

## **Abstract**

Based on research with middle-upper class 12-13 year old school girls, we discuss how femininities were embodied and discursively reconstructed in class-based ways. The data suggests the girls understood class antagonisms within the boundaries of neoliberal discourses of responsabilisation, self-discipline, self-worth, and 'proper' conduct and *choices*. With class stripped of any structural or structuring properties, instead imparted to the fleshy sinews of the (excessive) body, the data reveals how social class was made visible and manifest in various mechanisms of, and meanings about, inclusion, exclusion, pathology and 'normalisation.' Thus, in explicating the ways in which the school girls embodied middle-class femininity (as the epitome of localised and everyday neoliberalism) we highlight how, in turn, 'others' ('chavs') were pathologised and deemed in need of regulation, management and governance.

**Keywords:** embodiment, femininity, intersectionality, neoliberalism, social class.

## Introduction

At the turn of 2013 a series of significant changes to British welfare support were ushered in, accompanied by reinvigorated academic debate about the conceptualisation of social class; even the introduction of new models of social class (Savage et al., 2013). However, whilst many scholars work to highlight that the empirical actualities of class remain (Woodward et al., 2014); political rhetoric evades any reference to social class—instead opting to focus on choices, behaviours, attitudes and expectations. Class is then the ‘absent presence’ (Woodward et al., 2014: 427) within policy spheres of health, employment, education, leisure and sport. Yet even popular discourses note the inherent classed battles conjured within the political vernacular; an evocative vocabulary (*shirkers, scroungers, skivers*) that exposes the ‘cynical venom at the heart of David Cameron’s coalition’ (Milne, 2013). Within this paper, we focus on these aforementioned empirical actualities of class by analysing the everyday realities of young girls and theorising the complex interplay between their understandings of social class and how this becomes visible and manifests itself in various mechanisms of, and meanings about, inclusion, exclusion, pathology and normalisation. Our attention to young females’ constitution of social class derives from a wider research project focused on the complex relationship and intersections between gender, femininity and social divisions such as class, race, sexuality and disability. This research concentrated on the way femininities are negotiated by young girls within their everyday lives and looked at their leisure practices and engagement with media. The findings from this study reinforced our contention that class certainly still matters and all its manifestations need to be explicated and addressed (Woodward et al., 2014). Subsequently, our focus herein is the subjective mechanisms through which middle-upper class femininity was made known and experienced, the way that social class is embodied and how this study of embodiment is “about culture and experience insofar as these can be understood from the standpoint of being-in-the-world” (Csordas, 1999: 143). Therefore, we hope to add to the reinvigorated conversations about

class called for by Woodward et al (2014) through our analysis of class as a key organising principle for ‘producing the modes of subjectification and subjectivity’ (Walkerdine, 2003: 239) and the way subjectivities are ‘defined against those who are other/not-me’ (Bradley, 2014: 431).

### **The (ir)rationalities of neoliberalism: ‘future girls’, ‘top girls’ and ‘chavs’**

Our understandings of the nuances of class-based embodied femininities are ground within an extant neoliberalism that provides the political/economic rationalities for social welfare ‘reforms’ in the UK. For Giroux (2001, 2005), the defining essence of the rationality of neoliberalism is the morbidity of the social sphere, evidenced from the hegemonic cynicism toward all things public and collective. Coming to the fore in the late 1970s and early 1980s after a not inconsiderable incubation period, within most Western democracies an alternative political philosophy was strategically advanced (especially through the Regan/Thatcher era), prefigured on the need to dismantle the basic institutional components of the post-war social welfare consensus, and mobilise policies intended to extend market discipline, competition, and commodification throughout society (Brenner and Theodore, 2002; Jessop, 2002). The corollary of this has been the rise of a virulent contempt for the very notion of social welfare provision accompanied by an equally pernicious and questioning attitude towards those who are its recipients. Within the United Kingdom, this has been manifest in policy reforms such as the introduction of a cap on the amount of benefits working age people can receive and new rules on the size of state provided accommodation in order to increase incentives for people to find work (see gov.uk). While the doses vary—an outcome of temporal, spatial, political and utterly contextual variations—the basic prescription of neoliberalism is the same: purge the system of obstacles to the functioning of free markets; celebrate the virtues of individualism (recast social problems as individual problems); foster economic self sufficiency; abolish or weaken social

programs; include those marginalised into the labour market on the market's terms (such as through the workfare scheme); and, criminalise the homeless and the urban poor (Giroux, 2005).

The dictates of neoliberalism incentivises the subject to become the instigator of their own biography, modelling the responsible, flexible self as 'enterprising, reflexive, autonomous and self-regulating' (Hollingworth and Williams, 2009: 468). Through an ethic of self-discipline, subjects are *expected* to publicly perform their worth ('correct life choices') as evidence of their value; values which more often than not are represented in a symbolic manner that depicts or permits sameness and difference. In this regard, as Skeggs and Loveday (2012) proffer, the social subject themselves becomes a 'site' of their own investment—be that financial or in terms of time, material resources and aesthetic performance. This embodied 'site', a vessel or container of sorts, becomes a key location for understanding neoliberal class politics: the body represents an individual's value, productivity, conformity and status and speaks to a fluid conceptualisation of class as an enduring subjective lived experience (Munt, 2000). In this sense, social class cannot be conceived in terms of objective empirical economic conditions alone (Archer and Francis, 2006; Vincent, Ball and Braun, 2010a, 2010b), it is writ large on our bodies, a part of the intimate private sphere that has now been marshalled into public spaces 'for the operation of power, using it to reinforce arguments of normalcy against the ruptures of social and cultural tensions' (Skeggs and Wood, 2008: 559). We are forwarding, therefore, a relational and complex understanding of social class whereby, at the same time that class is 'denied, in talk of "classlessness", its importance downplayed' it is also 'performed, played out, registered in numberless small nuances of interaction in every aspect of our daily lives' (Bradley, 2014: 429-430).

Guided by the work of Harris (2004a, 2004b) and McRobbie (2007), we suggest that nowhere are these embodied class politics more apparent than when one looks towards what it means to be, and what is expected of, young women in Western capitalist societies. Eloquently represented in the image of the "Future Girls" and "Top Girls" who are celebrated for their

determination, their drive and ability to seize life chances, young women have been ‘constructed as the vanguard of [this] new subjectivity’ (Harris, 2004b: 1). “Future Girls” and “Top Girls” are both highly visible and valorised within books, television programmes, films, magazines and websites. This new privileged girl/subject is constructed as a powerful actor within free market imperatives and engenders a new language of affordances and freedoms to choose. Furthermore, she embodies a distinctively neoliberal subjectivity that strives for self-fulfilment, and demonstrates conduct of the self through monitoring, surveillance and self-investment (Harris, 2004a, 2004b). Yet, the multiple iterations of ‘can-do girl’ discourses offer up an individualised and often narrow reading of Westernised femininity. These are subjectivities wrought with struggles and contradictions, they are far from abstract and timeless impressions but are ‘embodied and historical . . . structured by other forms of inequality’ (Williams, 2013: 6).

Bound then within the context of the political and economic trajectories of neoliberalism, there appear to be disparate opportunities available for girls in education, employment and leisure. Such disparities are the preoccupation of the sociology of education and critical girl studies, drawing attention to the ways that articulations of classed femininities, whilst not necessarily new (see Allan and Charles, 2014), have been intensified and reconfigured in the neoliberal present. Our theoretical groundings are influenced by ‘Bourdieuian understandings of social and cultural reproduction’ and physical/corporeal capital (Maxwell and Aggleton, 2014: 190) across these disciplines and we hold these together with Nikolas Rose’s (1999) influential work on (self-)governance and conduct (or the conduct of conduct). In so doing, our analysis explores the embodied practices and dispositions that are deployed by the girls in their governance of the self as we aim to further understand the ruptures and tensions, as well as the coherences that appear within young girls’ accounts of embodied femininity as a classed subjectivity.

In the United Kingdom—and parodied in ‘the popular’ Vicky Pollard character in BBC televisions’ *Little Britain* series—it is the figure of the ‘chav’ that has become a vehicle for

explicitly exhibiting ontological class antagonisms (Tyler, 2008). Lawler (2005a, 2005b) argues that the respectable, law abiding, forward looking and hard-working have been absorbed into the middle classes, consigning the rough, the contagion, to the outside where they become discursively constituted as passive, ‘work shy’, and welfare recipients. The visibility of this specific ‘other(ed)’ body is discursively constituted as a pejorative scar on the pristine neoliberal corpus; pathologised as being in need of regulation and governance on the basis of living in council housing, the use or threat of violence, their aesthetic value, but also the social cues they embody: accent, age, ‘(in)appropriate’ behaviour, eating habits. Indeed, such popularised iconography is ubiquitous; we hear references as part of mainstream vocabulary, and our politicians evoke them during interviews and in parliament (Jones, 2012). Accordingly within the balance of this paper, we address the ways in which young girls occupy a ‘can do’ status and explicate how this serves to conceal, demonise and eviscerate those who ‘can’t do’. In so doing, we explore how class is inscribed on the young female body through celebrated, embodied performances and the concomitant discursive positioning, labelling and pathologisation of the ‘other.’

### **Methods that move**

Data collection took place over a school term with a group of 20 females aged between 12-13 years old. The girls attended Franklin School, a private (fee paying) school in the West of England and data were collected across a series of weekly ‘media and body image’ workshops as well as focus groups with the participants. This context is not insignificant methodologically or theoretically given a number of scholars have focussed on the ways in which young people’s subjectivities are sculpted in particularly ‘classed’ ways within schools (Allan and Charles, 2014; Maxwell and Aggleton, 2014; Ringrose, 2007). Similarly, we centralise these lived experiences but extend our analysis beyond school-girl subjectivities and the institutional setting and context of

Franklin School. We do so given we see the school as one of many sites of educational process impacting the young girls' everyday lives. As such, our approach is located at the crux of interrelations between the educative capacity of (popular) culture and that of institutions such as schools and colleges. Therefore, our methodology and analysis is not just about 'subjectivity formation in school settings' (Allan and Charles, 2014: 349); we embrace influences from public pedagogy that ensure we take seriously the multifarious ways in which young girls 'learn'—and are educated—about feminine performativity and 'appropriate' ways of being female (see author A). Our methods are reflective of this.

Each workshop session involved activities and guided discussion pertinent to the girls' everyday lives and feminine subjectivities. For example, the girls talked readily about shopping, playing sport, using MSN messenger and Facebook, reading magazines playing computer games, being a student at the school, being a sister, daughter, friend. The meetings were relaxed and informal and adapted, when necessary, to key emergent themes around gender, sexuality, social class, race and disability. The project utilised a range of innovative methodological practices designed specifically to engage young people—elsewhere we have discussed these as 'methods that move' (see author A). These methods ranged from dancing and playing Nintendo Wii games, to creating collages from magazines, writing narratives, making posters, and drawing pictures and the workshops were underscored by a climate of collaboration through which the girls became partners in the construction of knowledge.

As the girls engaged with the research activities, it was clear that they struggled to verbalise class inequality but were clear that 'chavs' were representative of 'poor people'. In order to best capture their experiences and reflections and to enhance their comments and descriptions, the workshop was adapted to utilise drawing as a method as—when used appropriately—it appeals to young people's skills and competencies (Punch, 2002). The lead researcher wanted to understand more about the way the Franklin School girls' embodiment was contingent upon being different to the female 'chav' and so they were asked whether they would

be able to/would like to draw two pictures, one of the ‘chav’ of which they so readily spoke and the other of themselves. They were then asked to clearly label these illustrations to show the differences and similarities. The written, spoken, and drawn data we present within this paper are multi-layered and our analysis here maps specifically the narratives around gender- and classed-based embodiment and is informed by Johnson et al’s (2004) framework for dialogic textual analysis that examines the link between individual experiences and the social context. This complimented the multiple data sources that were collected and allowed our interpretations to shift between the girls’ sculpting of a desirable subjectivity and our problematisation of the ways in which this desirability was often discussed and experienced in relation to another subject formation. The pathological, deviant and symbolic ‘chav’ body was *the* terminology of choice through which the girls demonised, and differentiated themselves from, the working classes. Subsequently, in our analysis we interrogate how, through the mobilisation and embodiment of class-based femininity, the Franklin School girls carved out a space in which to understand, preserve and legitimate their middle-upper class subjectivity while simultaneously demarcating the working class body. By way of order, our analysis is focussed on the way in which embodied class femininities are comprised of careful and conscious negotiation of the aesthetic presentation of the self, conduct and behavioural decisions, consumptive practices and educational and life choices.

### **Embodied femininities: aesthetic presentation of self**

There are chavs, chav chavs, nasty chavs, funny chavs, upper-class chavs, chavs you can be friends with, chavs cos [sic] of what they buy, *and us* (Monique, workshop 5)

Within this section, we explore how these young girls struggled with both their own desire to embody normalised and ‘appropriate’ femininity and, how in their attempts to



legitimate and rationalise their bodies, they affectively conceptualised and demonised an ‘inappropriate’ body politic (the white ‘chav other’)<sup>i</sup> that was in need of regulation and governance. At times this process of differentiation was articulated explicitly, however at others working class femininity was (re)established and (re)constituted through silence and omission. As Walkerdine (2003: 246) notes, ‘everything that is not present in this performance contains that other narrative, the narrative of being “Other”, now pushed into the place opposite to the position she . . . holds.’ Therefore, through the figurative ‘other’—the ‘chav’—the middle-upper class girl of the neoliberal present was brought into being. Young girls have been (re)established as smart consumers (Harris, 2004b) of both product and lifestyle due to their positioning as the new citizens of the neoliberal moment (Harris, 2004a, 2004b) and Bourdieu’s work around capital, tastes and dispositions has been fundamental to the integration of social class and consumption (Holt and Griffin, 2005). Like the girls in Maxwell and Aggleton’s (2014) research, the Franklin School girls’ projects of the ‘normalised’ self were shaped, materially and discursively, through resources and dispositions; consumption was aligned to a display of ‘normal’ middle-upper class femininity and so shopping and consuming were politicised expressions of self. But as McRobbie (1997) cautions, the invitation to consume does not address all women and consumption takes on new value when *correct choices* have to be made with regard to the presentation of the self. The intense regulation of the individual through this rhetoric makes docile and productive the proper consumer-citizen and renders those who make ‘inappropriate’ consumptive choices as pathological (Allen and Osgood, 2009).

Class can be read into fashion styles and, consistent with popular conceptions and representations, the girls identified ‘chavs’ according to the clothes they buy and wear (Hayward and Yar, 2006). Class was therefore embodied and read through the multiple stylisations of the self that the girls proffered; indeed the ‘chav body’ was also seen as stylised and sculpted through consumption. The tracksuit, for example, became an artefact of biopolitical performativity as it operated to speak to, and tell stories of, localised class struggles. Wearing a tracksuit took on

political significance when it was construed as *inauthentic* in comparison to the taken-for-granted ‘norms’ of middle-class style (Tyler, 2008). The ‘authenticity’ of a “cheap puff jacket, cheap tracky” (Stephie) was called into question on the basis of *choice*. The girls’ (unassuming) individualised responsabilisation suggested that the way one dresses, styles their hair and applies their make-up operates as a means of distinguishing between females: (re)establishing a normative consumptive middle-class. With Jones (2012: 9), these utterances of difference, which hinged on negative traits associated with the ‘chav’ aesthetic, became indicative of ‘pure class contempt’. This ‘contempt’ was displayed through what we term a language of *excess* that, in conjunction with a preoccupation with the fake and unnatural, discursively implied inferior taste that was not only different to the middle-upper class ‘norm’ but was a vulgar impersonation of it. By way of demonstrating this assertion, we turn to the girls’ stories (verbal/drawn/written) given they are suggestive of this process of ‘otherisation.’ By establishing a clear and stable understanding of ‘us’ and ‘them’, the middle-upper class girl located the self (herself) as legitimate, authentic and respectable. Nowhere was this more evident than when analysing the annotations that accompanied their drawn images of classed femininity:

**Figure 1** Illustration produced during a workshop

The language of excess, and the commodified aesthetic, is extended here through the use of dualisms related to fake and cheap versus ‘normal,’ nice and expensive. Within these images the girls emphasised certain visual and narrative signifiers that functioned in multifaceted ways to explicitly highlight the ‘flaws’ of the working class body (Hollingworth and Williams, 2009). Being extremely hyper feminine, and some might say a hyper (hetero)sexual female (Skeggs, 2005), was considered undesirable or *excessive* by the girls. Indeed, pushing the body to excess was considered critically, as Nina suggested, “It’s nice to have your hair back and more natural, but

then having it back and then loads of make-up doesn't look very nice." The 'chav' body was a figure that was "pretty, but they emphasise it too much" (Charlotte) and they had traversed beyond the boundaries of the *ideal*. Comparisons between the fake (shoe and clothing brands, use of lots of make-up) and authentic (natural, pretty) were frequent and imbued the 'natural' and 'unnatural' as dualistic class sensitive differentials. For example, India's assertion that the working class girl would be wearing "thick make up" whilst a middle-upper class female (herself) would utilise "natural make up," reinforced this binary between respectful, stylish and then excessive overindulgence. With Smith Maguire and Stanway (2008: 72), comments such as this 'signal aspirations to a more self-assured, socially-competent, adult mode of embodiment' that is the antithesis of the inferior taste and style of the lower class girl (Tyler and Bennett, 2010).

### **Embodied femininities: conduct & behaviour**

Clothing, as the initial point of reference in the aesthetic presentation of self, intersected with other narratives around conduct and behaviour that relationally framed the girls' 'knowledge' of the working classes. Drawing directly from the girls' dialogue, working class femininities were understood as different in terms of the perceived threat of violence, being tough, engaging in age 'inappropriate' behaviour, and the spatial dimensions within which these performances occurred. Following Skeggs (2004), the girls utilised technologies of knowledge—albeit knowledge of the working class as dangerous, uncontrollable and unmanageable—to locate working class activities and conduct as different to their own middle-upper class lives:

Charlotte      I went for a walk and I live like in the middle of the country, and then our next door neighbour is from Franklin city centre and she's like quite thuggy if you know what I mean? ... They're that scary

Building on their 'knowledge' of working class behaviour, the girls viewed the working class body as denoting a threat and therefore inviting a fearful response:

Lucy            [working classes are different because of their] Behaviour. When you see chavs you just see them like they walk so weird

Aqua            Like really *intimidatingly*, they sort of walk up to you and it's sort of like *scary*

Roxy            If I, if I walked past a chav I would actu—. If I was with my mum or dad I would just be like 'can we go like the other way?' I'm not joking; I would not want to go past a bunch

Aqua            Whenever I am by myself you don't want to walk past, you know just in case

Robin           I was crossing the road and my mum said 'are they chavs?' and they literally turned around . . . *it was like really scary*

This assumed unproductive, irrational behaviour that warranted the moral gaze, was once more reconfigured as a lived experience of class through the distanciation established between us (the middle-upper class girls) and them (the 'chav'). Returning to the girls' invocation of the tracksuit, or more accurately in this instance, the distinctive performativity of 'wearing' the tracksuit, we can see the wider multidimensional becomings of class-based embodied femininities:

Roxy            Yeah because chavs prevent people from actually having fun, like no, because sometimes they all like come . . . [others interject with comments like “in a park” and “in gangs”]. I know it sounds quite harsh they are probably all like quite nice, but some just like stand there smoking, drinking in hoodies [interrupted]

Paris            Drinking beers. They give us the *wrong* impression

Roxy            And that’s why people go ‘oh like hoodies are really bad,’ if we wear hoodies people wouldn’t be like ‘oh I’m really scared’ cause [sic] we might wear like a hoodie just our tracksuit top hoodie saying Franklin School and no one would be scared

Lottie           It’s because we don’t wear the full body thing and if some people do they wear sort of a more nice version of it

Through condemning the embodiment of the *wrong* type of ‘hoodie,’ Roxy, Paris and Lottie drew on the popular rhetoric of the ‘tracksuit hood’ as symbolic of the out of control and unruly (Wyer and Calvini, 2011). Simultaneously they troubled these understandings by drawing on their own ‘correct’ and ‘proper’ conduct when wearing a ‘hoodie’, despite the irony of their previous damning critique of wearing a tracksuit. Therefore, the tracksuit operated as a site for the conspicuous display of, and discrepancies between, class-based femininities. The classed body was read through both the material hoodie and the girls’ preferential reaction to its emblazoned Franklin School logo as opposed to “Superdry tracksuits<sup>iii</sup>” (Aqua). In distinguishing between clothing in such a manner, the epitome of neoliberalism—the middle-upper class young girl—was made visible and known according to a rational, entrepreneurial, autonomous self

(Allen and Osgood, 2008). The antithesis, the misbehaving (smoking, drinking and getting “into drugs” [Lottie]) ‘chav’ behaviour was deemed inappropriate, especially for girls of their age. By readily defining and ascribing value and meaning to the excesses of the body and behaviour of the working class female, bodily performance was constantly scrutinised and located in terms that became comprehensible for the girls and their lives and experiences. Moreover, such embodied conduct and ‘irresponsible’ behaviour is, according to the Franklin School girls, radically localised.

In this sense, it is not just people who are deemed in need of regulation; places (often those that contain the working classes) are also perceived to be unproductive and subject to market-led regeneration (Paton et al., 2012). The cartographies of embodied class dispositions featured heavily in the girls’ ‘knowledge’ as they articulated a quite lean, mean and divisive social and cultural geography. That is, the spatial imaginaries conjured by the girls are emergent technologies of governance (Fusco, 2007) that offer powerful pedagogies through which bodies and subjectivities are spatially (re)organised. Indeed, for the girls, an *immoral* urban landscape (Fusco, 2007) connoted class antagonisms and heralded consequences by association for those who were located there. The workshop narratives below reveal the surveying of these places and those who frequent them:

Roxy            Like in the centre of town you get like people speaking in a Westcountry accent and you think like chav ... Like when you drive through poor places there are some people . . . like that there. Charlotte you know when you walk like drive through the city centre and stuff yeah?

Charlotte      Yeah

Roxy            Oh oh on like a Friday yeah I just see like billions of like twelve year olds

In locating the body and its behaviour as integral to the production of place, classed subjectivities were (re)established based on their position within the city, moreover these seemingly passing observations simultaneously concealed and spoke to certain national concerns over an inferred threat to the social order that is conjured by youth hanging around on street corners, in bus shelters and sprawled in shop doorways (Hall, Coffey and Williamson, 1999). These places—and the bodies that inhabit them—are politically and theoretically inscribed and highlight the lack of productivity and deviance often attributed to working class youth. In drawing upon the ‘other’ as now both corporeally and spatially identifiable and contained, the girls located themselves as distinct from “*them* on the streets” (Monique). Of note was the girls’ own position within these discussions, instead of themselves being situated in these places they were always mobile, “*driving through* this quite chavvy place” (Charlotte). For these girls, embodied class dispositions were not just spatial they were also temporal; their position was always only temporary, their mobility allowed them to gaze upon the (immobile) ‘other’ and skirt around the boundaries of the ‘exotic’ serving to maintain class-based fixity in space. With Reay (2000) and Holt and Griffin (2005), urban place, and the ability or not to negotiate place, was an important resource in the young female repertoire that enabled the establishment of the sort of girl ‘I am’ and the sort of girl ‘I am not.’

### **Embodied femininities: the politics of consumption**

Overwhelmingly the need to categorise certain cultural practices and certain bodies overshadowed the nuanced experiences of young girls growing up in Britain. As with smoking and drinking alcohol, dietary behaviours were constructed in particular ways with particular consequences for young girls. Wrong consumptive choices were critically encountered when they

emphasised, rather than concealed, evidence of what the girls considered abhorrent excessive corporeality (Tyler and Bennett, 2010)

Charlotte      They [chavs] wear like crop tops even if they are like really fat and they have fat squashing out

Paris            And it's a bit sick

Charlotte      Like fine wear it if you're skinny but it's not a good look

Centralised around *wrong* consumption *choices* that exposed excessive flesh, the girls critiqued the 'soft body' (Jeffords, 1994), the superfluous flesh of the working class female. Excessive flesh was considered to be a corporeal confession of femininity *gone bad*, embodiment at its most 'inappropriate' that conjured notions of the 'unproductive body that has been and continues to be overly reliant on the welfare state' (Rail and LaFrance, 2009: 75). The girls' affective responses (feeling sick) to seeing "fat squashing out" speaks to the inescapable and dominant, indeed global, health discourses that surround the body and its size that have become narrowly read in class terms. The discursive reconstitution of the 'other' body and the vilification of fat are, however, situated alongside the girls' continual references back to their own bodies and their own middle-upper class tastes and dispositions. The girls eagerly managed their own slenderness in a quest to embody a distinctly different corporeality as Aqua made clear:

I don't mind being quite small but I am always like consciously worried that I am going to get fat. Cause [sic] I think because I'm quite petite at the moment I think and that's fine, but I am always worried that I will get fat . . . I'm always scared that's going to happen



The Franklin School girls were conspicuous in their consumption of food and controlled their calorie intake and physical exertion in order to maintain their slender bodies, reconcile body dissatisfaction and avoid, at all costs, a 'fat' body representative of deviance (author A):

Aqua            I often can't do much sport at home because I am often on the train to see my dad or something or in the car and so I think that might be why I don't eat as much because I feel I can't do anything to burn the food off

Lottie           Eat celery, you burn calories when you eat celery

LR                What body don't you want?

Charlotte       Fat and that's about it

Stephie          If you like wake up one morning and you like think you feel a bit fat

Stephie          Yeah, you think you're a bit podgy then like you'll like try a little bit extra for the exercise front

Jasmine          I just try and eat a bit less

Amber            I'd just eat a bit less, not have so much lunch, don't have a pudding at lunch. I mean I walk to school and back everyday

Amelia           It makes you feel better doesn't it?

The girls not only positioned themselves as different in terms of body shape and size, they also purported pseudo *expertise* in terms of diet. This allowed them to highlight bodily *excess* resulting from ‘inappropriate’ eating behaviours as well as rationalise the challenge to slender middle-upper class embodiment posed by the underweight working class ‘other’:

Lottie            And you can pass them off as like working class because they are like really, really big and they wear like these really, really tight tops

Charlotte        Either that or skinny

Lottie            Yeah no most of the time they are really, really big

The dichotomy between the working class girl as *too* skinny or *too* fat was repeated throughout the workshop, provoking the lead researcher (LR) to ask:

LR                Do you think the size of her body is going to make a difference?

Robin            Yeah she’s really skinny

Charlotte        Skinny or really fat, they aren’t in the middle, they’re either like really skinny or really fat

The variegated sizes of female bodies were lost in the girls’ analysis; they saw no space for a working class girl in “the middle.” This middle ground, this normative space was reserved

for them, for *their* bodies. As the conversation continued, the rationale they had for prescribing such extreme body differences unfolded:

LR                    Why are they skinny and why are they fat?

Lucy                  Because they don't have enough money to buy food

Monique             Or if they do they go to McDonalds

Roxy                  Yeah, if you don't have that much you can go to McDonalds like the whole time and it will be cheaper than buying like, I don't know, like some chicken and some pasta and like cooking it. Because like it might, that would be more expensive

Eva                    And sometimes they can't be bothered to cook

Monique             Because they are working

This extract, whilst not exhaustive, directs our attention to the theoretical intricacies of class, the messiness of its boundaries, and how the biopolitical becomes manifest and understood at the level of the symbolic (Skeggs, 2004). In attending to the potential structural forces that impact upon the lived experiences of a working class female subject, Roxy's comments—regarding McDonalds as opposed to home cooking as the only viable culinary option—drew upon and contested obesity, diet and health as being purely medical concerns, speaking instead to a number of social determinants of health (for example, the location of fast food restaurants within certain areas of cities and the price and (un)availability of fresh food).

Nevertheless, the political significance of these comments are less understood, somewhat unsurprisingly given the neoliberal reinvention of ‘welfare’ speaks to choice, personal accountability, consumerism, and, self-empowerment while masking the very social forces that position people into the dejected borderlands of consumer capitalism (Ouellette and Hay, 2008). Poverty was read onto the body and into the diet and consumption behaviours of the working class; size a sign of deprivation and limited economic resource. Likewise, the resulting fatness (or other bodily abnormalities) resulting from a perceived apathy to cook was exclaimed upon by the girls—“sometimes they can’t be bothered to cook” (Eva)—and seen as being proof of, and producing, laziness, lack of willpower, responsibility, effort and a failure of self-esteem rather than configured around structural inequalities. As such the girls embodied the ideal neoliberal citizen—the middle-upper class girl (themselves)—governed by free will and consumer *choice*, in relation to their discursive invocation of ‘chavs’ unable to cope with the endless freedom on offer. The bodies the girls deemed abject—because they are *too* fat, *too* thin, making the *wrong* consumptive choices, exposing fleshy *excesses*—are understood within a neoliberal conjuncture that not only produces self-disciplined citizens, but, for sustenance (of the body proper), requires their lazy fat or skinny nemesis (Sender and Sullivan, 2008).

Forms of biopolitical governance associated with diet and weight management were considered fundamental to the sculpting of the ethical self and accrued value upon/for the classed female body. Whereas the body conceived by Charlotte as being somewhere in the “middle” was evidence of the moral worth of the individual and a display of the correct investment in the self, Skeggs (2005) notes that this imperativeness towards the ethically complete self is neither garnered in the same way nor possible for all. Rather, failures attributed to diseases of the will (Skeggs, 2005) render more visible the *choices* the working class have made; particularly when an implicit condition of their citizenship is an ability to reflect upon, work on and organise their lives and themselves through everyday techniques of self-governance (Ouellette and Hay, 2008). These everyday forms of self-governance are directed—or conducted



- Paris            Yeah that gets on my nerves as well
- Roxy            It doesn't get on my nerves because *it's their life*
- Paris            Yeah I know *it's their life*
- Roxy            All of the people that we are calling chavs yeah, they don't go to school
- Paris            They have the *option* to go to school, I know a lot of them do, they have an *option* to make their life better it's not like they don't

Paris and Roxy reworked educational opportunity from a problem needing state provision—educational under achievement as a moral hazard—towards a problem of work ethic, individual productivity and aspiration (Carabine, 2007). Discourses of responsabilisation were palpable through the utilisation of nouns such as “option” and the impression that “it’s their life.” Within these discourses of individualism there was little scope allocated for the structural dynamics that may have ‘socialised their non-participating peers’ out of education (Rich, 2005: 502). Consequently, the girls’ irritation around female ‘chavs’ sabotaging their education can be read in terms of the personalised role of education in their own lives. For the girls, institutional capital derived from educational achievement—attendance even—surfaced as the first step in a normalised life trajectory, educational achievement was equated with employment and a disengagement from the former inevitably meant a lack of job prospects or motivation to find work. As a result, a middle-upper class moralising gaze that was cast over education was soon extended to career options. Indeed, and as a recurrent theme across the data,

there was a normative expectation around work and (un)employment, one that hinged on the individual's dedication to the self as a project to be worked upon. This is depicted in Robin's drawings (Figure 2):

**Figure 2** Illustrations from workshop

The images distinguish, define and attribute middle-upper class value to specific practices and persons, making the schema of moral value apparent and identifying people in need of transformation (Ringrose and Walkerdine, 2008). Such sentiments were epitomised by Joanna's proposition that the working class girl is brought up in a household where the "Dad does not have no job, mum deal with drugs." Comparatively her own experiences were characterised by her mum and dad having "*very* good jobs". This promotion of personal accountability and *correct* conduct is all too easily located in contemporary welfare and benefit reform and resultant popularised representations of unethical citizenship: 'undeserved' finance in the form of social benefits, and/or illegal narcotics/alcoholism. In this sense, the images are located within a wider discourse that names, shames and makes discernable those without the moral fortitude to live a 'normal' neoliberal life. The 'chav' girl, in Robin's image, is one discursively constituted as a 'problem' to be justifiably managed, an immoral non-productive 'other' who is subject to control and exclusion. Blame and responsibility for an 'unhealthy' body lie firmly at her feet, she is a personal moral failure instantly held in comparison to the reconstruction of their own 'normal', idealised, aspired to embodiment.

Moreover, such moral failures were infused with discourses of teenage pregnancy and motherhood. The girls afforded both 'chavs' and 'normal' girls the dispensary to 'choose' how they spent their time; but these 'choices' ultimately served a distinctive purpose as they marked out, individualised and cast moralising judgements over certain conduct. Roxy's pictorial representation (see Figure 3) of working class femininity was inclusive of 'thought bubbles'

denoting what these young women might be *choosing* to do. In scrutinising this it is possible to see where the discrepancies may lie for the middle-upper class girl, she is a figure who is brought into existence via her opposition to a lifestyle of going out on the town, taking the baby to nursery, paying off debt and a mortgage. In essence Roxy conceived this alternative lifestyle as distinct from her own class preferences—a preoccupation with school and the ‘choice’ to postpone motherhood until the completion of her education:

**Figure 3** Illustrations from Workshop

Underpinned by a distinct classed based moralising, educational value and the desire to avoid teenage pregnancy were conflated such that—and we are guided by Roxy’s images here—they become synonymous with an embodied working class subjectivity. Interpreting these written, drawn and spoken conceptions of classed femininity reveals how their knowledge reconstituted the working class girl *as* mother. Articulated within an atmosphere of contempt and disapproval, the teenage mother was deemed to be symbolic of failed working class femininity and a significant indicator of how divergent the embodied femininities of the Franklin School girls were:

Robin            It’s like sixteen year olds with like prams and babies

Lottie            That’s the desperate lady who accidently got pregnant [outburst  
of laughter]

Pregnancy at a young age was discursively constructed as an obstacle to embodying their “Future Girl” subjectivities (Harris, 2004b). The cultural imperative to discount young motherhood as a valid life choice is itself representative of a political climate that seeks to minimise, reduce or



eradicate characteristics of youth deemed to disrupt their ability to work such as school avoidance and/or low educational achievement, criminality and teenage pregnancy (Carabine, 2007). Indeed, the Department of Communities, Schools and Families' Policy strategy (2010) operates as a form of pernicious discursively based governance suggesting that 'young people have the knowledge and skills to make safe and healthy choices.' Wrong choices—or 'poor outcomes'—would lead, according to the Policy, to health, emotional and well-being concerns, and the likelihood of long-term poverty. The report is clearly indicative of the workfare, as opposed to welfare, state (McRobbie, 2000) and calls upon teenagers (particularly female teenagers) to manage and monitor themselves—their bodies—responsibly and in a manner that does not detract from their productivity in work place/education settings. Not unlike this political rhetoric, the young girls themselves readily identified the pregnancies as untimely:

And then umm, you see the really young people walking around with this like five year old kid. It's like, what are you doing? You can't have a five year old kid when you're that young (Roxy).

Perhaps more so than in the other emergent discourses construed by the girls in this study, the 'othering' that was predicated upon the young mother or the pregnant teenager was emblematic of the ways in which class coalesced around tensions related to young femininity and power. Working class pregnancy was seen by the girls to disrupt both the heteronormative family nexus and, as noted previously, the normalised life trajectory of a female in contemporary society—a pathway through education, career, marriage, *and then* family. Following Bettie (2003), these prospective stages towards motherhood can be seen to adhere to a normalised, neoliberal 'ideal' of extended adolescence via extended education. The decision to be made was not whether or not to have a baby but rather *when* the '(in)appropriate' time was to do so. 'Inappropriate' decisions were relocated from being a social problem to one of individual failure and

irresponsible citizenship, such that a historical trend towards working class youth entering adult roles before their middle-upper class peers was constructed as their own individual failings and inadequacies.

## **Coda**

Within this paper we have drawn attention to how a group of young girls who occupy a position of *privilege* remade their own normalised classed bodies and reconstituted ‘otherness’ through moralising corporeal judgments. Our aim was to contribute to the recently reignited debates around the supposed decline of class based inequalities in a neoliberal era and/or the need for a reconfiguration of class in light of recent economic and political transformations (Woodward et al., 2014). We have done this through empirically based interpretations of classed power relations and both celebrated and pathologised embodied femininities. Our analysis is suggestive of the ways in which the girls embodied middle-upper class femininity and of the euphemistic transference (Bromley, 2000) that focused, in the main, their knowledge to a homogenous, restrictive and omnipresent—mediated—cultural icon: the ‘chav.’ Further, and through an understanding of class as complex, multifaceted, relational and reconstituted through a distinctive language of bodily excess, we interrogated the ways that the working class female’s body and conduct was engaged and ‘called upon’ in the management of an individual’s behaviour and productivity. In this respect, we pointed towards the ways in which a class aesthetic was used as a means of differentiating between females—between an ‘(in)appropriate’ body politic—and operated as a central mechanism through which the young Franklin School girls established their own, and ‘othered’, subjectivities.

With Rose (1999), the girls’ ‘knowledge’ and the aspersions cast on working class bodies are ground within practices and technologies of the self through which conduct is conducted. Shaped around a somatic body ontology founded on the monitoring of bodily information

(Monahan and Wall, 2007; Rich, 2011), the girls learned their own bodies—and by corollary demonised ‘others’—through an assemblage of neoliberal technologies and dispositions that act to monitor, manage, control, and reshape classed bodies in the production of complicit and productive neoliberal citizens. Weaved throughout the girls’ experiences and wider circulating body narratives was a moralising tone that pitched the formation of the ‘new’ self-sufficient and productive young woman against her antithesis, a non-conforming, unproductive abject body perceived as not *be(long)ing*. This is not to suggest that the girls necessarily understood the deep-rooted structural inequalities about which they spoke, nor the historical patterns of struggle, judgements and assumptions that they invoked when they apologised for stereotyping or making generalisations. Such an apologetic consciousness may temper some of our conclusions, yet recourse to neoliberal discourses of autonomy and self-responsibility were pervasive throughout the workshop and focus groups. For instance looking and/or behaving in a certain ‘inappropriate’ way—read a working class way—was considered solely a matter of *choice* (Harris, 2004b).

For Henry Giroux (2003: 195) social class, as a matter of societal consideration, has become negated under neoliberalism as issues of civic value have become privatised. This individualised culture of blame breeds derision in which class is reworked and in some instances relabelled in ways that efface the inequitable realities of the present. The social realities of the “Future Girl”, “Top Girl” and “Cosmo Girl” (Allan and Charles, 2014; Harris, 2004; McRobbie, 2007) have been shown throughout this paper to be located at the intersection of gender and class. Borrowing from Harris, these discourses obscure entrenched patterns of classed hierarchies and privilege middle-upper class femininity as more virtuous and respectable. This is perhaps most vehemently felt when social class is silenced or invisible. As was outlined at the outset, the ‘chav’ become the terminology par excellence to describe working class femininity and the ‘chav’ was deemed to be a victim of their own lack of will and poor ‘choices’ rather than disadvantaged by a nexus of social inequalities. Therefore, social class was visible—through the

body of the ‘chav’—yet *unremarkable* as the girls did not possess exacting vocabulary or reflexivity to comprehend class-based inequality or stigmatisation. Even when questioned by the lead researcher and asked to imagine alternative realities that are more inclusive (author A), the girls still re-established the dominant pre-conditions of neoliberalism—their embodied positionality emblematic of the ways that individualisation and self-production are stratifying and undermine attempts to counter marginalisation within Western social agendas.

The insidious nature of class politics became writ large on the body; and the girls read class as an aesthetic presentation of the self that legitimated mocking, regulation, governance and surveillance. As a consequence, the normalised middle-upper class girl, celebrated for success in education, employment and financial security prior to (assumed) motherhood, was regulated by, and relational to, the ‘other,’ pathological figure of humour—the young ‘chav’ mum (Skeggs, 1997, 2004; Tyler, 2008). This is a body conceived as a drain on the welfare system and in need of constant surveillance and regulation. In this sense, the constitution of their own young, slender, schooled, healthy body politic operates as a form of ocular authoritarianism that renders even more visible, and subject to control, those bodies whom are deemed or perceived to threaten normalised, healthy bodies and social practices (author B).

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> The form of class contempt enacted in the labelling of some individuals as ‘chavs’ was suggestive not only to the divisions that emerged to differentiate between females (in this instance ‘appropriate’ femininity) but further it can be seen to draw the lines and construct the boundaries between different sorts of whiteness. The female ‘chav’ is the embodiment of the white working class; that lazy, welfare dependent, disposable, dirty populous with whom divisions along the lines of purity and virtue can be drawn. The purpose, Skeggs (2005) notes, of this rhetoric is that it allows for a disruption of whiteness whereby privilege and success are not a given. In this vein the vilification, criminalisation, monitoring and surveillance of white (and black) working classes, (re)establishes a class hierarchy and maintains the middle-upper class body and experience as ‘normative.’ The ruptures that are produced and unhinged by notions of whiteness and blackness are currently being developed in a paper.

<sup>ii</sup> Superdry, the flagship brand of the supergroup UK fashion retailer, is recognisable for the clear and bold superdry branding on its products. An ‘expensive’ product, it appears to have been reappropriated (at least in the eyes of the girls in this study) as a marker (excessive branding, too ‘flash’) of ‘chavness’ much like Burberry (see Jones, 2012)

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# Figures

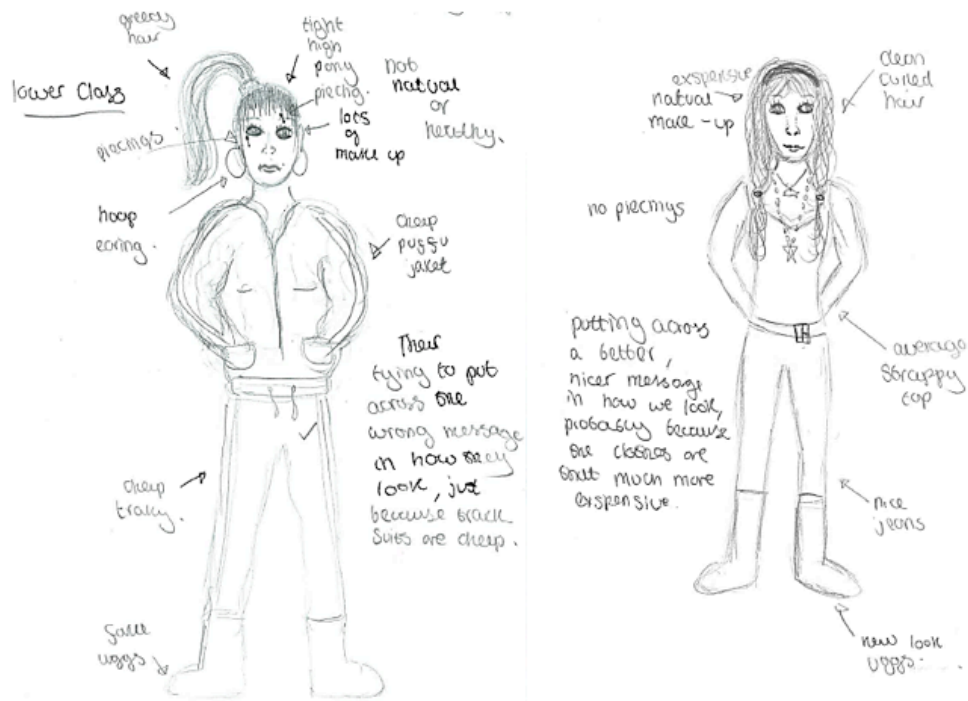


Figure 1 Illustration produced during a workshop



Figure 2 Illustrations from workshop

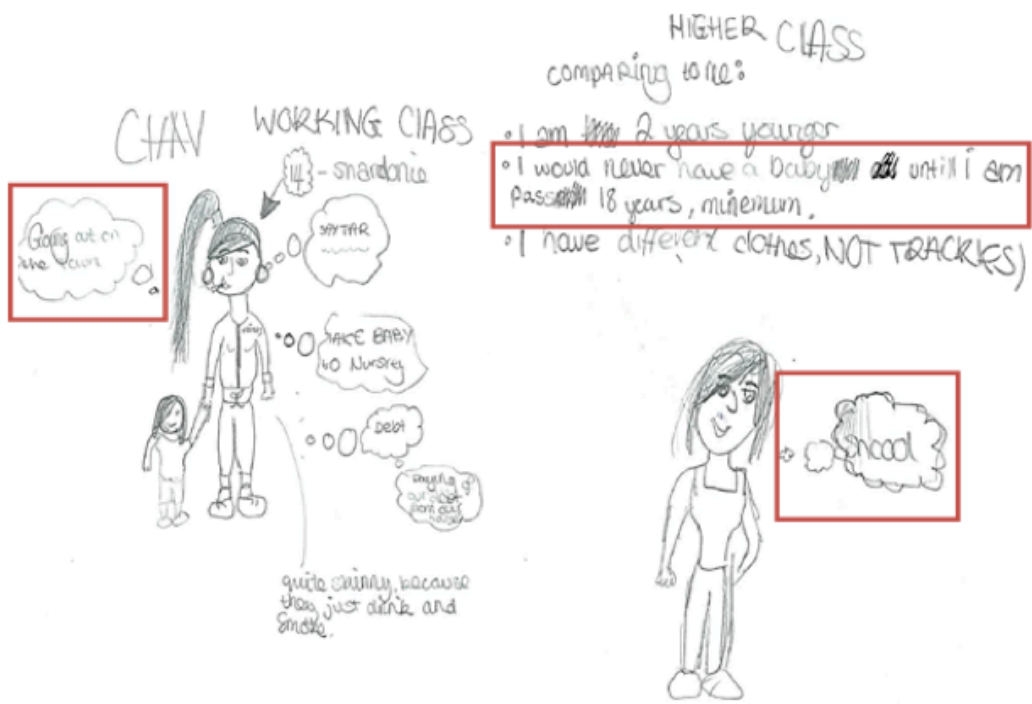


Figure 3 Illustrations from Workshop