Hegemonic femininities in the classroom

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1 Introduction: the possibility of hegemonic femininity

In this chapter I explore the possibilities for a concept of hegemonic femininity, based around a more Gramscian conception of hegemony than that which has been developed from Connell's (1987, 1995, 2002) groundbreaking research in this area. After outlining the problems associated with Connell's original conception, I then propose an alternative definition of hegemonic gender performance which could encompass both masculinities and femininities and also apply to children. Following this, I consider how researchers have identified hegemonic masculinities and femininities in school settings and note that they have a good deal in common. I then explore in more detail my own research in two London schools, demonstrating again that, in school settings at least, hegemonic masculinities and femininities operate in parallel and contain many common features.

The idea of hegemonic femininities originates in Connell's (1987, 1995, 2002) work on masculinities and how these are related to femininities. Connell argues that there are forms of masculinity which are in some ways idealised and aspirational and which support a generally patriarchal system. Hegemonic masculinity, Connell suggests, is constructed both in relation to a variety of subordinated masculinities and to femininity (Connell, 1987), and can be defined as:

> "the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimation of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women." (Connell, 1995: 77)

Hegemonic masculinity is, then, a cultural ideal which may in practice be performed only by a relatively small number of men. However, it has powerful effects on the position both of other men and of women, bringing considerable benefits not only to those men who embody it but also, by association, to other men.

In originally setting up the concept of hegemonic masculinity, Connell was focusing entirely on men, and considered femininities solely in relation to this. As a result, the questions of how femininities might be conceptualised and in particular the position of culturally dominant forms of femininity were only considered later and then still only in conjunction with her primary focus on masculinity. This led Connell to argue that 'there is no femininity

that is hegemonic in the sense that the dominant form of masculinity is hegemonic among men' (Connell, 1987: 183). The difference, suggests Connell, is both contingent and necessary. First, she points out that there has been no overall agreement, historically, about the ideal characteristics of women, but second, and more important, she argues that, within a patriarchal society, there cannot be a form of femininity which is, in itself, hegemonic:

> "All forms of femininity in this society are constructed in the context of the overall subordination of women to men. For this reason, there is no femininity that holds among women the position held by hegemonic masculinity among men." (Connell, 1987: 186-7)

This is a bold claim, and one that has convinced many subsequent researchers, including myself (Paechter, 2012). Connell suggests, that rather than a hegemonic femininity, we should consider 'emphasised femininity', which she characterises in these very traditional terms:

> "the display of sociability rather than technical competence, fragility in mating scenes, compliance with men's desire for titillation and ego-stroking in office relationships, acceptance of marriage and childcare as a response to labour-market discrimination against women." (Connell, 1987: 187)

While both hegemonic masculinity and emphasised femininity were originally understood as being locally established, there has been a subsequent tendency by researchers to reify both into monolithic forms which take insufficient account of local conditions (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Paechter, 2012). If anything, conceptions of dominant femininity have become even more solidified in researchers' heads than have those of hegemonic masculinity, with the result that both have frequently become tied to particular behaviours in ways that Connell did not originally envisage (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Paechter, 2012). Furthermore, while Connell's description of hegemonic masculinity does seem to correspond quite closely to many dominant adult and child masculinities across a variety of contexts, this does not appear to be the case for emphasised femininity. The latter, while still close to what is frequently expected of women by dominant men, is less obviously related to what educational researchers are finding in classrooms and playgrounds (Blaise, 2005; Cobbett, 2013; George, 2007; Hey, 1997; Kelly, Pomerantz, & Currie, 2005; Marsh, 2000; Martin, 2009; Paechter, 2010; Paechter & Clark, 2016; Reay, 2001). There, even though dominant girls' groups remain subordinate to and frequently focused on high-status boys, membership is also significantly marked by ideas about 'girl power' and a distancing from lower status girls.

Meanwhile, in the midst of this general slippage over the use of the concept 'hegemonic masculinity', Connell's comments on the impossibility of hegemonic femininity have often been ignored. Consequently, we now have a considerable number of otherwise well conceived texts that refer to 'hegemonic femininity' as if it were an unproblematic concept. This suggests that

we need to rethink hegemonic masculinity to give us a more general conception of dominant gender forms, in order to allow for a more rigorously conceived idea of hegemonic femininity that could be used by researchers. This would also need to be applicable not just to adult gender relations but also to those of children.

2 An alternative conception of hegemonic masculinities and femininities

As suggested above, the underlying problem with the imbalance between dominant masculinities and femininities, both in how they are conceptualised and, as a result, how they are researched, originates in Connell's (1987) formulation of hegemonic masculinity based solely on research on males. Because Connell was focused on masculinities, she does not appear to have addressed the possibility of a counterpart for hegemonic masculinity until after she had already set up her definition. Once that had happened it was too late: the definition of hegemonic masculinity leads inevitably to the impossibility of hegemonic femininity. We need, in consequence, to rethink hegemonic masculinity in tandem with a parallel concept of hegemonic femininity, or, if possible, have an overarching concept of hegemonic gender performance that can apply to both genders. This would both give us a basis for theorising femininities and allow us to see the extent to which hegemonic masculinities and femininities in a particular context operate in opposition or in parallel, and what features they have in common or fundamentally different. I think that it is also important to have a definition that applies as well to children as to adults, as many previous approaches to gender, particularly when rooted in adult heterosexuality and heterosexual desire, become theoretically problematic when applied to children (Paechter, 2017)

Following Francis et al (2016), who suggest that we might have a more faithfully Gramscian approach to hegemonic gender performances, I propose a more general definition:

> Hegemonic gender performances are those which act, within a particular context, to uphold a gender binary and maintain traditional social relations between genders.

Such an approach allows us to apply the same criteria to the traditionally conceived two genders while also providing space for non-binary and other trans-related gender identities and performances (Dahl, 2012). I nevertheless recognise that the gender binary is a longstanding hegemonic force that, at least contingently, renders non-binary identities and performances as different, if not subordinate or Other.

The advantages of such a definition are manifold. First, it allows for the conception and definition of hegemonic femininities in a particular context, and an assessment of hegemonic masculinities within that context. This plugs a longstanding theoretical gap and, I hope, will make it less likely that researchers start with a focus on local dominant masculinities and only consider femininities as Other to these. Second, and related to this, my definition gives greater theoretical equality to masculinities and femininities, without losing sight of the male dominance prevalent in traditional social relations between genders. This is important as it is clear from empirical research (Blaise, 2005; Currie, Kelly, & Pomeranz, 2007) that men and boys retain dominance over women and girls in most circumstances, even when the local hegemonic femininities are in many ways similar to their masculine counterparts (Paechter & Clark, 2010). Third, it reminds us that hegemony is a power relation and that hegemonic identities are related to this. In Foucaultian terms, hegemonic masculinities and femininities allow greater mobilisation of power by one group in relation to another, though of course there is always resistance to this[1]. Fourth, while pointing to the naturalisation of a gender binary, my definition also recognises that there are other possibilities, even if these may be treated as subordinate in most circumstances. Finally, it is not tied to male and female bodies. It allows for people with bodies identified as female to perform hegemonic masculinities and for people with bodies identified as male to perform hegemonic femininities, even if it is in practice relatively rare to find social groups in which such performances are hegemonic.

We therefore have a theoretical conception of hegemonic masculinities and femininities that can be applied to particular circumstances. In the remainder of this chapter I am going to focus particularly on hegemonic femininities among children and young people, and see how they are manifested in practice, and how they are related to the corresponding local hegemonic masculinities.

3 Hegemonic femininities in classrooms and playgrounds

Blaise (2005) notes that hegemonic masculinity is a culture's fantasy version of what an ideal male should be. She argues that, because it is an illusion, it is essentially unattainable, but that such idealisations nevertheless govern classroom gendered power relations. The situation is similar with regard to hege-

1 Although my own approach to power is Foucaultian, implying that power cannot be held but may be mobilised within social relations, this is not the case for all the authors cited. Generally, when referring to others' work, I preserve their approach to power, and consequently the terms they use.

monic femininities in the classroom. While such ideals will have localised features, they are of course influenced by wider discourses of masculinity and femininity. They are, however, particularly locally salient because, as is well established, peer relations are a fundamental influence on how children and young people construct and inhabit gender and other identities (Cunningham & Meunter, 2004; Harris, 1998; Kehily & Pattman, 2006; Paechter, 2007; Read, Francis, & Skelton, 2011; Sedano, 2012; Warrington & Younger, 2011). In this section I will discuss some of the dominant femininities constructed by children's and young people's peer groups, as they have been identified in the literature on gender and schooling. I will then go on to talk about examples from my own study[2], which, while focusing on the generally non-hegemonic tomboy identities, still provides examples of how hegemonic femininities can manifest themselves in schools.

Renold and Ringrose (2012) discuss the image of the 'alpha girl' and suggest that they are seen as embodying the 'best' traits of both masculinity and femininity. Such girls, they argue, are expected to display contradictory characteristics, such as 'nice, nurturing, passive, sexually desirable via hyper-feminine embodiment and display' alongside being 'rational, competitive, sexually assertive' (47). They suggest that, because of the contradictory nature of these demands, such a subject position is fundamentally impossible, and I agree. However, I argue that it is certainly possible for some girls to project and embody a rather narrower combination of these characteristics. While not taking up quite such a broad and contradictory set of positions and performances, hegemonic girl groups in many situations do turn out to have a good deal more in common with hegemonic boys than Connell's binary construction of hegemonic masculinity/emphasised femininity might suggest.

When discussing dominant masculinities and femininities in classrooms and playgrounds, most researchers focus on 'cool' or 'popular' groups. This is because such groups are usually able to mobilise power (Allen, 2003; Paechter & Clark, 2016) so as to dominate inter-group and interpersonal relationships in these settings and to control, at least to some extent, what masculinities and femininities are acceptable. Of course, these mobilisations of power and the related definitions are always contested and resisted. They nevertheless produce discourses around masculinity and femininity that reflect wider social forces and maintain traditional gender relations (Paechter & Clark, 2016). Warrington and Younger (2011) for example note that 'cool' boys are leaders in bullying misfits, and could also put pressure on other young people to participate in bullying. Similarly, Gulbrandsen (2003), focusing on girls, points out that being part of a 'popular' group gives general social advantages, including the power to influence the social field.

2 Tomboy Identities Study, supported by the UK Economic and Social Research Council under Grant RES-00-22-1032. Sheryl Clark was the researcher on this project.

This ability to mobilise power seems to be the key to participation in dominant or hegemonic groups for both boys and girls. Consequently, the term 'popular' used by children and young people to denote these groups, is somewhat of a misnomer. 'Popularity' implies that one is liked. However, several researchers note that 'cool' groups are frequently feared and disliked because of the way they wield power over and exclude other children. Currie et al (2007), for example, note that 'popular' girls are not those who are liked but those who actively mobilise power, and that they could, indeed, actually be disliked because of their tendency to make fun of the 'unpopular'. Similarly, Cobbett (2013) found that young people classed as 'popular' might have high status, but were also disliked. One facet of 'coolness' for the group Currie et al (2007) studied was that they did not acknowledge outsiders, and so were considered to be 'snobs' by their peers. Kehily et al (2002) also note that the girls they studied controlled group femininities by collectively Othering outsiders, and this is echoed by Aapola et al (2005) who report that because friendship gives access to social power, girls' groups tend to be tight, exclusive cliques in which there are constant tensions and power struggles (George, 2007). Some of these characterisations may be affected by social class, ethnicity and other aspects of the social setting, however. Read et al (2011) note that, for white middle-class children, being kind, friendly and helpful was most often cited in relation to both popular boys and popular girls. Although being nice to peers is usually found to be feminised, this study demonstrates that even this feature can be something that dominant boys and girls have in common.

With this caveat, that hegemonic masculinities and femininities among children, at least, are associated with 'cool' groups that are frequently described as 'popular' but often disliked, I will now examine the similarities and differences between these groups in particular sites. This analysis needs to be treated with some caution, as several of the studies cited were of only boys or only girls, so that direct comparisons are not always possible. Generally, however, analysing the accounts of researchers into the masculinities and femininities in 'cool' groups of children and young people, it becomes clear that they share many characteristics, while girls usually remain subordinate to boys. In particular, hegemonic girls are expected to be physically attractive to hegemonic boys, and, partly in consequence of this, are not able to mobilise as much power as the boys can. The extent to which this is the case seems to vary. While Blaise (2005) argues, for example, that being 'cool' does not give girls power, just a reflection of the power wielded by 'cool' boys, Currie et al (2007), however, are clear that, in their study, 'popular' girls were those who could mobilise power, at least with respect to other girls.

In several studies, hegemonic masculinity and femininity, at all ages, were both associated with heterosexuality. Warrington and Younger (2011),

studying British 14-15 year olds, note that being part of the in-crowd involves having mainstream heterosexual relationships and identities. This was reflected by Cobbett's (2013) Antiguan study, also of teenagers, although this was somewhat nuanced by gender: girls established their gender identities through heterosexual relationships while boys did so through rejecting homosexuality. Blaise (2005), whose work was focused on the early years of schooling, notes that desirable forms of femininity and masculinity were embodied by 'fashion girls' and 'fashion guys'. Fashion girls were expected to marry fashion guys, and fashion boys were said to like fashion girls best. Similarly, in his study of young middle-class children, Connolly (2004) notes that a boy's sense of his own attractiveness depended on girls showing him interest, and vice versa. Renold, studying a class of British 10-11 year olds in which heterosexual relationships were a significant part of the gender and power relations between pupils, suggests further that hegemonic masculinity could be secured through being positioned as a 'boyfriend', if this were combined with talking about and playing football. Indeed, she argues, heterosexuality was so important in this setting that boys who did not take up heterosexual relationships could find that their masculinity was called into question. She also remarks that, while the appropriation of sexual identities differed between girls and boys, they experienced a parallel struggle to get this 'right' in order to fit in and not be criticised, with girls having to balance overt sexual attractiveness with the danger of being considered 'tarty' and boys needing to walk a fine line between 'being hard' and being 'too hard' (Currie et al., 2007). Read et al (2011) also indicate the importance of appropriate heterosexual performance for the young people in their study.

Related to this, a salient feature of hegemonic groups of both genders is that they are expected to be conventionally heterosexually attractive and to dress well, and to resist or avoid schoolwork. Cobbett (2013) notes, for example, that for both boys and girls, 'popularity' was related to behaviour, material possessions and looks, and that 'popular' young men and women were both expected to misbehave in school, although girls found it easier to balance popularity with academic success, as long as they were physically attractive and aroused male attention. Currie et al (2007) found that popular girls were required to look perfect, be skinny, with long, frequently blonde, hair. Jackson (2006) also remarks on the importance, to both male and female teenagers, of embodying conventional attractiveness. Girls were expected to be fashionable and pretty, which again involved being thin, while boys could get away with the ultimate non-cool attribute, working hard in school, if they were heterosexually attractive, sporting, and sociable. She notes that this is easier for middle class young people, partly because of their increased access to the 'right' clothing and other material possessions such as the latest mobile phones. Sociability was an important requirement for 'coolness' for both boys and girls in Jackson's study, as in Cobbett's (2013) and Read et al's

(2011). Academic success caused problems with 'popularity' for both genders, and had to be balanced by other features, such as overt heterosexuality, an air of effortless achievement and apparent indifference to schoolwork.

This is not to say that the previous literature does not indicate differences in what it means to be 'cool' for boys and girls. One salient distinction is the expectation of physical activity. For even the young children in Blaise's (2005) study, 'fashion girls' were expected to be good and nice, and to sit around being beautiful, while 'fashion guys' were seen as active. Other researchers (Aapola et al., 2005; Gulbrandsen, 2003; Kehily et al., 2002) point to the ways in which hegemonic girl groups focus on intimate and confidential talk, as a simultaneously binding and excluding process. This focus on talk arguably makes it harder for girls who are not part of such groups to manage to join them. Not only does this intensive mutuality, as Aapola et al (2005) point out, make it harder to include new friends, it also points up something particularly noted by Read et al (2011), that authenticity is central to hegemony. If you are believed, for example, to be trying to appear more 'cool' than you really are, you are in danger of taking on the pariah identity of 'wannabe' (Currie et al., 2007) or 'tagalong' (Goodwin, 2002), a social climber with no real 'right' to participation in hegemonic masculinity or femininity.

We can see from this that, across a variety of settings, hegemonic masculinities and femininities, while having significant differences, also have a considerable amount in common. In the remainder of this chapter I will focus on case studies of two primary school classes, investigating how hegemonic masculinities and femininities were performed (or not) among children aged 9-11 in two contrasting London schools.

4 Hegemonic femininities in my own research: The Tomboy Identities Study

The data explored in this section comes from a one-year study of tomboy identities, which involved case study data collection in one class in each of two London primary schools, Benjamin Laurence and Holly Bank[3]. The children were studied as they moved from the penultimate to the final year of their primary school education, so were aged between 9 and 11 years old during the period of the study. Although the main focus was on tomboy identities, the regular presence of the researcher, Sheryl Clark, in classrooms and

3 Names of schools and all individuals are pseudonyms. The children chose their own, so that some are quite strange and they do not always reflect ethnicity.

playgrounds, as well as in after school activities, meant that we also gathered a considerable amount of data on peer relations among both girls and boys across the two focus classes and beyond (Paechter, 2010). All the children in each class were interviewed once in small friendship groups and those identified by peers and/or teachers, or self-identified, as tomboys, were also interviewed twice individually, once in each term of the study. Regular observational field notes were collected of activities in both classrooms and playgrounds, as well as on specific occasions such as football tournaments. Although she sometimes acted as an 'extra pair of hands' in the classroom, hearing children read or working with small groups, Sheryl's main role was as a participant observer, watching and listening to the children's interactions, asking questions informally, and, at times, playing alongside the girls. She was partially incorporated into the girls' friendship groups and thereby into their inter-group rivalries, having to take care to distribute her time across each class as groups of girls vied for her attention and, from their point of view, loyalty. This extended to one attempt made by the 'cool girls' at Holly Bank to bully her in the same way that they bullied each other (Paechter & Clark, 2010). This partial incorporation into the girls' social groupings required a constant reflexive attention to possible researcher bias, but at the same time allowed a limited amount of affective access to the emotional worlds of the children being studied (Paechter & Clark, 2016).

Data analysis took place on the basis of a theoretical underpinning that combined a communities of practice framework augmented by a Foucaultian understanding of power (Foucault, 1977, 1978, 1980, 1988, 2003a, 2003b, 2004, 2007). In analysing both interview transcripts and field notes, we used progressively focused coding techniques, in which the analysis of successive periods of data gathering each feeds into subsequent observations and interviews. This progressive approach meant that, as power relations within and between groups of girls (and, to a lesser extent, boys) arose repeatedly in field notes and interviews, we spent some time looking explicitly at these: the ideas discussed below are, therefore, grounded in and arise out of the data. Because the hegemonic femininities and masculinities discussed here were mainly enacted, defended and performed out in classroom and playground interactions, much of my analysis is based on observational field notes, supported by the interview data.

The two schools were specifically selected to provide strong contrasts in social class and ethnic student body as well as geographical location. Benjamin Laurence was a small urban school in an area of significant social deprivation, while Holly Bank was a large suburban school in an affluent area. The schools were also different in various other ways. In particular, Holly Bank had an extremely competitive ethos, with a large cabinet of trophies in the front hall, an annual cross-country run in which each child was 'placed' within their entire year group, and many of the children being prepared, both at

school and in out-of-school classes, for competitive entry to selective private and state-funded secondary schools. Benjamin Laurence, in contrast, had an explicitly non-competitive approach, with children being encouraged to do as well as they could themselves but not compared with each other in terms of attainment: indeed, children were occasionally reprimanded for being competitive in class. Although both schools were overtly anti-bullying, at Benjamin Laurence this was regularly spelled out to children as a general principle and not just in relation to specific instances. At this school there was also an explicit stance taken against sexual teasing, with the head telling the children firmly that 'who likes whom is nobody's business and you have no right to say anything' and lunchtime detentions being given to children who infringed this injunction.

This strong difference in competitive culture may be a significant factor in the extent to which there were dominant groups in each school. While Holly Bank had easily identified hegemonic groups of 'cool girls' and 'cool boys', this was not really the case at Benjamin Laurence, suggesting that the development of such groups is not inevitable. This school did, however, despite the ban on relationship gossip, have a 'celebrity couple' (Renold, 2005) in the year above the group studied. Charlie (a girl) and Malcolm were also widely acknowledged to be the best football players in the school, which contributed to their high status. Charlie was described by Malcolm as being 'good like a boy' at the game, and her pre-eminence was generally recognised by the other children. Between them they did seem to embody the masculine and feminine ideals predominant at this school, and to show that these had a lot in common: they were both popular, athletic and good-looking. Charlie was also academically successful and treated by the staff as a role model for other children. She described herself as 'a bit tomboy', able to move between aggression when playing football and a more traditional femininity in social settings. This ability to move between athletic aggression and conventional femininity was something possessed by all the more socially successful girls at Benjamin Laurence, and reflected the local hegemonic femininity, which included assertiveness and a willingness to stand up for oneself. While they were still dominated by boys, particularly in the pre-eminent playground activity of football from which they were frequently excluded (Clark & Paechter, 2007), girls nevertheless embodied a strong independent femininity that could hold its own in many situations. Indeed, there was one playground game, foursquare (known as champ in this school) that was played so aggressively by girls that, while girls frequently had loud arguments about who was in and who out, such decisions were only rarely challenged by boys.

Holly Bank's strongly competitive classroom and sports culture was reflected in interpersonal relations between students, with exclusive 'cool' groups of hegemonic boys and girls dominating the classroom and play-

ground. These groups had a shared discourse around masculine and feminine behaviour that, while resisted by other children (Paechter & Clark, 2016), was not easily influenced by teacher intervention, reflecting the importance of peer relations (Harris, 1998). In the rest of this section I focus on these groups, and in particular on the commonalities between hegemonic femininities and masculinities in this school. Both genders included small, exclusive, groups of 'cool' children, who worked hard to maintain their exclusivity. This included a physical separation from other children along with clear indications that they were only to be joined by invitation. For example, Humphrey, the most powerful child in the class, sat separately with his two friends Frederick and Glazer, and sometimes Owen, during lunch, though they played football with other children when not eating. Kelly, the dominant girl, and her friends Chelsea, Bridget, Pippa, Holly and Joanna, also tended to sit apart from other children to eat lunch:

> I ask [Pippa, Kelly and Bridget] why they're sitting alone and they reply that they're the best and don't want to sit with the others. (field notes)

The hegemonic girls spent most of their playtimes in a small but boundaried area along a shallow slope at the side of the playground from which they could observe others and intervene in their affairs (via messengers) from a distance. This gave them both a slightly elevated position in relation to the rest of the playground, and a boundary rail along the side of the slope so that it was clear that you only entered their territory by invitation. Neither the dominant girls nor the dominant boys ever joined in with games involving the whole of the rest of their class, preferring to keep to themselves or, in the case of Humphrey's group, to play football with children (mainly boys) from a parallel, same-age class. Although both 'cool' boys and 'cool' girls sometimes interacted or interfered with the affairs of the middle status children, teasing or stirring up trouble between them, their approach to the lowest status boys and girls was quite different. The hegemonic girl group distanced themselves from lower status girls by completely ignoring them, so that these latter girls seemed to be completely below the 'cool' girls' radar (Paechter & Clark, 2016). The hegemonic boys, by contrast, were extremely aware of the lowest status boys, and seemed to be constantly on the watch for opportunities to ridicule or otherwise bully them (Warrington & Younger, 2011).

The 'cool' children at Holly Bank were, like Charlie and Malcolm at Benjamin Laurence, very much the embodiment of localised masculinities and femininities: they were the local 'beautiful people'. Chelsea, for example, had long blonde hair, and at different times in the study Kelly and Pippa's hair had blonde highlights and Bridget's blue and purple streaks. Outside of school, the girls wore expensive and fashionable clothes, and inside school expected each other to look physically perfect, without a hair out of place (Paechter & Clark, 2010). Similarly, Humphrey was taller than most of the

other boys, blond and muscular. All the 'cool' children strongly aspired to the trappings of adult sexuality, the girls flaunting their training bras (and, by implication, their developing breasts) when changing for PE, and Humphrey boasting to Sheryl that he had leg hair.

This projection of a perfect, adult-modelled body was associated with another common feature of the hegemonic femininities and masculinities at Holly Bank: an overt sexualisation, in tandem with an interest and participation in boyfriend-girlfriend relationships. This participation was not equal, however, as the 'cool' boys considered even the 'cool' girls in their class as not being good enough for them. The 'cool' girls teased each other constantly about liking Humphrey, possibly because many of them did, but also, of course, because of his high status. They knew, however, that they did not have much of a chance with him, telling Sheryl that Humphrey and his group thought that they were in a better league than the rest of the class. Humphrey himself said in his joint interview with Frederick that he was 'going out' with a girl in a parallel class. Indeed, on Humphrey's own account, all his female friends were in this other class, although he did admit to chatting with some of the 'cool' girls on social media, and they were eager to claim his online friendship.

Because the hegemonic boys in this class disdained the hegemonic girls, the latter were forced to rely on middle status boys in order to participate directly in boyfriend-girlfriend culture. It is a reflection of the latter's importance to hegemonic femininity in this setting that most of these girls were prepared to have relationships with boys outside of the 'cool' group, although Kelly, their leader, never did. For example, Bridget had been Jake's girlfriend for a while, and Joanna had an on-off relationship with another middle status boy, Hedgehog. This underlined the higher overall status enjoyed by the hegemonic boys, who were able not just to take their love lives elsewhere but felt sufficiently confident in their higher status to be able to claim to 'fancy' low status girls as a harassment tactic (Paechter & Clark, 2016). Middle status girls, however, frequently became the girlfriends of middle status boys. Among this group were several boyfriend-girlfriend relationships, and considerable discussion about who 'fancied' whom, who was asking out or breaking up with whom, and other aspects of these sexualised paired relationships. Here is just one example, from field notes, of the interactions of middle status children in this respect:

> As we go inside, Dave tells me that he fancies Leafy Blue now and they are going to the park after school to kiss. Tom and Britney are going as well but Tom says just Dave has 'kissing ceremonies'. (field notes)

The importance of not just heterosexuality but its overt acting out in boyfriend-girlfriend relationships was, reflecting previous studies, central to idealised masculinities and femininities in this setting.

A fourth aspect which hegemonic masculinities and femininities had in common at Holly Bank was the accumulation of knowledge about other people in the class. This was something that was particularly persistently pursued by the two central figures, Kelly and Humphrey, and key to their ability to dominate and control others (Paechter & Clark, 2010). It was also an example of how, while knowledge accumulation and manipulation were fundamental to both their hegemonic positions, Humphrey, as a boy, was always able to control and mobilise more knowledge than Kelly, and, in particular, was able to keep his personal business secret from her. The possession and carefully judged spending of this knowledge capital thus both supported the hegemonic position of Kelly, Humphrey and their friends, and acted not just to perpetuate the hierarchies within boy and girl groups in the class, but also to support the overall gender order of male dominance over female.

Both Kelly and Humphrey actively sought out knowledge about other children, with Humphrey in particular seeming always to be on the look-out for information that he could hoard until he could make best use of it. This constant pursuit of knowledge was, however, supported by these children's already established dominant status, so that additional information was simply yielded up to them by other children:

> Britney, Tom and Charlotte are at a set of desks alone and they're asking questions of one another such as 'who would you rather snog?' Humphrey walks by and Britney immediately informs him what they're doing. (field notes)

The desire of lower status children to please and interest the dominant meant that the latter's hegemonic positioning was further supported by additional (even if relatively unimportant) information about goings-on in the class. The possession of (real or imagined) knowledge, once acquired, was then conspicuously displayed, especially by the 'cool' girls, again supporting and enacting the hegemonic children's superior positioning and power. This display usually took the form of excited public whispering between 'cool' girls and boys, an overt performance of their position as the 'in' crowd:

> In ICT they have to pair up at each computer…Humphrey is paired with Glazer next to Kelly, Holly, Bridget and Pippa and they whisper to each other throughout the lesson, conspicuously airing their knowledge. (field notes)

The hegemonic children's ability to both acquire this knowledge and to keep it to themselves until it could be most effectively used, and the fact that the other children were all well aware of this, allowed the 'cool' group considerable control over other children in the class. Their entrepreneurship in picking up any bit of knowledge that came their way, and their self-restraint in then holding on to it rather than, like the lower status children, immediately passing it on, meant that they could release previously hoarded knowledge at a key time, with potentially devastating effects. Secrets that were especially useful for mobilising power in this way included passwords for social net-

working sites. These were exchanged between girls, in particular, as a sign of trust and friendship, with the obvious potential for misuse at a later stage, for example after falling out or simply to cause trouble. Hegemonic girls might be able to acquire such knowledge from lower status 'wannabes' (Currie et al., 2007; Read et al., 2011) by pretending to be close friends, then hoard it for malicious use later:

> [Joanna] admits that she convinced Mia to exchange MSN passwords with her. She told Mia a fake password and got Mia's in return. She doesn't know yet what she'll do with it. (field notes)

This ability not just to manipulate others into releasing treasured secrets but then to maintain sufficient self-control to hoard that knowledge up for use at an unspecified later time, was central to the behaviour of both hegemonic girls and hegemonic boys and a key source of their facility and agility in mobilising power.

Finally, a key quality shared by hegemonic girls and boys was that, while a subtle defiance of school rules was an important aspect of 'coolness' this was coupled with an outward conformity and a strong ethos of 'not grassing'[4], which put pressure on other children to tell no-one if they were being bullied. Both Kelly and Humphrey were highly successful in hiding both their disobedience to rules and their bullying behaviour from school staff. This reflects George's (2007; 2000) research, in which she found that girls dominating small friendship groups were frequently seen by teachers as bright, well behaved, helpful and socially skilled. Humphrey, of whom the whole class was afraid, was particularly good at covering up his bullying. He even managed to manipulate the class teacher into reprimanding a low status girl, Melissa, for being uncomfortable touching his hands during rehearsals for a paired dance for the Christmas concert, in which he and his friend Glazer took every opportunity to make her uncomfortable, under cover of full co-operation and 'maturity' in their approach to the rehearsal:

> Whereas Melissa is unhappy to be paired with Humphrey, Humphrey seems to delight in this chance to torment her and moves in close to make her uncomfortable….[Later in the dance, when they have to lie down together]… Melissa lies as far from Humphrey as she can and Glazer teases her, 'Melissa, closer!'…[…]… The proximity of their bodies allows physical intimidation to come into play and Humphrey pretends to 'bonk' Melissa's nose after their move. (field notes)

Similarly, the hegemonic girls took considerable trouble not just to appear to their teachers as friendly, co-operative and obedient, but also to cover up subtler forms of bullying in such a way that they would have a plausible defence if accused. Here is one example from within the hegemonic girls group, in which Chelsea manages to undermine Joanna's security about her

4 'Grassing' or 'being a grass' is a derogatory colloquial term in British English that refers to reporting bad (or even, in some contexts, illegal) behaviour.

place in the group without overtly refusing her anything. Note, however, that, in contrast to Humphrey's overt harassment of Melissa, Chelsea's behaviour is more subtle, so that she is never quite open with Joanna about how much Joanna is being excluded. This allows Chelsea to maintain an outward show of 'niceness', something that is frequently part of the performance of hegemonic femininity (Kehily et al., 2002). The result is that Joanna is rendered nervous about her position in the group, while Chelsea would still, if challenged, be able to deny being unkind:

> They have to glue something in their book and Chelsea lends Bridget her glue stick. When Joanna asks to use it Chelsea says there's not much left and shows her (it's almost the whole stick). Then she asks both Melissa [not in the 'cool' group] and Pippa if they want to use it. Melissa says yes and says softly to Joanna that she will let her use it afterwards. Bridget, sensing something amiss, asks Chelsea if she likes Joanna. I think she says no. Then when Joanna begins to use the glue stick Bridget asks her if she asked Chelsea and looks to Chelsea to answer. Joanna apologises and says she thought Chelsea says yes, she passes her back the glue stick before she's done with it. Chelsea changes her mind and says she can use it, she's not even done. (field notes)

It is noteworthy that in this example both that Chelsea underlines her implied exclusion of Joanna by explicitly offering the use of her glue stick to Melissa, an outsider, and that Bridget compounds Joanna's difficulties by drawing Chelsea's attention to Joanna's use of the stick, thereby not only consolidating her own place in the group but doing so by giving Chelsea an excuse to exclude Joanna. This jostling for power within hegemonic girl groups, in which status gained is frequently at the expense of someone else, is typical of their operation (George & Browne, 2000).

5 Conclusion

Current understandings of hegemonic masculinity and emphasised femininity (Connell, 1987, 1995, 2002) neither reflect current ideals for femininity nor the parallels between the behaviour and performances of dominant male and female groups of children and young people. In this chapter I have sought to overcome this problem by proposing an alternative definition of hegemonic gender performances which allows for a hegemonic femininity that is not simply the subservient Other to local hegemonic masculinity. I have subsequently argued that, as demonstrated by research in schools, hegemonic femininities and masculinities can actually have a considerable number of common characteristics. This claim was then examined through my own research study of tomboy identities in two London schools. My findings suggest that hegemonic femininities and masculinities, in specific contexts, may have a considerable amount in common, including: exclusivity; physical attractive-

ness that echoes adult norms; overt sexualisation and involvement in relationship gossip; knowledge accumulation about others and the ability to store it up and use it later; and sufficient social adroitness to disobey school rules and bully other children while projecting an image of friendly co-operation to school staff.

It is striking that, however much power hegemonic girl groups are able to mobilise against other girls and lower status boys, they remain subordinate to hegemonically masculine boys. This suggests that, 'girl power' and the increasing value given accorded to female assertiveness and success notwithstanding, it remains the case that girls and young women hegemonic femininities are unable to challenge the pre-eminence of hegemonic masculine groups. We still have some way to go before the overall gender order is overturned.

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