White Rose Research Online

eprints@whiterose.ac.uk
https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk
Universities of Leeds, Sheffield and York

Deposited via The University of York.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:
https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/id/eprint/174112/

Version: Published Version

Article:
Nicholls, Emily (2012) Risky pleasures? to what extent are the boundaries of contemporary understandings of (in)appropriate femininities shaped by young women's negotiation of risk within the night time economy? The Graduate Journal of Social Science. pp. 15-22. ISSN: 1572-3763

Reuse
Items deposited in White Rose Research Online are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved unless indicated otherwise. They may be downloaded and/or printed for private study, or other acts as permitted by national copyright laws. The publisher or other rights holders may allow further reproduction and re-use of the full text version. This is indicated by the licence information on the White Rose Research Online record for the item.

Takedown
If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing eprints@whiterose.ac.uk including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.

UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS
University of Sheffield
UNIVERSITY of York

Risky pleasures? To what extent are the boundaries of contemporary understandings of (in)appropriate femininities shaped by young women's negotiation of risk within the Night Time Economy?

Emily Nicholls

This snapshot will offer a summary of my current research project on how the boundaries of appropriate femininities might be policed and managed through women's everyday practices within the Night Time Economy (NTE) in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, North East England. Through focus groups and semi-structured interviews with young women, my research will explore the embodied practices of alcohol consumption, presentation of the body and patterns of use of the NTE, facilitating a greater understanding of the extent to which notions of risk and respectability might continue (or otherwise) to regulate young women's behaviour, and providing an insight into how particular classed and sexualised (in)appropriately feminine identities are conceptualised and performed.

Keywords: Femininities, Night Time Economy, Risk, Identity

It is widely recognised that only certain manifestations of femininity are deemed appropriate. However, the literature on gendered subjects has long identified various tensions and contradictions within young women's performances of appropriate femininity. These may have become particularly salient in recent years, where supposed 'new' femininities advocating agency and empowerment (see McRobbie 2007) may continue to sit awkwardly alongside more traditional notions of femininity (Griffin 2004). As a result, contemporary femininity can be the-

© 2012 by Graduate Journal of Social Science. All Rights Reserved. ISSN: 1572-3763

orised as a space for hedonism and fun, yet also regulation and insecurity (Skeggs 1997, 116). For this reason, further research into the ways in which the boundaries of femininity might be negotiated remains pertinent and important. Drawing upon a symbolic interactionist framework, a study of the everyday practices of young women within the Night Time Economy (NTE) will provide an opportunity to explore in more detail the ways in which these conflicting conceptualisations of (in)appropriateness might be negotiated and lived, and the ways in which the potentially complex and shifting boundaries of acceptability might be managed.

The performance of 'appropriate' femininity has long been bound up with ideas of risk and respectability (Campbell 2005). This project will examine how far negotiations of risk to safety and respectability within the NTE might shape individual and collective understandings of classed and sexualised (in)appropriate femininities. Traditional femininity is tied to the management of physical risks and the performance of effective 'safekeeping' strategies (Campbell 2005) as women are charged with taking responsibility for their own safety and may be subjected to blame or alienation if they are seen to have made themselves 'vulnerable' to risky situations through failing to adhere to standards of appropriate feminine behaviour (Brooks 2008). Traditional femininity is also bound up with notions of respectability and reputation. This is frequently linked to the 'othering' of less respectable, more 'risky' bodies (see Cowie and Lees 1981; Green and Singleton 2006). These apparently constraining and 'victim-blaming' discourses – which also clearly deny an active female sexuality – need to be re-examined against the supposed 'new' femininities of liberation and sexual empowerment (see McRobbie 2007; Waitt, Jessop, and Gorman-Murray 2011).

Whilst there has been a considerable amount of useful research on risk and safekeeping within the NTE, this often focuses on management of physical risks to safety such as drink-spiking (Burgess, Donovan, and Moore 2009), rather than combining this with a broader understanding of risk to reputation or exploring how risk might be negotiated through more subtle means such as clothing and appearance. Furthermore, existing research in this area often fails to draw upon the ways in which the dimensions of class and sexuality might impact on understandings of risk, the boundaries of (in)appropriate femininities and the creation of different identities (Haydock 2009). William Haydock argues that research on the NTE frequently fails to focus on how young people themselves negotiate drinking, and calls for future research to explore the way in which practices within the NTE actively construct – rather than simply reflect – gender

(Haydock 2009, 20).

In addition, Jo Lindsay argues that little research on risk has been carried out with young working populations (Lindsay 2003, 3). Whilst this comment was made almost ten years ago, little research since then has addressed this issue. For example, Oona Brooks (2011) researched predominantly heterosexual students only, and – as Haydock (2009, 137) and Jan S. Gill et al (2007, 27) argue – a large amount of other research also focuses primarily on easily accessible student populations (although see Laura Sheard (2011) for a notable exception). This is recognised as a problem as students are often in quite different circumstances to their peers who are not in higher education (Haydock 2009, 137).

The Night Time Economy

The complexity of these discourses around risk and respectability is epitomised within the often highly gendered and (hetero) sexualised spaces of the NTE (see Laurie et al 1999; Skeggs 2001; Valentine 2001), the site of a number of contradictory and competing scripts surrounding the participation and presentation of women's bodies (Cullen 2011). The NTE has been conceptualised both as a site of female pleasure, empowerment, sexual agency, independence and bonding (Skeggs 1997; Leyshon 2008) and also as a key site of regulation in which women are expected to conform in appearance and behaviour to certain modes of heterosexual femininity (Waitt, Jessop, and Gorman-Murray 2011) and manage risk in spaces that carry the threat of male violence (Brooks 2011; Sheard 2011). Furthermore, whilst prior research demonstrates that young women report that they engage in 'an extensive range of safety behaviours' (Brooks 2011, 639) within the NTE (often simply accepting them as 'commonsense' gender-specific measures), further research into this area is important in order to understand whether this might be changing in light of arguments around the 'feminisation' of the NTE (Day, Gough, and McFadden 2004).

Such contradictions mean the NTE is an ideal site within which to examine the embodied practices of young women. The context of the study within the 'party city' (Nayak 2003) of Newcastle-upon-Tyne is also important and relevant. There has been prior, illuminating research within the city (Chatterton and Hollands 2003), which will act as a useful foundation upon which to build, whilst sufficient time has elapsed that further research is timely. Much research has also focused on post-industrial masculinities within Newcastle (Nayak 2003) and it will be interesting to explore this from a different angle by looking at contemporary femininities and how these are negotiated within spaces that may 'remain highly masculinised

in terms of the male domination of space and the policing of compulsory heterosexuality' (Chatterton and Hollands 2003, 148).

Three key themes will be explored through the research:

Drinking practices

Women's alcohol consumption has been popularly portrayed as a threat to safety, health and – ultimately – femininity (Day, Gough, and McFadden 2004; Meyer 2010), with research on the embodied drinking practices of young women suggesting that they 'show self-policing and self-restraint in terms of intoxication in order to stay within the boundaries of traditional femininity' (Measham 2002, 358), both to avoid being seen as sexually promiscuous and to ensure their own safety. The respectability of young women in relation to drinking practices may be maintained by eschewing or 'othering' excessively drunken girls (Cullen 2011, 131). This is often described as a classed and sexualised process, with the female binge drinker 'generally marked as white, working class and heterosexual' (Griffin et al 2009, 458).

However, alternative conceptualisations see alcohol consumption as empowering and a key component of female socialising. Alcohol consumption has been linked to the negotiation of pleasure, relationships and group identity and to conceptualisations of femininity as assertive and sexually empowered (Sheehan and Ridge 2001). With drinking now portrayed as a means 'for women to accomplish a range of both traditional and non-traditional femininities' (Measham 2002, 362) in this way, the clear need for further research in this area in order to untangle this complex and sometimes contradictory interplay of factors is further highlighted.

Bodily presentation, appearance and dress

Management of bodily presentation (through strategies such as grooming, make-up and dress) is a key element of the performativity of appropriate femininity (Nayak and Kehily 2006). The NTE is a space in which the 'rules' regarding appropriate dress may be different to other everyday settings – a space for the visual display of 'hyper-sexualised femininities' through clothes that are glamorous, revealing and erotic (Buckley and Fawcett 2002, 132).

However, dress and appearance is another area that may be defined by complex contradictions, with Beverley Skeggs reporting that 'appearance is simultaneously and across time a site for pleasure and strength but also a site of anxiety, regulation and surveillance' (Skeggs 1997, 107; Buckley and Fawcett 2002). Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott summarise these tensions neatly; 'young women remain concerned with maintaining appropriately feminine sexual respectability while representing themselves as sexually

desirable' (Jackson and Scott 2010, 96).

Gordon Waitt, Loretta Jessop and Andrew Gorman-Murray found in their study of young women's engagements with the NTE that dress and appearance could be harnessed as a perceived source of confidence-boosting 'power' over men (Waitt et al 2011, 264). Several participants were 'emotionally invested in ''doing'' a femininity that best approximated normative understandings of feminine and ''sexy''' and commented that they enjoyed flirting with men and receiving attention, suggesting a sense of individual empowerment (Waitt et al 2011, 265). Yet even as some participants embraced this sexualised femininity through their clothing and appearance, others read these appearances as performative of a kind of unrespectable and promiscuous femininity (Waitt et al 2011, 265), with other contemporary research also suggesting that some women can continue to be scathing of a perceived 'overdone' performance of femininity (see Haydock 2009, 211). There is a clear classed element to this, with Skeggs referring to the 'devalued class signifiers of excess (big hair, short skirts, lots of make-up)' (Skeggs 2001, 302). This is supported by Cheryl Buckley and Hilary Fawcett's argument that overtly sexualised performances of hyper-femininity are strongly linked to traditional working-class identities (Buckley and Fawcett 2002, 138).

Patterns of use of venues and space

Finally, the ways in which the bodies of young women physically engage with – and move through – the spaces and venues of the NTE will be explored. Numerous studies outline the risk management strategies young women might take within the spaces of the NTE; these may include regarding certain spaces or venues as 'off-limits' or arranging transport home in advance (Sheehan and Ridge 2001; Montemurro and McClure 2005). This is supported by a vast body of work on the positioning of women in public space, which argues that the physical movements of women through space are informally policed and curtailed by the threat of violence (Green, Hebron, and Woodward 1987), thus severely impacting on women's freedom and their ability to engage with social, political and work opportunities (Radford 1987).

Sexuality and class may also be important dimensions shaping young women's use of space. For example, different venues may appeal to different groups of clientele, with some prohibiting certain groups through exclusionary pricing or dress codes or an environment where only heterosexuality is perceived as welcome. Non-heterosexual women may be required to take additional measures to manage different kinds of risk in public space, for example by self-policing the more visible indicators of their sexuality in order to

limit the risk of homophobic violence (Corteen 2002).

Summary

The literature explored above has offered a snapshot of some of the proposed tensions surrounding the participation of women in the NTE and the ways in which their behaviours and practices might be shaped by the negotiation of risk to both safety and reputation, alongside current gaps in the literature. My study of the actual everyday practices of young women will help to highlight the extent to which these tensions continue to exist and the ways in which they might be managed and negotiated to create (in) appropriately gendered subjects. My work will develop understandings of the classed and sexualised identities that are enabled through young women's performances of appropriately safe and respectable (or not) femininities within the NTE. This will have real implications in terms of contributing to understandings of embodied, contemporary femininity.

References

Brooks, Oona. 2008. Consuming Alcohol in Bars, Pubs and Clubs: A risky freedom for young women? *Annals of Leisure Research* 11 (3-4): 331-50.

Brooks, Oona. 2011. 'Guys! Stop Doing It!': Young Women's Adoption and Rejection of Safety Advice when Socializing in Bars, Pubs and Clubs. *British Journal of Criminology* 51 (4): 635-51.

Buckley, Cheryl, and Hilary Fawcett. 2002. *Fashioning the Feminine Representation and Women's Fashion from the Fin de Siècle to the Present.* London: I. B. Tauris & Company, Limited, Macmillan Distributor.

Burgess, Adam, Pamela Donovan, and Sarah Moore. 2009. Embodying Uncertainty? Understanding Heightened Risk Perception of Drink 'Spiking'. *British Journal of Criminology* 49 (6): 848-62.

Campbell, Alex. 2005. Keeping the 'Lady' Safe: The Regulation of Femininity through Crime Prevention Literature. *Critical Criminology* 13 (2): 119-40.

Chatterton, Paul, and Robert Hollands. 2003. *Urban nightscapes: Youth Cultures, Pleasure Spaces and Corporate Power, Critical Geographies*. London: Routledge.

Corteen, Karen. 2002. Lesbian Safety Talk: Problematizing Definitions and Experiences of Violence, Sexuality and Space. *Sexualities* 5 (3): 259-80.

Cowie, Celia, and Sue Lees. 1981. Slags or Drags. *Feminist Review* 9: 17-31.

Cullen, Fin. 2011. 'The Only Time I Feel Girly is When I Go Out': Drinking stories, Teenage girls, and Respectable Femininities. *Interna-*

tional Journal of Adolescence and Youth 16 (2): 119-38.

Day, Katy, Brendan Gough, and Majella McFadden. 2004. 'Warning! Alcohol Can Seriously Damage Your Feminine Health'. *Feminist Media Studies* 4 (2): 165-83.

Gill, Jan, S., Marie Donaghy, Jennifer Guise, and Pamela Warner. 2007. Descriptors and Accounts of Alcohol Consumption: Methodological Issues Piloted with Female Undergraduate Drinkers in Scotland. *Health Education Research* 22 (1): 27-36.

Green, Eileen, Sandra Hebron, and Diana Woodward. 1987. Women, Leisure and Social Control. In Jalna Hanmer and Mary Maynard eds. *Women, Violence and Social Control*, London: Macmillan Press.

Green, Eileen, and Carrie Singleton. 2006. Risky Bodies at Leisure: Young Women Negotiating Space and Place. *Sociology* 40 (5): 853-71.

Griffin, Christine. 2004. Good Girls, Bad Girls: Anglocentrism and Diversity in the Constitution of Contemporary Girlhood. In Anita Harris ed. *All About the Girl: Culture, Power, and Identity*. London: Routledge.

Griffin, Christine, Andrew Bengry-Howell, Chris Hackley, Willm Mistral, and Isabelle Szmigin. 2009. 'Every Time I Do It I Annihilate Myself': Loss of (Self-)Consciousness and Loss of Memory in Young People's Drinking Narratives. *Sociology* 43 (3): 457-76.

Haydock, William. 2009. *Gender, Class and 'Binge' Drinking: An Ethnography of Drinkers in Bournemouth's Night-Time Economy.* PhD Thesis. Bournemouth University.

Jackson, Stevi, and Sue Scott. 2010. *Theorizing Sexuality.* Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Laurie, Nina, Claire Dwyer, Sarah Holloway, and Fiona Smith. 1999. *Geographies of New Femininities.* New York: Longman.

Leyshon, Michael. 2008. 'We're Stuck in the Corner': Young Women, Embodiment and Drinking in the Countryside. *Drugs: Education, Prevention, and Policy* 15 (3): 267-89.

Lindsay, Jo. 2003. 'Partying hard', 'Partying Sometimes' or 'Shopping': Young Workers' Socializing Patterns and Sexual, Alcohol and Illicit Drug Risk Taking. *Critical Public Health* 13 (1): 1-14.

McRobbie, Angela. 2007. TOP GIRLS? Young Women and the Post-Feminist Sexual Contract. *Cultural Studies* 21 (4-5): 718-37.

Measham, Fiona. 2002. 'Doing Gender' – 'Doing Drugs': Conceptualizing the Gendering of Drugs Cultures. *Contemporary Drug Problems* 29 (1): 335 - 73.

Meyer, Anneke. 2010. 'Too Drunk To Say No': Binge Drinking, Rape

and the Daily Mail. *Feminist Media Studies* 10 (1): 19-34.

Montemurro, Beth, and Bridget McClure. 2005. Changing Gender Norms for Alcohol Consumption: Social Drinking and Lowered Inhibitions at Bachelorette Parties. *Sex Roles* 52 (5/6): 279-88.

Nayak, Anoop, and Mary Jane Kehily. 2006. Gender Undone: Subversion, Regulation and Embodiment in the Work of Judith Butler. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 27 (4): 459-72.

Nayak, Anoop. 2003. Last of the 'Real Geordies'? White Masculinities and the Subcultural Response to Deindustrialisation. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 21 (1): 7-25.

Radford, Jill. 1987. Policing Male Violence – Policing Women. In Jalna Hanmer and Mary Maynard eds. *Women, Violence and Social Control*, London: Macmillan Press.

Sheard, Laura. 2011. 'Anything Could Have Happened': Women, The Night-time Economy, Alcohol and Drink Spiking. *Sociology* 45 (4): 619-633.

Sheehan, Margaret, and Damien Ridge. 2001. 'You Become Really Close . . . You Talk About the Silly Things You Did, and We Laugh": The Role of Binge Drinking in Female Secondary Students' Lives. *Substance Use and Misuse* 36 (3): 347-72.

Skeggs, Beverley. 1997. Formations of Class and Gender: Becoming Respectable, *Theory, Culture & Society.* London; Thousand Oaks, Calif.: SAGE.

Skeggs, Beverley. 2001. The Toilet Paper: Femininity, Class and Mis-Recognition. *Women's Studies International Forum 24 (3–4): 295-07.*

Valentine, Gill. 2001. *Social Geographies: Space and Society.* Harlow: Prentice Hall.

Waitt, Gordon, Loretta Jessop, and Andrew Gorman-Murray. 2011. 'The Guys in There Just Expect to be Laid': Embodied and Gendered Socio-Spatial Practices of a 'Night Out' in Wollongong, Australia. *Gender, Place & Culture* 18 (2): 255-275.