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PLACING THE GIRLHOOD SCHOLAR INTO THE POLITICS OF CHANGE

A Reflexive Account

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Problematizing Voice, Participation, and Social Change through Reflexivity

Girlhood studies is a rights-based approach to research and activism that aims to achieve gender equality for girls of all ages in local and global contexts (Mitchell and Reid-Walsh 2009). Seeking to foster girls' and young women's empowerment across contexts and locations, feminist scholars and activists working in this field demonstrate a strong commitment to enabling girls' participation in their communities and to listening carefully to girls' voices in the research process (Brown and Gilligan 1992; Mazzarella and Pecora 2007). Indeed, despite being relatively new, the field of girlhood studies is already "replete with references to participation and the need for girl-centredness (Mitchell and Reid-Walsh 2009: 214) [with] [m]any of us want[ing] to claim that the voices of the girls with whom we work are [being] heard" (221).

The purpose of this chapter is to examine critically the assumed relationship in girlhood studies among its politically driven feminist agendas, its explicit focus on voice and participation by girls, and its concern with social change. I will foreground the issue of accountability in the field of girlhood studies by asking three questions: In what ways, and to what extent, does a focus on girls' voices and participation inform an approach to social change? How do scholars in girlhood studies identify evidence of social change, and in what forms does that evidence take shape? If social change is a goal of our research practice, what happens if no demonstrable change results from our research? To sum up my approach I pose a fourth question: Are girlhood scholars self-critical about their claims that they do, indeed, pursue social change?

Although featuring centrally in the literature on feminist methodology (Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002), accountability remains a neglected

area of discussion and debate within the "limited body of literature that attends to methodologies for work *with* girls or for facillitating research *by* girls themselves" (Mitchell and Reid-Walsh 2009: 214). In this chapter, I seek to address this issue through a critical self-reflexive account of my past work with Francophone girls in Canada. My purpose is to emphasize the peculiarities of conducting feminist work *with* and *for* girls while assessing, in order to eventually improve, my capacity to enact the political commitment endorsed by girlhood studies. In doing so, I want to stress that reflexivity may be a productive tool for examining the truthfulness of the claim that feminist knowledge "has the potential to produce alterations in social systems along with personal and group empowerment" (Jiwani and Berman 2002: 6).

Reflexivity is a widely acknowledged principle in feminist methodology. It has been described in the literature as an ethical research practice that attempts to make visible "the power relations and the exercise of power in the research process" (Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002: 118). Increasing the researcher's accountability for the methodological choices she makes, reflexivity asks the researcher to locate herself within the process of knowledge production, so as to foreground the impact her particular social location has on the research process and on her relationship with research participants. Reflexivity is a task fraught with tensions, dilemmas, and unease, since the critical self-awareness it requires may result in negative feelings such as doubt, undecidedeness, and guilt (see Kitzinger and Wilkinson 1996).

I approach uneasiness and uncertainty in my work as challenges that deserve careful consideration and attention, but that are ultimately impossible to overcome fully. This unstable ground puts me in a state of vigilance that is key, in my view, to improving the ability to conduct responsible and responsive research with regard to feminist ideals of social justice and gender equity; my work in the field is grounded in a commitment to "hear the voices of girls for the purposes of [my] own research … [while] ensuring that [I] take appropriate steps with policy makers" (Mitchell and Reid-Walsh 2009: 223–224) or with any other body that can have an impact on girls' lives.

Being Accountable towards a Community of Girls: A Feminist Perspective on Research Ethics

Accountability is a concept in its own right in the literature on social science methodologies; it promotes "the development of more democratic social relations" (Harding and Norberg 2005: 2009). In the field of

girlhood studies, structural age-based social relations complicate this goal because a sharing of power is not fully achievable. That this power differential is also hierarchical further complicates the achievement of egalitarian relationships between the adult researcher and young research participants. For example, it is the girlhood scholar who occupies a privileged position when she is designing and conducting a research project. Whereas the scholar (or activist) has chosen to conduct a study of her own and has been afforded material resources to achieve her chosen goals, young subjects are often captive in institutions and organizations where their participation is mandatory and in which their choices are limited or, worse still, constrained. Consequently, the two following questions are worth asking: To what extent are young research participants free to take part in our research projects? To what extent do they really participate in their design?

There is a legal aspect to this structural power imbalance between the adult-researcher and the young research participants. In every country in the world, the law not only treats children and adults differently, it defines and monitors the relationships between underage people and adults. This pre-existing structure of social relations complicates the endeavor of achieving an egalitarian relationship between a girlhood scholar and her young female research participants. For example, when the underage voices tell us stories of violence and abuse committed by legal guardians, how are we to translate our commitment to social change and girls' empowerment?

The critical research problems and ethical dilemmas that arise from this structural power imbalance between adults and young people in the field of girlhood studies may be successfully addressed through critical reflection on methodology. Here, methodology should not be confused with methods. Methodology implies the link of an ontology to an epistemology and a set of rules that specify how valid knowledge claims about social reality can be made (Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002). It involves "the theory and analysis of how research should proceed, how research questions might best be addressed and the criteria against which research findings might be evaluated" (Maynard 1994: 14). Methodology uncovers the research process as a whole whereas methods refer to research techniques and procedures used for data collection and the testing of evidence found (Bromley 2012). As indicated in italics in the following representation of the research process in social sciences, methods apply only to one specific stage of a research project: Theory → Research question(s) → *Data* → Coding → Interpretation → Conclusion(s) → Modification of theory.

The Politics of Feminist Methodology

Feminist researchers and girlhood studies scholars share a common "quest for valid knowledge of social realities by a knowing subject" (Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002: 42; see also Olesen 2005). This is not to say that feminist methodology is monolithic; the use of the singular is meant to signal a key feature of feminist methodology—its rejection of the positivist claim to objectivity, which feminism shares with critical social theory and other emancipatory research methodologies (Bromley 2012).

Despite being informed by a wide range of theoretical perspectives, feminist methodology usually posits that since no value-free research can be conducted, subjectivity provides a valid ground upon which ethical relationships can be built and sustained between researchers and research participants (Richardson 1997). This principle was coined, famously, by the American sociologist Michelle Fine (1994) in her classic article, "Working the Hyphens," in which she emphasizes the need for researchers to probe their relationships with the contexts they study and with their research participants. As eloquently summarized by Ramazanoglu and Holland, such a contention illustrates that "*Feminism implies a moral responsibility for feminist knowledge and a general ethic of accountability to a community of women [and girls]*" (2002: 170).

A feminist ethics of accountability means that researchers are responsible and accountable for the knowledge they produce, as well as for both the expected and unintended consequences of their research. Consequently, feminist praxis is guided by the principle of doing no harm (Maynard 1994; Kiragu and Warrington 2012). Researchers bear responsibility for ensuring that the voices of marginalized women are heard in the ethics of accountability (Kitzinger and Wilkinson 1996; Krumer-Nevo 2009), which accounts for the centrality of voice and experience in the literature on women's studies since the 1970s (Harding and Norberg 2005).

Feminist ethics are of capital importance in girlhood studies, given that the research participants' age places them in a subordinate position to adults. To ensure an adequate assessment of the risks young research participants may incur as a result of their participation in our work, girlhood scholars' notions of potential risk must be carefully probed. When what we hear from research participants' calls for immediate action against those who have legal authority over them, what is our responsibility? What is the purpose of our hearing in such situations?

The available literature on issues of access, confidentiality, informed consent, intergenerational equality, positionality, and relations of power in the research process shows that the field of girlhood studies is actively engaged in dealing with the ethics of conducting research with and for girls (see Holland and Ramazanoglu 1994; Harris 1996; Oliver and Lalik 2000; Kiragu and Warrington 2012). Since these discussions are informed by feminism and feminist methodology, girlhood scholars' apparent lack of interest in accountability remains puzzling. If the ethics of accountability has been widely discussed and debated in the context of research *about* women, *for* women, and *with* women (Maynard 1994), the same cannot be said of our field. The following reflexive account of my research praxis is meant to foreground this lack, locating the research process as the primary site where accountability begins.

Francophone Girls in Canada: A Solidarity Standpoint

Feminism aims for the inclusion of all differences, particularly of subjugated groups and voices from the margins (Bromley 2012). Yet designing a research project requires a sequence of choices that inevitably have exclusionary consequences. For example, that some research questions are to be asked implies that others will not be raised. Decisions must also be made about which populations or girls are to be invited to participate in a research study. Categories such as age, geographical location, and sociodemographics inevitably frame decisions about which groups of girls are invited to participate, which necessarily means that some girls will be included in the research design and others excluded.

A reflexive approach begins with the unsettling admission that the research project is itself an active process of inclusion and exclusion, and that researchers are accountable not only for the people and topics they include but for what they leave out as well. Consequently, it is vital to reflect critically on *how* we make decisions about who and what is included in our work and why (see Kitzinger and Wilkinson 1996). But how do we make ourselves accountable to the girls we include or exclude as a result of our privileged position in the research process?

Over the last ten years, I have conducted research with and about adolescent Francophone girls, focusing specifically on their readership of magazines targeted at teenage girls. My research explores public discourses about youth sexuality within the context of Quebec, a Canadian province in which a large majority of the population is French-speaking. This choice reflects my own position as a native Quebecer, as well as my own linguistic preference and ability as a native French-speaker.

This stance is also an attempt to stand in solidarity with the girls I study because they are part of a minority language group in the context of North America. My commitment to making interventions in the English-speaking literature on girlhood rather than the French seeks to counter the absence of French-speaking girls in both Canadian and international girlhood studies. As noted by Gouin and Wais, the Anglocentric focus of girlhood studies "constitutes a powerful form of … homogenization which silences diverse and alternative stories of girlhoods" (2006: 35). My chosen focus on Francophone girls, then, is not a matter of access to research samples, but rather a political statement that situates my work in solidarity with my research participants.

Language is not always the category that merits primary consideration, yet languages are far from being neutral. The hegemony of English in Canada and elsewhere in the world, for instance, denotes power structures that remain imperceptible: English becomes the only audible language. My decision to work with Francophone girls, then, resonates with the feminist politics of inclusion, diversity, and social justice (Bromley 2012).

My point is not that language or any other category (age, class, sexual orientation, ability, poverty, experience of violence, rural/urban location, and so on) should be *the* focus of our work. *Au contraire,* I believe it is the researcher's prerogative to make the best decision she can with regard to her own concerns, preoccupations, constraints, and capabilities. What is crucial is the ability to answer the question: Why are we deciding to work with these girls rather than others? *My* chosen solidarity standpoint makes *me* accountable to a specific category of girls, even though I acknowledge that this group cannot be studied as a whole, given the several differences between and among girls who share the same language such as age, class, sexuality, citizenship status, and religion.

Voice and Participation: Are They Enough to Tie Research to Action?

Looking back at the work I have conducted over the last ten years, I notice a recurring theme that is worth addressing here—the silencing of girls' voices in mainstream media, public policy, and local decision-making processes. Like much of the work in girlhood studies, countering the silencing of girls' voices has been enacted by giving voice and listening carefully to what girls have had to say (for an overview, see Caron 2009, 2011).

Addressing accountability requires asking questions about the political impact that the research can have on girls' lives. Girlhood studies not only means allowing marginalized voices to speak and be heard, it also aims to tie research into action in order to better enable girls' political agency (Kirk, Mitchell, and Reid-Walsh 2010). This goal is not uncontentious, however, for it raises questions about who should listen to these voices, for what purpose, and with what consequences, as well as that of who should bear the responsibility for making change happen.

Tying research to action in politically effective ways is a demanding, complex, and not always feasible task. Doing so would require, first, a shared definition of what the notions of action and social change mean. Thus far, social policy and public policy have been the preferred sites for making structural changes happen, even though few studies in the field explicitly undertake action with policy makers.[1] Since it is the researchers, not the young research participants, who are responsible for catalyzing change, this seems to indicate a failure in the field's attempts at moving towards the *political* empowerment of girls, as advocated by Kirk, Mitchell, and Reid-Walsh (2010) and by Caron (2011).

It is necessary to think critically about our unquestioned assumptions about the meaning of action and change and how we aim to make these happen. Our conception of girls' political agency is crucial to this pursuit since it centers our attention on politics, a topic that is increasingly difficult to pin down in youth research. As I will show in the example below, politicizing young people through research is complicated by the age and status differences between the researcher and her subjects.

Micro-Change as a Form of Valuable Mode of Intervention in the Field of Girlhood Studies: A Practical Example

Within the parameters of my research on mediated discourses of hypersexualization in Quebec, I conducted focus group discussions with twenty-seven adolescent girls in 2007. Media coverage at this time was portraying female high school students and their clothing as being too sexy and as a threat to the proper learning environment of primary and high schools. Within the discursive landscape of this mediated controversy, school administrators tried to maintain social order by regulating girls' dress through school dress code reforms. These reforms, widely undertaken in the province, assumed that the banning of (female) sexy clothing would erase (female) sexuality from schools and bring back a neutral and healthy learning atmosphere. The stigmatization and condemnation of female sexual expression was neither debated nor

challenged in mediated discussions of what was then labeled hyper-sexualization in the context of Quebec.[2]

Although this was not what I originally intended to have them do, my research participants seized the opportunity to voice their opinions about how the media framed the issue of hypersexualization. They were also eager to discuss how the trend of girls' wearing revealing clothing had been handled by school authorities according to gender norms.

The safe space provided to my research participants to voice their opinions about the controversial issue enabled them to contest their mis-representation in and exclusion from public discussions on clothing and the meaning of a healthy school environment.[3] They also used the op-portunity to speak about their sense of disenfranchisement from school governance. Frustrated by the ways dress code reforms were adopted and implemented in the seventeen high schools they attended among them, my participants discussed at length their perceptions of the un-democratic, top-down, and unfair school decision-making processes at the root of dress code reforms. These heated discussions clearly hinted at a demand for increased political agency for students in their high schools. From this point, how was I to tie research to action?

Certainly, telling their stories and having them heard had an em-powering effect on my participants. Group discussions allowed them to at least make sense of some of the thoughts and feelings they had about the issue, and created a shared awareness about the gendered and reg-ulatory nature of media discourses on girls' sexualization. Indeed, most of my research participants thanked me very enthusiastically for the opportunity for discussion that they would not otherwise have had. I contend that this form of (micro)change qualifies as a valuable and legitimate mode of intervention.

There are, nonetheless, limitations to change. For instance, none of my research participants seemed able to acknowledge her own respon-sibility in the slut-labeling phenomenon they were so keen to condemn. On many occasions, they used the slut label in order to distance them-selves from the (Other) girls. They believed their own sexy clothes to be normal and acceptable, although other girls' clothing was deemed too sexy, tasteless, and even slutty. In fact, my research participants used the slut label as a form of othering that was clearly meant to position themselves favorably in the cultural script of the good girl/bad girl. It is only when I analyzed these findings that I came to grasp fully the paradox at play—there are sluts out there, but none to be found among my research participants—as a mere reflection of my participants' in-vestment in hegemonic discourses of femininity, whiteness, and hetero-

sexuality. Had I been able to pin down this complex dynamic earlier in the research process, I may have attempted to challenge their essentialist beliefs about gender and sexual expression through clothing. This strategy would have served as a form of action, since we could have worked together on deconstructing patriarchal social categories that shape, limit, and govern girls' and women's sexuality.

Nonetheless, the analysis of mediated discourses about hypersexualization I have crafted decenters the authoritative voices of experts and draws attention to girls' experiences, on the one hand, and to the regulatory effects this mediated controversy has had on their daily lives, on the other. That is, the voices of my research participants feature centrally in my publications, as suggested by the ethics of representation (see Maynard 1994; Kitzinger and Wilkison 1996; Richardson 1997; Olesen 2005). This writing strategy is based on the premise of the epistemic privilege of situated and subjugated voices; its use has allowed me to emphasize the intersectional social categories at play—gender, age, class, race, sexual orientation, and ability—in the construction of hypersexualization as a social problem.

This feminist (standpoint) epistemology was instrumental in my capacity to build knowledge grounded in girls' accounts and experiences. From this point, I came to grasp the unexpected consequences that the discourse of hypersexualization—the policing of gender and heterosexuality in school settings through dress code reforms—had had thus far on the daily lives of my research participants. In effect, dress code reforms were experienced by the majority of my research participants as an unscripted policy of harassment enforced by teachers and principals. Dress codes and uniforms targeted mainly female students, and when they were deemed delinquent, they faced a series of consequences, ranging from an informal notice, to in-school forms of punishment (isolation, extra assignments, mandatory covering of their body with provided baggy sweaters), to banishment from school.

Critically Assessing My Commitment to the Politics of Girlhood Studies

A feminist theoretical framework was instrumental in making the centrality of the female body and sexuality visible to me in the controversy over hypersexualization in Quebec, shedding light on what then appeared to most to be a trivial topic. Even though my work has not resulted in any tangible social action or policy change thus far, it can be argued that foregrounding the political nature of the struggle—the

regulation of females' sexuality—is a legitimate form of feminist intervention. Furthermore, my call for carefully listening to the voices of females was congruent with the feminist politics of girlhood studies regarding girls' participation, their voices, and their empowerment.

However, if I reflect on my work only from the perspective of policy change (Mitchell and Reid-Walsh 2009) or structural change (Jiwani and Berman 2002), my assessment becomes more complicated and discomforting. What would have been the correct course of action according to these perspectives? For instance, would inciting girls to organize against the sexist implementation of dress code reforms have been a positive step towards action? Could I have made connections with school boards in order to use my (assumed) privileged position on the girls' behalf to address their concerns? Should I have organized a workshop on students' rights in order to foster my research participants' political agency with regard to school governance? If so, would this have put my research participants at risk of being stigmatized by teachers and school principals?

The politicization of the research process created by a commitment to tying research to action raises ethical dilemmas and questions of feasibility that are heightened by the age and status differences between the researcher and subjects in girlhood studies. As minors, my research participants could not be politically empowered the way adults could. Conducting research as a graduate student, a junior researcher, a senior professor, or a research assistant informs the work in totally different ways, each associated with different sets of opportunities and constraints that have to be taken into consideration when we are assessing ways to tie research to action. Such an awareness of our positionality is perhaps a strength that we can bring to our work, helping us to define what action and social change mean in specific locations, conjunctures, and times.

The "What's Next?" Step

There are two steps I see as being potentially helpful in envisioning ways to draw closer ties between research and action. The first step consists of adding a "What's next?" step into the research process, so that the incentive to take action is made integral to it, as in the following modified sequence: Theory → Research question(s) → Data → Coding → Interpretation → Conclusion(s) → *Modification of theory leading to a search for meaningful action(s)* → *What's next?*

Inserting this step into the research process is a powerful way to make accountability central to our work. It assumes that the purpose

of research goes beyond modifying theory by giving space to the goal of improving the lives of the girls with whom we work. Theory modification is not an end in itself, then, but a possible step towards action. Furthermore, this step can also help, when necessary, to link projects to one another to foster the development of research programs congruent with and accountable to a given community of girls.

I see the linking of projects in the field of girlhood studies as a valuable form of action geared towards social or policy change. My reflexive account has demonstrated that, for several reasons, it is not always possible or feasible to make a specific form of change happen during the course of one research project, especially when the change we seek to facilitate is the political empowerment of research participants who are assigned a subordinated position by the law. The "what's next?" step can ensure, nonetheless, that we do not lose track of this goal. However, there are forces working against the commitment to creating meaningful links between projects and to bringing about social and policy changes in the lives of girls. For example, as a masters and Ph.D. student, and as a postdoctoral fellow, it has been necessary for me to design new research projects while my older existing research has been still underway because of the way in which research grants are allocated in Canada: completing one before applying for another is not how it works.

The second step to tie research to action I propose is inspired by the significant contribution feminist geographers have made in feminist methodology over the last decades (Thien 2009). In order to place myself within the research process as an embodied subject, I suggest a literal understanding of the notion of the politics of place. I suggest that we remain aware not only of the power relationships embedded *in* the research process, but also *within* and *outside* of academia, to develop a clearer understanding of how contexts shape our research agendas and their possibilities (or constraints) for action and change. In this way, accountability will not be restricted to the power relations between the researcher and the researched; it will include a critical yet realistic examination of what taking action can mean within a specific research setting that includes the researcher's positionality and professional status.

Doing research as a graduate student, a research assistant, a junior faculty member, an activist, or a volunteer in a girl-centered non-profit organization shapes the researcher's location in different ways in terms of power, autonomy, access to research participants, access to material resources, and so on. Conducting work in poor rural areas in Canada is not the same as working in conflict zones or in so-called developing countries. The challenges, opportunities, and constraints differ by loca-

tion just as much as the needs of the communities of girls we study do, so the meaning we afford notions of social change and action has to fit the contextual location of the researcher and her chosen community of study.

Feminist research methodology often focuses on the research process and the power imbalance assumed between the researcher and subjects. The placing I am suggesting is meant to locate the multiple layers making up the context of a research project—the physical, social, and structural spaces in which we conduct our work. Thus this place we are talking about is not only related to geographical space; it also has social, political, institutional, personal, and symbolic dimensions. Furthermore, privilege and subordination are not fixed but fluid and context-dependent. If our work is geared towards change, we must be able to see or place ourselves, as embodied subjects, not only within the research process, but within the multiple networks of people, organizations, and institutions with which or within which we are working. Our position of power may sometimes shift from one place to another, and this has to be taken into consideration as well.

To conclude, the two steps described above are an invitation to break with the conventional representation of an abstracted research process from which the researcher is absent. I suggest a literal placing of our embodied selves within this research process so we can see ourselves in it so that we are not outside the process, but striving in our professional and personal lives to achieve social change through research and action. This placing is central to building new research paradigms since it can open new spaces and modes of intervention that are congruent with a feminist approach to accountability. I believe that thinking critically about the meaning of change and action in our work can increase our collective capacity to tie research to action in girlhood studies.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

1. A notable exception was the work done by the Balkishori Team of VACHA Women's Resource Center with Jackie Kirk in 2005.
2. This heated controversy—the mediated discussion that cannot be called a debate, as evidenced in my doctoral thesis (Caron 2009)—lasted for about five years (2001–2006) and has been echoed in other countries through concerns about the eroticization of childhood and the media sexualization of girls since the late 1990s.
3. Public discussions on the topic held that sexy clothing worn by female students polluted schools' learning environments since it was too distracting to (heterosexual) male students.

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