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### Britney, Beyoncé, and me - primary school girls' role models and constructions of the 'popular' girl

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## Britney, Beyoncé, and me – primary school girls’ role models and constructions of the ‘popular’ girl

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This paper looks at the ways in which the gendered social construction of the ‘popular girl’ infuses girls’ ideas as to their role models: those representing who they would like to be when they ‘grow up’. It will look at the ways in which the gendered characteristics that are seen to be of most value to girls (often embodied by ‘celebrities’ such as Britney and Beyoncé) often reflect socially dominant constructions of femininity. These characteristics can in some ways be seen to emphasise passivity rather than agency and power – for an example in an emphasis on attractiveness and appearance rather than activity and accomplishments. However, such desired characteristics are also those considered to characterise the ‘popular’ girl at school – a position of power and influence amongst girls’ peers. Therefore such desires are complexly located within both the constraints of hegemonic femininities and the dynamics of power relations between girls themselves.

**Keywords:** gender; girls; popularity; femininity; role models; celebrity

### Introduction

A number of feminist educationalists and sociologists in the emerging area of ‘Girlhood Studies’ have written about the centrality and importance to girls of the ‘micropolitics’ of friendships – how friendship relates to girls’ gender identities, and their achievement and success at school (e.g. George 2007; Hey 1997; Jackson 2006a; Kehily 2002; Paechter and Clark 2007; Pomerantz 2008; Reay 2001; Renold 2000; Ringrose 2008; McRobbie 2009). In her ethnography on girls’ friendships, *The Company She Keeps* (1997), Hey discusses how the study of these connections and alliances has often been passed over by sociologists who have seen friendship as merely a personal individual enterprise (see also George 2007). Hey’s purpose in her study was to ‘stake a claim to a *sociological* exploration of how everyday “obvious” experience is played out as forms of subjectivity and power’ (1997, 3). I would like to take a similar approach here, drawing on some of the insights from writers in the area of Girlhood Studies, by looking at the ways in which the gendered *social* construction of the ‘popular girl’ infuses girls’ ideas as to who (at a particular moment in time) they would like to be when they ‘grow up’ – called here for simplification their ‘role models’.<sup>1</sup> I will be looking at the ways in which the gendered characteristics that are seen to be of most value to girls (often embodied by ‘celebrities’ such as Britney and

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Beyoncé) often reflect socially dominant constructions of femininity. These characteristics can in some ways be seen to emphasise passivity rather than agency and power – for example in an emphasis on attractiveness and appearance rather than activity and accomplishments. However, I will be arguing that such desired characteristics are also those considered to characterise the ‘popular’ girl at school – a position of power and influence amongst girls’ peers. Therefore such desires are complexly located within both the constraints of hegemonic femininities and the dynamics of power relations between girls themselves. As Weitz (2001) and others have argued, the practice of femininity often combines elements of both ‘accommodation’ and ‘resistance’ to hegemonic norms in the same act – and I would like to explore the ways in which the values placed on socially dominant ‘feminine’ characteristics of girls’ role models can be simultaneously accommodations to ‘passive’ constructions of femininity and also agentic resistances (within discursive constraints) in the form of desiring power and status amongst their peer group. Indeed, in some ways, girls explicitly equate the ‘fame’ of such role models as Britney and Beyoncé with the ‘celebrity’ of being popular amongst their peers at school.

### **Gender and the cultural construction of friendship and popularity**

Children’s ‘peer cultures’ work to influence and constrain the ways in which children construct meaning and values; act and communicate with others; and conduct complex aspects of ‘identity work’ in relation to themselves and their peers (see e.g. Adler, Kless, and Adler 1992). This includes, importantly, ‘learning and evaluating roles and values for their future adult behaviour’ (Adler, Kless, and Adler 1992, 169). One of the key arenas in which such work is carried out is in the area of friendship groups, and the ways in which such groups construct and maintain complex differential levels of status and prestige, measured in part through a person’s ‘popularity’ amongst their peers. A number of writers have discussed the importance of friendship groups in relation to identity formation (see e.g. George 2007; Hey 1997; Weller 2007). As Currie, Kelly, and Pomerantz (2007) note, membership of a group (or exclusion from it) can greatly inform the construction of ‘who you are’ in terms of identity – both in relation to one’s own self-identity and how others see you. Those who are accepted as friends with peers who are socially deemed to have high ‘status’ (either within a particular friendship group, or wider collectivities such as school year cohorts) can themselves acquire ‘status’ capital amongst their peer groups. As Adler, Kless, and Adler (1992) state, ‘having someone as a friend is a form of power’. Moreover, the consequences of finding yourself ‘unpopular’ can be severe, including the threat and the actuality of bullying and violence. The threat of finding oneself labelled as unpopular, for example through being positioned as a ‘nerd’ or ‘boffin’, is a common fear amongst both primary and secondary school children (see e.g. Francis, forthcoming).

In contrast to boys, who are generally described in the literature as preferring membership of quite large friendship groups, girls are generally described as tending to form close dyadic friendships with other girls, often linking up with other pairs to form shifting and changing group networks (Adler, Kless, and Adler 1992; Pratt and George 2004). Merten (1997) has challenged the long-held popular assumption (also supported by academic studies) that girls tend to be less competitive than boys, arguing that in the arena of friendship and popularity the girls in his US junior high school study were extremely competitive. However, they tended to not present this as openly

as boys, probably due to dominant cultural constructions of 'ideal' femininity as passive and affiliative rather than aggressive or competitive. Nevertheless in Merten's study 'competition for popularity was a nearly ubiquitous concern for these junior high school girls' (1997, 176).

In addition, the 'qualities' that are perceived to increase the chances of a pupil being 'popular' are themselves highly gendered. For boys, sporting ability (or at the very least a keen interest in sport) seems to be a key element in acquiring 'popularity capital' in both primary and secondary school (Pratt and George 2005; Renold 2003). In Adler, Kless, and Adler's study of elementary pupils in the USA 'those who were least proficient athletically were potential pariahs' (1992, 172). My focus in this paper however is with girls, and there are a number of quite complex characteristics described as most important for girls to be considered popular. Currie, Kelly, and Pomerantz highlight some most commonly described characteristics here:

girls must be pretty but not 'self absorbed' about their appearance; they must be attractive to boys but not seen to be too sexually 'forward'; they must be noticed and liked by the 'right people' but not a social climber; independent but not a 'loner', and so on. (2007, 24)

I will be going on to look at these described characteristics in some detail throughout this paper, considering such characteristics – and indeed, 'sex' and gender itself – as constantly shifting and changing discursively constructed entities. At any point in time/space certain discourses as to the 'meaning' of particular constructed categories such as 'boy', 'girl', the 'popular' boy, the 'popular' girl, etc. will have more social power than others, becoming socially dominant, while other 'alternative' meanings work to resist and challenge their dominance. Context is key to the construction and interpretation of such characteristics at any given time for fluid and shifting groupings and collectivities of girls (George 2007). Moreover, these concepts are highly 'classed' and 'raced' – Mirza, Reay and others have written, for example, of the ways in which African Caribbean femininity is often constructed differently to White and Asian femininities (Mirza 1992; Reay 2001). Whilst socially constructed, such discourses nevertheless have significant 'real' impact on people's lives – in this case in the ways in which young girls strive to construct and maintain friendship and social status amongst their peers.

Not surprisingly, with commercial interests paramount, the presented image of many of the most popular 'celebrities' in the film, TV and music world reflect/re-enforce dominant cultural discourses of masculinity (for men) and femininity (for women), within what Judith Butler has described as 'heterosexual hegemony' (Butler 1993). This is particularly true in the hyper-commercialised arena of pop music. As Railton and Watson note:

Precisely the fact of their commercial function means pop music videos overwhelmingly tend to deal in the familiar, that is, in images that their audience are likely to find comfortable and unchallenging. (2005, 52)

Moreover, such 'unchallenging' representations are often (hetero)sexualised:

the display of the sexualised body and the potential for that body to be figured as an object of desire or fantasy are crucial to the economies of both pleasure and profit of the pop music video. (2005, 52)

As I will be going on to demonstrate, for many girls in our study the constructed images of such female celebrities represented more than anything else their own future ideal self-identity – who they would like to be when they grow up. A number of writers have attempted to analyse the enduring appeal of such celebrities for (particularly female) children, adolescents, and adults in the modern West – often linking their appeal to their perceived sexual attractiveness in relation to dominant constructions of femininity in terms of facial beauty and body size (Ali 2003; Fairclough 2008). As already discussed, notions of ‘ideal’ femininity are ‘raced’ and classed, and music videos present an arena in which viewers can access dominant cultural representations of ethnically diverse (idealised) femininities, being, as bell hooks (1992) notes, one of the few arenas where images of Black women are numerous. Jones (2008) and others have noted how celebrities are often constructed and referenced as models for the post-feminist project of endlessly striving to ‘become’ a new, more ‘beautiful’ person through endless maintenance of self-image. (Interestingly, however, Fairclough 2008 notes a trend in which celebrities are now as likely to be scorned and derided as idealised in relation to meeting dominant ideals of femininity, particularly with the rise of online gossip bloggers such as Perez Hilton).

Others such as Ehrenreich, Hess, and Jacobs (1992) have argued that male ‘stars’ appeal to girls because they provide them with fantasies of (heterosexual) romance ‘without the hassle of a relationship or the monotony of marriage’. I would further argue here that a strong factor behind such idealisation of celebrities (or derision if they are perceived to ‘fail’ in their presentation of idealised feminine self) is not necessarily, or only, related to girls’ desire to passively *be seen as* ‘beautiful’ and thus (hetero)sexually desirable. They also desire to *be*, to be popular, to acquire cultural status and prestige amongst their peers – for as we shall see, such ‘celebrities’ epitomise the conceptualisation of the ‘popular’ girl. Ultimately, however, such ‘active’ desires are still constructed within the constraints of culturally dominant discourses of femininity, and thus ultimately work to ‘accommodate’ rather than ‘resist’ or challenge such discourses (see Ringrose 2008).

## Methods

The material I will be drawing on was collected as part of an ESRC-funded project<sup>2</sup> involving a gender analysis of pupils’ perceptions of male and female primary teachers in relation to the public and policy call for more male primary teachers to act as ‘role models’, particularly for boys perceived to be underachieving. The research was conducted in 51 different Year 3 primary school classes (involving 7–8-year-old children) in London (25 classes) and North-East England (26 classes). Twenty-five classes were taught by a male teacher and 26 by a female teacher (with an even split between London and the North-East). Interviews were conducted with three girls and three boys in each of the classes (307 pupils in total; 153 boys and 154 girls. Of these pupils, 207 are White, 52 are Black, 25 are South Asian, five are dual heritage, one is Chinese, and the ethnicity of 17 was not classified. Only 10 of the minority ethnic pupils were located in North-East England.

The interviews were semi-structured and asked pupils about those they admire in popular culture and in their daily lives; their views of their class teacher; and their opinions on gender and teaching. In this paper I will mainly be drawing from pupils’ answers to the following question contained in the interview schedule: ‘Who would

you like to be like when you grow up? Why?’ Pseudonyms have been used to protect the anonymity of participants and their schools.

### Girls’ role models – who?

As we have discussed in some detail in other papers from this study the data we collected in regards to Year 3 pupils’ role models was incredibly interesting, not least because it suggested that young boys were not likely to consider either their male or female teachers to be role models – favouring instead sports or TV stars or male relatives and friends of their family – thus challenging the popular/policy call for more male teachers to be recruited to primary schools in order to act as such models for male pupils (Francis et al. 2008; see also Carrington et al. 2007; Hutchings et al. 2008; Read 2008; Skelton and Read 2006; Skelton et al., forthcoming).

As we can see in Table 1, which focuses on the girls’ answers as to their role models, teachers were more often supplied as an answer, especially if they were women teachers. As can be seen in Table 1, a ‘bond’ in relation to gender identity was a strong factor here (as with the boys – see Hutchings et al. 2008), with the majority of girls wanting to be like someone of the same gender as themselves. Moreover, all seven of the girls choosing Britney, a white American singer, were themselves white, and of the seven choosing Beyoncé, an African American singer, five were African Caribbean and two were white – so ethnic identity seemed to also play a strong influence on choice.

Whilst teachers top the list, female singers also rank very highly, reflecting the high importance of music and celebrity/star culture to primary as well as secondary

Table 1. Girls’ answers to the question ‘Who would you like to be when you grow up?’

	<i>N</i>
Female teacher	35
Female singer/group of which Britney (7), Beyonce (7)	24
Female fictional TV/book character of which Tracy Beaker (4), Matilda (4)	24
Mum	22
Other female relative/friend of family	18
Female friends (peers)	13
Male teacher	8
Dad	6
Male fictional TV/book character	5
Male relative/friend of family	5
Female book author	4
Male singer/group	3
Male book author	2
Male actor	2
Female sportsperson	1
Male sportsperson	1
Other female adults	4
Total	177

Note: I have omitted the ‘don’t know’ answers, and those who just listed an occupation. If the participant mentioned more than one person/type of person I have included these, not just the first mentioned.

school age pupils. A study by Baker (2001) showed how pop music is especially important for pre-teen girls, and a key way in which they construct their cultural identities. She outlined numerous instances in her research where some young girls would create extra cultural capital (and therefore status) amongst their peers by demonstrating an interest in unknown or rare songs, or new bands or singers, before anyone else.

### **Girls' role models – why?**

Especially interesting were the reasons the girls in our study gave for choosing their particular role models. In discussing these reasons, I have split the findings into three strands – appearance, personality, and accomplishments.

#### *Appearance*

While not as numerous as answers relating to personality and accomplishments, which predominated, a sizeable minority of answers related to the appearance of the role models. All of these answers related to women role models, reflecting the wider social/cultural importance attached to women's outward appearance in relation to men. Some pupils mentioned they had chosen their role models because they valued the way their clothes, hair or figure looked, and almost half of the answers related particularly to the aspired quality of 'prettiness'. As mentioned above, prettiness and physical attractiveness in general (according to dominant cultural norms) are highly desired attributes, being equated with the dominant image of the 'popular girl'. Jackson (2006a), Renold (2000), Currie, Kelly, and Pomerantz (2007), Pomerantz (2008) and others have detailed the huge investment of time, money and energy expended by girls in order to be judged heterosexually attractive and the power/status related to 'looking good'. Despite the popular cultural discourse of 'childhood as innocence', Francis (1998), Renold (2000) and others have persuasively documented the ways in which primary school pupils' cultures are highly (hetero)sexualised. When undertaking research in this sector Renold recounts:

From my first days in the field, I became increasingly aware of the ways in which girls were investing in the production of their bodies as heterosexually desirable commodities. This involved embodying heterosexual somatic (bodily) ideals. Typical daily rituals included checking and regulating arms, legs, hips and thighs, positioning their bodies and others' as 'too fat' or 'too thin' and advocating the need to diet. (2000, p. 310)

As discussed above, such 'ideals' are raced and classed. Adler, Kless, and Adler (1992) argue that socio-economic status matters in relation to girls' popularity than boys because this determines the degree to which girls can access 'stylish' and 'fashionable' clothes and make-up. Nevertheless, wearing 'too' revealing clothes or 'too much' make-up is often negatively ascribed by middle-class pupils as 'chavy', a common current (and most often pejorative) term ascribed to working-class femininities and masculinities. For teens/young women they can also be seen as indicative of the 'ladette', also a highly classed label (Jackson 2006a, 2006b). Weitz (2001) and others have also discussed how 'ideal' femininities are also dominantly constructed as White. In an interesting study of cheerleading culture in the USA (an activity consummately related to school popularity and status amongst girls), Bettis and Adams (2003) recount how the ideal of the White/'conventionally attractive' cheerleader could not be challenged even by formal measures designed to encourage minority ethnic pupils

and those not ‘conventionally attractive’ to take cheerleading courses, and to ensure they were not formally discriminated against in trials. This was predominantly due to the association of cheerleaders with a high-status social group in the school known as the ‘preps’, who were predominantly White and from affluent backgrounds. The association of the ‘cheerleading type’ with ‘cute’, ‘pretty’, petite – and White – femininity, along with a passive display of ‘niceness’ emphasised by the need for a constant smile, were ideals that many pupils in the school either could not, or refused to, adopt.

Many of the girls who cited aspects of appearance as reasons for choosing particular role models chose celebrities, especially pop singers, as their role models, often (but not always) choosing singers of the same ethnicity as themselves. As I have noted, pop stars such as Beyoncé, Rihanna and Jamelia provide Black girls with visible images of ideal femininity literally embodied by Black women. However, such stars often construct their image at least partially according to Eurocentric norms of attractiveness, for example Beyoncé is often pictured with long, straightened and/or golden-coloured hair. In our study, a number of girls chose Black women as their role models for reasons of appearance, for example:

- Sally: I'd like to be like Jamelia.  
 Interviewer: Like Jamelia? Oh and why would you like to be like her?  
 Sally: Because she's got long hair and I want long hair but nearly every day some people come and cut my hair, even in one week they just cut my hair. (Sally, White British, Ettenmoor School, London)

[Beyoncé] Because her mum makes all her clothes for her and there are lots of different things that I like about her. (Aisha, African Caribbean, Weathertop School, London)

[Beyoncé] Because she can sing, she wears all different kinds of clothes, nice clothes and best shoes on and she can sing. (Nina, African Caribbean, Weathertop School, London)

These examples indicate how singers such as Jamelia and Beyoncé seem to encapsulate and embody these aspects of valued femininity for these girls, and are thus highly desirable role models – although as Sally's desire for Jamelia's long hair shows, the aspects of femininity that are coveted may well be those traditionally associated with a ‘white’ ideal.

### **Personality**

Many of the girl's answers as to why they had chosen their role models related to perceived aspects of the role model's personality. As can be expected, many of these aspects of a person's ‘character’ were cited by children who chose role models they actually knew in real life, such as family members, teachers and friends. However, as we shall see, reasons related to personality were also cited in relation to fictional characters and celebrities – role models the children had never met but whose personalities they believed they could ascertain.

Out of these, by far the most common personality traits described by the participants were ‘niceness’, ‘kindness’ and ‘friendliness’ – mentioned in relation to fictional characters such as Snow White and pop stars such as Britney as well as family and friends:

[Britney] Because she's friendly. (Phoebe, White British, Cloudyhead School, London)



[Snow White] Because she's ... a nice girl and she dresses nice, I'd like to be like her.  
(Kiesla, Turkish, Weathertop School, London)

Again, being 'nice' and 'kind' are also dominant culturally ascribed feminine characteristics, and something that is often seen to be expected of 'popular' girls – in order to adhere to an expected tacit 'moral code' of friendship (George and Browne 2000). A number of studies have shown how popular girls have to balance trying to be 'nice' to everyone while simultaneously retaining the exclusivity of their friendship to those within the in-crowd, lest they lose their 'shine' by consorting too much with 'outsiders' (see Bettis and Adams 2003; Merten 1997). However in many studies being *too* nice, or too much of the 'good girl' – especially towards authority figures, can lead you to be categorised negatively as a 'goody-goody' (Renold 2000).

Interestingly, Kiesla, who is of Turkish origin, chooses a role model that could be argued to be the epitomisation of 'pure' whiteness – Snow White, and chooses her for her 'niceness' in terms of personality and appearance. As we can see, whilst both white girls and (more often) minority ethnic girls chose minority ethnic role models as exemplars of 'emphasised femininity', a strong ongoing connection between feminine 'niceness/goodness' and whiteness in children's literature is arguably still at influence here. Indeed, the label of 'nice girl' is actively resisted by some girls due to its associations with white middle-class femininity (see Bettis and Adams 2003; Jackson 2006a, 2006b; Reay 2001). An exception is the image of Beyoncé as a 'good girl' due to her much publicised Christian beliefs, for example discussed by Aisha below:

[Beyoncé] She has lots of different songs she doesn't sing them over again and she doesn't say no bad stuff or anything like that and she is very good at doing dance moves.  
(Aisha, African Caribbean, Weathertop School, London)

It is interesting that by placing Beyoncé as a 'good girl' some of our participants are challenging cultural discourses that implicitly or explicitly equate 'blackness' with the (overly loud, overly assertive or sexually aggressive) 'bad girl' (see Fordham 1993; Mirza 1992), despite the singer being criticised in some sections of the media for presenting an 'overly' raunchy, hyper-sexualised image (see e.g. Spencer 2007).<sup>3</sup>

A minority of the girls in our study did choose role models for reasons that challenged the 'good girl' ideal – for example the 'naughty' fictional character Matilda, or assertive or 'tough' female family members or friends – but celebrities were not chosen for these reasons. Our study was conducted before Britney's widely publicised 'fall from grace' and her media reclassification from an arguably 'good' to an overwhelmingly 'poor' role model (Associated Press 2006) – it would be interesting to see whether this has affected her popularity with children, and whether the reasons they may articulate for choosing to emulate her would be different than the 'nice' girl described by our own participants. In any case, in our study, celebrities were actually mentioned by children as role models largely in relation to appearance or skills and accomplishments rather than perceived moral or ethical behaviour, for which family and friends were much more likely to be cited as model examples.

### *Accomplishments*

Not surprisingly (especially in relation to the socially pervasive neo-liberal discourse of the 'project of the self'), a popular reason for choosing role models (for both boys

and for girls) was their perceived skills, abilities or accomplishments in particular fields of life. For boys, such activities or accomplishments were predominantly sports or physical activity-related, and related overwhelmingly to male role models. Girls were also much more likely to choose female role models (although not quite so overwhelmingly as boys – see Hutchings et al. 2008), but the skills and accomplishments they admired in their chosen icons were more diverse. One popular form of skill cited by girls was an admiration for a particular occupation or career undertaken by the role model; another popular form of accomplishment was the acquisition of money, possessions or social status. And finally, the single most admired skill cited by girls was the ability to sing or to dance – another very common reason for choosing a pop singer as a role model, most of whom are visually presented as dancing as well as singing in their videos.

[Britney] Because she knows lots of songs and I like her song, and I want to be just like her when I'm big and be famous and a good singer just like her. (Nancy, White British, Delving School, London)

One participant recounted how she and her friends would often sing and dance in the playground, pretending to be certain pop groups and acting out their performances:

Interviewer: When you say you play in these bands, at break time, is there anybody in a band that you think you'd like to be like when you grow up?  
 Maisie: Destiny's Child.  
 Interviewer: Destiny's Child. All of them or just one of them?  
 Maisie: One of them.  
 Interviewer: Do you know the name of the one you'd like to be like?  
 Maisie: Beyoncé.  
 Interviewer: Beyoncé. Okay, thank you. (Maisie, White British, Woodbine School, North-East)

Thus for Maisie, the desire to 'be like' their chosen role model includes 'acting out' their interpretation of the stars' own 'identity performances' in their acts – actively emulating and 'trying on' elements of 'emphasised femininity' (and heterosexualised desirability) performed through the song and dance routines of favourite pop stars. As Ringrose (2008) and others have noted, such active 'performance' of sexualised femininity, often conducted in active competition with other girls, runs in tension with the passivity of the wish to 'be desired' in heteronormative ways.

For some participants there was a realisation that such performances do not just exist 'in the moment' but come at the cost of a great deal of practising – a 'behind the scenes' element that is not as desired as the performance itself, and its attendant rewards:

Neva: My friend wants to be like Beyoncé.  
 Interviewer: Oh really why does she want to be like Beyoncé?  
 Neva: Because she can dance and she has a nice house.  
 Interviewer: OK is this your friend that wants to be a dancer? Oh yeah and what do you think about Beyoncé, would you like to be like her or not?  
 Neva: A little bit.  
 Interviewer: So why only a little bit?  
 Neva: Because you have to do things that are hard. And you have to practise every single day and sometimes it is boring.  
 Interviewer: Sure that's fine but you would like to be her a little bit, what do you like about her that you would like to be like?

Neva: Like same as my friend she can dance. (Neva, Mauritian, Fangorn School, London)

For many of the girls, the skills the role models are seen to possess are desired specifically because they are a conduit to success, to the material possessions that lead from such success, and simply, in order to become famous. And for some participants, the desire to perform well and to become 'famous' was explicitly connected to the conception of being 'popular' and becoming 'well liked'. For example, Saffron says in relation to wanting to be like Jamelia, her chosen role model:

I just like singing. Standing in front of people and making them smile and everything. (Saffron, African Caribbean, Shirebourne School, London)

For Saffron, performing for people is directly connected to pleasing them and becoming liked by them. Tina also states plainly the connection in many participants' minds between the fame of celebrity and being 'popular' and well liked:

[Beyoncé] Because everyone likes her and she's really famous. (Tina, White British, Bree School, London)

Again, choosing such celebrities as role models seems to equate specifically to the desire to obtain and maintain forms of 'popularity capital' that will enable the holder to obtain social status amongst their peers. Indeed, Saffron and Tina above directly equate the 'fame' of celebrity with social popularity – a central over-riding concern of so many children during their time at school. The celebrity – particularly iconic pop stars such as Britney or Beyoncé – at a certain moment in time become signifiers of not only hegemonic 'emphasised' femininity, but of the prized notion of popularity itself.

## Conclusion

In this paper I have been concerned with exploring the links between the people young girls choose as role models and the characteristics most likely to make girls 'popular' amongst their peers. Many of the reasons discussed by the girls in our study as to why they have chosen stars such as Britney or Beyoncé as their role models related to aspects of their appearance, to their ability to perform for an audience in terms of singing and dancing, and (to a lesser extent) to personality traits such as 'niceness' and 'kindness'. The great desire to 'own' such aspects of appearance, personality or skills shown by our participants attests to the continued dominance of particular socially constructed discourses surrounding 'ideal' femininity that arguably emphasise passivity over activity. As Adler, Kless, and Adler state, 'boys have traditionally displayed an active posture and girls, a passive one ... girls' behaviour has historically included a focus on relational and intimacy work, nurturance and emotional supportiveness, and a concern with developing feminine allure' (Adler, Kless, and Adler 1992, 170). The findings I draw on here would seem to support the continuing predominance of girls' desires to encompass and embody a 'passive' ideal femininity, both in terms of what they desire for themselves at this moment in time, and what they desire for themselves to 'become' in adulthood.

However, I have attempted to show here that a simple reading of such desires as passive is inadequate, for the situation is certainly more complex. A reading of such

desires in relation to the social power relations expressed through the notion of ‘popularity’ show that contextually such characteristics may be desired *not* simply in order to passively attract (hetero) sexualised attention, or indeed gain societal approval as the good/docile/passive girl. Rather such desires for the forms of femininity expressed through the signifiers of ‘Britney’ or ‘Beyoncé’ can also be seen as a ‘means to an end’ in order to achieve a more ‘active’ desire for power and status amongst one’s peers – to achieve the ‘holy grail’ of the status as a ‘popular’ pupil. Such a desire can therefore be seen in some ways as resistance as well as accommodation to dominant discourses of femininity – an ‘unfeminine’ desire for status and social power at the same time as an ‘appropriate’ desire to emulate aspects of ‘emphasised femininity’ that infuse pop stars’ gendered representations.

Indeed it could be argued that stars such as Britney and Beyoncé actively work to construct an image of themselves analogous to the ‘popular’ girl at school. Beyoncé, for example, has designed a cheerleading outfit for the basketball team New Jersey Nets (*I’m Not Obsessed!* 2007) – the ‘cheerleader’ representing the epitome of the ‘popular girl’ in American popular culture. Moreover, many pop singers perform on stage and in music videos with an array of ‘backup’ dancers dressed in similar clothes, an image that can be likened to the singer as the leader of a gang of popular pretty girls. Britney, in particular, was propelled to fame by her video for ‘Baby One More Time’, where she famously played the role of a daydreaming schoolgirl fantasising about dancing down the school corridors, supported by her friends, whilst she waits for the bell to ring for the end of lessons. As we have shown in the paper, marketing the singer in such a way appeals not only to masculine fantasies of the sexually precocious schoolgirl but also discursively constructs the singer as the epitome of what many schoolgirls themselves desire – to be the leader of the gang, to acquire the status capital of holding the most coveted of positions – that of the popular girl.

However, as this paper has shown, girls’ desires to be like Britney or Beyoncé are still constructed within dominant discursive constructions of ‘ideal’ femininity, an ‘impossible’ idealisation that McRobbie (2008) and others have argued is related to the rise in eating disorders and instances of self-harm amongst girls and women. Along with the perpetuation and reinforcement of hierarchies between, and competition among, girls and women, the challenge to traditional femininities encapsulated by the desire to emulate Britney and Beyoncé – to be the alpha, the ‘it-girl’, the most popular girl – is not a challenge that most feminists would feel comfortable supporting.

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### Notes

1. It is recognised that the concept of ‘role models’ is based on ‘social learning’ and ‘sex roles’ theories which see a somewhat uncomplicated process of identification and emulation on the part of children with particular adults (see Hutchings et al. 2008). I would agree with critics of this position that gender and other aspects of identity are constantly shifting and changing, rather than containing the fixities that the concept of ‘role models’ implies. The term is only used here as a ‘shorthand’ for the answers our participants gave at a particular ‘snapshot’ in space/time, to our questions concerning who they would like to be like when they ‘grow up’.

2. RES-000-23-0624 – ‘Investigating Gender as a Factor in Primary Pupil–Teacher Relations and Perceptions’. The team members were Merryn Hutchings and Barbara Read at London Metropolitan University, Bruce Carrington and Ian Hall at the University of Newcastle, and Becky Francis and Christine Skelton at Roehampton University.
3. Interestingly, Beyoncé herself seems to simultaneously play with, and distance her ‘real’ self from, such stereotypical constructions with her onstage persona of ‘Sasha Fierce’: ‘SASHA FIERCE is my alter ego’, says Beyoncé, ‘and now she has a last name. I have someone else that takes over when it’s time for me to work and when I’m on stage, this alter ego that I’ve created that kind of protects me and who I really am. That’s why half the record, I AM...’, is about who I am underneath all the makeup, underneath the lights, and underneath all the exciting star drama. And SASHA FIERCE is the fun, more sensual, more aggressive, more outspoken side’ (Beyoncé n.d.)

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