

DISARTICULATION OF THE FEMALE SUBJECTIVITY IN THE EVERYDAY LIFE

A CASE OF STUDY IN PUEBLA, MEXICO

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ABSTRACT

This paper is focused on understanding the formation of female subjectivity within the transition from childhood to adolescence through the interconnection between class and gender. These hierarchically ordered relationships consolidate positions that place the adolescents as receptacles of the social imaginary of contemporary femininity models.

Through the analysis of the discussions obtained from a focus group of adolescents from upper middle class households in Puebla City (Mexico), I observe how this transitional stage unveils a social reality full of conditionings and subjectivities, which are both structured and structuring.

The range of life experiences narrated by the participants disclose the close tie between class and gender and this gives us the opportunity to recognise how social relationships are established and how the adolescents face them in their everyday life. Further, these relationships are also crucial for understanding aspects on how these social relationships operate as a framework of shared values within a specific social group.

Keywords: Female subjectivity, adolescence, class, gender, family dynamics.

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Introductory Considerations about the Research

In western societies currently exist a proliferation of images and narratives about the girl's/women's power. These images present us new women: highly motivated and ambitious, young women with clear projects, all of them secure about the direction that they want to go, even since early stages of their life (Aapola, Gonick and Harris 2005; McRobbie 2004, 2007, 2015). Here, we observe that the woman become an individual who gets rid of its ties with the structure and thus, being free to develop their full potential. However, this discourse of openness to women disguises a series of practices that keep reproducing the constraints of heteronormative –white–femininity.

The main point of this paper is to analyse the ways in which adolescent female sexualisation is composed, experienced and made sense of within a group of female adolescents in Central Mexico. The analysis is based on two highly linked axes. On the one hand, I seek to deeply analyse the experiences of a group of three adolescent girls and their upper middle-class households in the urban area of Puebla City (Mexico). On the other, the theoretical body is defined by the social class analysis and the gender category under the feminist perspectives on reproduction.

Certainly, social class is an elusive concept so in this sense, I suggest – following Thomson arguments – to observe the class as a relationship and as a process that must be observed for some time under a certain pattern of social relations and institutions and values which are connected as a whole. We must remember that people are not grouped in classes but in the expression of these, therefore these expressions indicate how consciousness is moulded and the willingness to act as a particular class (Thompson 1978).

The use of the gender concept attempts to show, as Stolcke (2013) established, that 'the socio-symbolic identities that are assigned to women in their relationships with men in the organization of social life, are cultural and variable, therefore they can be transformed'. Likewise, the gender axis will provide us a wider perspective to understand the news forms of reproduction of the patriarchal¹ heteronormativity.

It is important to express that I do not pretend to make generalisations or to provide explanations of universal character, rather emphasise the objective and subjective conditions experienced in common by a group of female teenagers by analysing the constitution of diverse social relationships in the organisation of the daily life of these women.

Some Methodological Remarks

¹ I am fully aware of the debate about the use of the concept of patriarchy. Even when I do not perceive *patriarchy* as an immutable structure which is fixed, the concept it is still useful for the explanation and description of institutionalised gender relations, which is potentially important to demonstrate the prominence of the male contingent and their advantages in the construction of gender divisions.

It is noteworthy that although the school² was not the primary analysis space of this research –understanding this as the physical institutional space and the dynamics within – the school played an important role in two senses. First, the school offered the arrangement of the focus groups. Second, this arrangement facilitates the understanding of the link between the different social institutions in which the girls inhabited.

The interviews were a challenge in many ways due to the ‘particularity’ of the research subjects. The fact that I interacted with female adolescents caused that the parents heavily supervised the meetings. The act to go through their private space was not easy and all of the parents showed reticence to be recorded. After a long discussion, we agree not to use a video camera and the use of the voice recorder only with parent’s supervision.³

Nevertheless, thanks to this supervision due to which I had the great chance to involve the parents (either the mother, the father or both) in our sessions, and we were able to get a deeper understanding about childcare and parenting attitudes. Surprisingly after a short period, the parents were open to allow me to more intimate spaces and events, such as family reunions or school parties in which they were the host. I also had the opportunity to observe their extracurricular spaces such as gyms, dance halls and even the country club. In any case, I always conducted myself carefully, preventing not transgress the privacy and confidence of the interviewees⁴.

Notes on the Construction of the Amazon Subjectivity

In this section, I address the construction of what the parents denominate the *amazon subjectivity*. By the develop of this subjectivity, I observe how the adolescents are encouraged to break down the model of female domesticity throughout a variety of assertive speeches while subtly this assertiveness hides class privilege as social relations of whiteness and the encouragement of the western ideal of female beauty as a power to move up in the reproduction⁵ of their living conditions.

I use the term *amazon* as the parents in our sessions did it. The mothers commonly referred to their daughters as a warriors or champions and they

² This also responds to the fact that I was not allowed to get access into the school because of the privacy clauses established by it. All the information about the interaction of the adolescents at the school comes from the printed School Monthly Newsletter and the information given by the same adolescents and their parents.

³ According to Hector (father of one of the girls in the study) this is a preventive measure in case that we could misuse the material obtained from the interviews. Lisandro (another father of one of the girls in the study) also showed his reluctance to the fact that his daughter could be recorded. He mentions: ‘you never know if you will see the recording later on YouTube.’

⁴ To ensure confidentiality and anonymity of the participants, all the names used here are pseudonyms.

⁵ For social reproduction I use the conceptualisation of Edholm, Harris and Young (1978), reproduction not only in biological meaning but also in the reproduction of human beings who occupy certain positions in the network of social relationships, and whose situation will frame their ability to exercise power, or access to resources to reinterpret ideologies. I also use approaches on this subject of Narotzky (1995) and Tilly and Scott (1987).

seemed to find parallel with the amazons' myth since these women not only were considered strong but also beautiful.⁶ Through the use of this term, the parents aspire to situate their daughters far apart from the female image of domesticity and passivity, since the adolescents in their highly active role have the duty to achieve all.⁷

The adolescents attend to a prestigious private school in Puebla City. The institution serves levels maternal through high school and it is situated in the Atlixcáyotl Territorial Reserve. This area possesses the highest *per capita* income in the state and is structured as 'luxury land-use' (housing, offices and shopping centres). It includes a wide offer of private educational institutions accessible only to upper middle and high economic sectors (Becerra, Bazán and Ramírez 2008). All the family groups live in the same residential area where the housing spaces stand out for their infrastructure and the occupational profile of the residents (groups with capital control, political power or senior professionals).

It is necessary to highlight this fact because their spaces for socialisation and reproduction are intimately related with the conformation of their subjectivity, which, at the same time, is linked to their parents' discourse about *how to be a woman today*. This conception has a notable influence on the perception that adolescents have, not only about themselves but also in the way of how they want to be perceived in the world.

The institution is known for the high professional success of its graduates (many of them are renowned businessmen or politicians). The favourable outcome is 'product of providing an educational plan that enhances the different abilities and skills to the students to achieve their greatest development in the different fields in which these will have to perform in the future.'⁸

In the group I had Ainia (15 years old), Camila (12 years old), and Myrina (13 years old). As members of a specific social group, the adolescents share a variety of spaces: school, leisure areas (language schools, recreation places, gyms, shopping centres, *etc.*) and also the housing area, since all the family units inhabit in the same residential neighbourhood.

In the group the participation of the parents in the lives of the daughters is high and active. They are watchful of the academic performance of their daughters,

⁶ In Greek mythology, the amazons were women descendants from Ares, God of war and the nymph Harmonia. These women were characterised by living in a matriarchal order where man was allegedly subordinated to slave tasks. Added to this, they were known as much for their beauty as for their skill in the arts of hunting and war. The amazons pose the recurrent myth about women living in freedom from the dominant patriarchal regime, as fighters and powerful women.

⁷ In several discussions, both fathers and mothers insisted that the girls had the resources to *achieve all*.

⁸ Information from the Institutional Monthly Newsletter, special edition for newcomers. Printed yearly at the beginning of the school year (September).

which has to be remarkable. The three girls maintain an average grade between 5.3 to 5.8 on a scale of 1-6. As some parents⁹ mentioned:

'...she has to be excellent... because of that we give her all' Héctor, (Myrina's father).

'It is our duty to take care of our daughter and provide her with all the things necessary to face the many challenges in the world, but she has the duty to make the right use of everything that she receives' Diana (Myrina's mother).

'Well{.} tell me, why she cannot achieve excellence? I mean, she has everything she needs for it' Ulises (Ainia's father).

'We provide her with the most important things...{.} she has everything she want and because of that, we only ask an outstanding performance' Coral (Camila's grandmother)

In these narratives, I observed how the girls are conceived as an active subjects provided with all the necessary tools to be winners in educational achievements. The use of every resource that they get has become normative. Decisively this discourse gives them the clear message: it is not possible to be nobody.

On one occasion Myrina told me – in confidence – that she hates Polynesian dance class and that she wishes to quite that scholar activity because she wants to attend the theatre club. In our conversation, she sighs deeply and she said using a tone of disappointment: 'What can I say to you? {.} Sometimes I just want to do nothing and pinch my belly {laughs} but my mother would go crazy {.} mmm {.} my dad too.'

Camila was in an extracurricular math course as a result of a low note in recent months. She was noticeably tired because as a part of the swim school team, she spent around two hours after school practicing (and maybe more if it is competence season). On several occasions she fought with her mother and with her grandmother because she was too tired to assist to the extra classes. She told me 'I just don't want to go anymore, I hate it!{.} I'm not so good in math or chemistry or in many things{.} I'm ok with 4.5{.} I've had so many 6's {.} I just don't want to take more extra courses... I'd really like to be at home before six'.

Ainia and I were taking an ice cream after her French lessons. It was a sunny Saturday noon. She was telling me about the next volleyball tournament, which would take place in two months in Monterrey. She told me that she was happy for the travel. '...even if we do not win, for me it will be a break from everything {.} and everyone... it's enough for me, you know?' She adds 'it's too hard being a PRECOCIOUS kid!' {she emphasises}.

Although precociousness is frequently associated with the early onset of signs of pubertal development, *being precocious* within this group is more related to the early acquisition of assertive features, especially if they are related to intelligence or reasoning. The parents, the teachers and even the adolescents themselves find convenient to use this term under this perspective. Since

⁹ Key transcription system:

{.}denotes a pause

... Denotes a section of text omitted

C: Signifies speech by the interviewer

precociousness is valued by both parents and daughters, it becomes a kind of gift; a feature that plays to their favour, remarking their capacity in the use of skills in front of the rest of the girls of their group.

The interviews also made me observe the practice of a *neoliberal femininity*¹⁰ where the girls are urged, since they develop in an equal and competitive society, to embody success. This discourse presents a complex equation of neoliberal values (such as individualism and competitiveness) alongside discourses of 'girl empowerment'. However, such equation is less about balances between gender and agency and more to match within the normative social, economic and political processes of creating and reproducing neoliberal subjects.

In this case, assertiveness and empowerment discourses operate as a socially cohesive force. This means the use of all their assets (hegemonic femininity, class resources, educational means, *etc.*) function as a framework of class-gender shared values. The girls' practices often operated as a class marker among their peers. By characterising themselves in the creative use of their individual capacities (intelligence, brightness, judgment but also self-control and discipline) they display what they consider the 'righteous' femininity, *i.e.*, the version of femininity that their social group considers the most effective in the competitive heterosexual market. Thus, class was a present social force in the specific version of femininity that the girls performed.

The analysis of these types of discourses is crucial because they have the potential to envision a kind of neoliberal femininity. In this women are not only urged to become active, determined and dynamic workers but also to carry out – inconspicuously – the traditional modes of patriarchal authority (heteronormative feminine beauty, motherhood, domestic division of labour, among others). As McRobbie (2007) suggests, 'here too young women (top girls) are now understood to be ideal subjects of female success, exemplars of the new competitive meritocracy.'

Gerodetti and McNaught-Davis (2017) assert that due to the latest cultural transformations, feminist ideals of autonomy or choice have been absorbed and appropriated by neoliberal discourses, resulting in a kind of 'new femininities' within the framework of neoliberal subjectivities. In this 'modernized femininity' (Budgeon 2011: 7) young women are interpellated to inhabit neoliberal values, not so much as 'feminists' but as liberated, self-made subjects.

Likewise, even when 'the neo-liberalism insists on the individual as a rational self-reflexive agent constructing a lifelong choice biography' (Davies and Bansel

¹⁰ For femininity we understand what society deems appropriate behaviour for a 'woman'. The set of attitudes, roles, norms of behavior, hierarchy of values considered typical of the female can vary in time and place, and even within different groups in the same society. Also, it is possible to find different variants of femininity according to its articulation with class, race, ethnicity, etc.

2007), the capability to construct our personal journey is closely related with our departure point of one's material conditions from the class relationships. The class privilege provides more opportunities by virtue of the familiar networks and increases the ability to respond to contingencies. With the proper material conditions, the individual has a greater social network and better and higher chance of moving up the social hierarchy (Sennett and Cobb 1973: 72).

We cannot forget that as Bettie suggest 'class origins did matter significantly, of course, as girls' life chances are shaped by the economic and cultural resources provided at home' (2000: 10). Even when class relations are undisclosed, it can be interpreted through other terms (gender, race, nationality, etc.). So, clear class advantages are rendered invisible in the consideration of these girls' exceptional school performance, since this is seen as a consequence of the fact that the girls possess 'strong individual capacities' rather than as a consequence of their class privilege.

As a part of a family with the necessary means, the girls get the advantage of a better atmosphere during their passage through formal education; nevertheless it provides the illusion that their vocational choice and their professional career are not part of their determined circumstances (class, gender, race, etc.). It is noteworthy how far our own interviewees' narratives tended to place the girls as *highly assertive subjects*, as if only their *agency* (their own choosing and strength) is the apparent responsible of their achievements, avoiding to make clear references to their prerogative as a privileged group.

The Act to Keep your Friends Close

In the previous part, I described the strategies to develop educational skills and the regulation of free time in the acquisition of extra-credentials to increase the human capital of the girls. In this, parents or tutors according with the contemporary notion of female autonomy put an extraordinary effort on educational success. But within this group, a successful passage through formal education is not all, especially if you are trying to prove that '*women can do it all*.'¹¹

The families in this group – secretly – recognise that any goal cannot be achieved individually, so they acknowledge in a very subtle way, that their class position and the relationships that emerge from it, is decisive in the development of particular professional paths. The eagerness to consolidate the girls' excellence is not only academic. This is observable as well in the selection of proper leisure activities, *proper* as a euphemism for class selection, just like the girls' parents told me: '*It is just not what you do rather with whom you do it.*' Thus, the recreation activities have (1) to integrate the daughters into the specific dynamics of their class, (2) to effectively preserve their class

¹¹ Penelope (Ainia's stepmother) tells me this phrase in several occasions, emphasising how now '*women can get it all.*'

relationships and (3) to consolidate a gendered process (marriage and motherhood) by the selection of a suitable partner.

The practices have to continue the effective boundary created by the school environment (as a social space) and by their class background. The dance classes, the gymnastics, the swimming, the attendance to the Movie Theatre or going to the mall has to be a continuation of their social relationships with classmates, sons or daughters from 'good families'.

There was no consensus about what do they understand about 'good families' and the expression came to light in many of my conversations with the fathers and mothers. In some cases, it referred to the recognition of the father's status, the lineage of the family or in other cases to the stability of the nuclear family, as we can observe below:

'You should see what kind of people are in the school... only the children of the best families in the city,' Penelope (Ainia's Stepmother).

'...a good school is the one that gives you the chance to make good contacts,' Diana (Mirina's Mother).

'...for me, it's not enough to be just a MATADITO¹²{he emphasises}. It's important to use your connections{.} Many people have good positions and not all of them had the best grades, but when you check what school they attended, what kind of people they studied with, you get the picture{.} you know what I mean?' Héctor (Mirina's Father).

'Obviously the quality of the education is important but most of the time is more important other things, you know.' Demetrio (Camila's Grandfather).

If the parents find a friend as *feasible*, the relationship is highly fomented; otherwise the parents will seek an effective but subtle way to restrict it. In one of our sessions, Camila started to talk about 'her friend'¹³ Diego. After some reticence, she agreed to keep speaking if I promised to keep the secret. She showed me a hidden box with letters and memories from her friend. Camila constantly refers to Diego as funny and very smart and at this point I notice she is willing to tell me more about him. She started to narrate me how they began to spend time together as a result of their assignment as partners in biology class. Diego was new at the school, he came from a public school and due to his high notes the school awarded him with a full scholarship. Diego's mother is the breadwinner in his family and she works as a receptionist in an office. He lives in a working class neighbourhood in the north of the city, near to the main industrial corridor.¹⁴

Camila makes a pause and clarifies me that they only see each other in the school. Here, I suspect she avoids to tell me that her family does not approve their relationship, so she firmly adduces that they live far away from each other and this make difficult to do any activity outside the school. She continues: 'we

¹² Mexicanism which refers 'nerd'

¹³ Despite the clear signs about her relationship with Diego, she never referred to him as her 'boyfriend'.

¹⁴ Just to illustrate: Diego's trip from home to school takes about 50 minutes by car (75 minutes or more by public transportation). Camila's house is 20 minutes away from the school (by car).

used to chat a lot{.} some nights we spent long hours on the phone.’ For a period, there was no problem (mostly because Camila never mentioned anything to their parents or grandparents). At this point, she sighs and tells me ‘and then came my birthday party... Diego was there{.} everyone in my family found out who he was and where he came from{.} and then BOOM!’{she emphasises}.’

This was a tense situation and when I decided to inquire about Diego with her family, I found the hesitation to talk about him. Camila's grandfather tells me how he was the first one to know about ‘*the boy*’¹⁵ and with conviction asserts me that it was an obligation to inform about the situation with ‘the boy’. Camila's father tells me that they should let the things flow because is ‘*kids' stuff*’ however Coral emphasises that Lisandro as a foreigner, he may be a bit naive and he does not know ‘*how things works*.’

At the beginning, each member of the family had a different opinion about how to handle the matter however the majority agreed that Diego represented a ‘*bad influence*’ for Camila. Even when no one openly mentioned it, the problem with Diego was his class background. His poverty is considered both, as negative and as a weakness. Thus, he is perceived as a potential source of moral deviation because the alleged *inability* of the poor to hold *themselves*, but most important Diego represents the weakness of his family. This indicates the meritocratic narrative that his family did not have the ability to ‘get ahead’ against the circumstances (poverty, lack of education, *etc.*). Diego's family lack of talent, which in theory in the meritocratic discourse; is the most important –*neutral* – feature to climb the social scale (Sennett 2006).

The narratives above show us how that frequently, the speeches of wellbeing and care of the girls are in part, an apology to classism. This works to justify their success and well-being over other social groups: they are rich because they are good and virtuous so their place into the social scale is a ‘natural’ reflection of their competence (Sennett and Cobb 1973).

I also observed the display of the paradoxical manifestations of class and gender relationships within a specific social group. In a supposedly tolerant and equal society, relations between individuals of the same class will be prioritised and bounded between them. While the group wields assertive speeches about female autonomy, the adolescents in this group are driven to a directly proportional operative: the more investment (education, talents, appearance, *etc.*), the greater the benefit (partner) is expected.

Contradictions in the Construction of Amazon Subjectivity

The main point of this paper was to analyse the way in which adolescent female subjectivity is composed in a particular social space such as contemporary

¹⁵ Camila's family members always referred to Diego as ‘the boy’ or ‘that boy’.

Mexico. Here, I tried to vividly describe the family relationships and practices that make possible certain social relations for a group of young Mexican women.

In this sense I tried to document the particular ways in which different relationships (class, gender and family) shape certain aspects in both daily life and the long-term patterns but also assemble a particular common sense or ideologies that the people in our study hold. This is crucial in the understanding of the content, importance and construction of social categories such as family, woman, men, father, and mother among others.

A deeper analysis to the narratives show us the constitution of a paradoxical subjectivity in the adolescents, product of the contradictory command to become a fully self-actualised neo-liberal subjects (McRobbie 2004) but keeping themselves a hyper-sexualised visual display and performances inside the normative femininity.

The 'new femininity' place – discursive –young women as more adaptable to changes and able to refashion themselves as empowered, flexible, creative and resilient (Budgeon 2011). This create the idea of a positive cultural transformations that have reshaped the gender order, nevertheless there is an enforcement for women to conform to the social norms in terms of gender, sexuality, femininity, and heterosexism.

In recent decades, young woman have been positioned as the benefactors of successful social and political change which, together with ideas of individualism and reflexive constructions of identity, almost mandate young woman to personify success. However, the set-up of the 'neoliberal femininity' is constraint by its same normative limitations, *i.e.*, young women can be empowered and autonomous but also they must be alluring and youthful (Gerodetti & McNaught-Davis 2017).

Previously, cultural stereotypes as Wolf (2002: 59) suggests 'forced women to develop a femininity based on the beauty without intelligence or intelligence without beauty, where women could own mind or beauty but not both,' We can observe that in the construction of the *amazon ideal*, beauty and intelligence are not mutually exclusive but necessary, since the girls' success within the social reproduction space is a function of how well they can develop both.

We observe that the encouragement of assertive discourses for girls can be inbuilt into the logic of neoliberal dynamics. Such trends place young women under the possibility to be exploited both, in the public and private sphere. We have to pay attention of women empowerment speeches that could fit into the male dominant order. The research also draws attention to the fact that despite the force of affirmative discourses of women's emancipation, in many cases, women remain anchored to the expectations of their specific social space.

As (McRobbie 2009: 155) points out, the 'new femininity' discourse is more a 'technocratic-managerial strategy' to co-opt feminist achievements rather than developing. Thus, terms such as 'empowerment', 'choice' or 'autonomy'

(previously popular in the feminist slogans) are adopted and redirected towards self-transformation rather than social transformation, thereby surreptitiously emptying them of their political relevance (Anderson 2015).

It is also noteworthy to observe that the social variation on the perceptions of children's needs. The narratives show us how the understandings about the nature of parenting and what is the best for the children tended to be deeply gendered. The guidelines of what is might be expected in each family give us a wider evidence of the gendered nature of parenting. Even when the families perceive themselves as 'progressive', all of them remained attached to traditional social constructions of womanhood and manhood and their gendered equivalents (femininity, masculinity, motherhood, fatherhood, *etc.*).

By the age of our interviewed, it was difficult to find a clear feature of dissent regarding the class and/or gender norms of the family group, and perhaps it is soon for the emergence of conflict between the family values and having the freedom to pursue individual goals. It is important to highlight that family responsibilities, values and dynamics can be negotiated in context rather than being fixed terms. As the girls start to interact beyond the family group I expect a major recognition of ambiguities and dilemmas and likely, a greater exercise of their own agency.

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