



# Childhood, neo-liberalism and the feminization of education

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This paper brings together analyses from childhood and gender studies with macro-economic analysis to offer new perspectives on current educational debates, including the current role of education within broader discussions. Girls' recent (supposed) educational success is situated within economic and cultural contexts to explore how discussions of gender, childhood and development both express and, paradoxically, obscure these. Analysis of popular discourses surrounding children and childhood is used to suggest that the sentimentalized (girl) child has come to represent a new neo-liberal subject, such that contemporary discourses of childhood and feminization typically distract attention from more meaningful structural analyses - that would crucially include further analyses of gender and childhood.

## Introduction

In this paper I connect the representation of childhood, current economic policies, gender studies and education. My claims are concerned with the value of making these connections as critical resources. I propose that we can gain better analyses by making links across these apparently diverse arenas—indeed that we cannot make adequate sense except by so situating them. Since my argument is cumulative, I will take the different aspects of my title in reverse order in order to identify its features and contribution. I suggest that current discourses of the feminization of education (whatever their veracity) flourish in part due to the consonance between educational and political agendas regarding forms of governance and economic policies. These owe their success to a particular and potent deployment of representations of gender and childhood which rely upon ideological renderings of childhood – in particular of girl children. Hence contemporary educationalists and psychologists need to take into account how these wider issues inform their policies and practices.

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So I am going to make some rather rapid moves from recent debates about boys' and girls' relative educational success to consider how these relate to more enduring representations of gender and childhood within the modern western imaginary. At first sight there are apparent contrasts between these two configurations (of gender and educational success vs. gender and childhood) especially in relation to seeming reversals of traditional gendered power relations. Notwithstanding these, deeper continuities enable particular forms of global and local economic power relations to be maintained, in subtle and insidious ways, with the recourse to gender performing a key role in this. To justify this claim I will make a further shift, from the economic to the cultural domain, to explore how recent imagery of girls and young women appears to function.

This argument may appear far-fetched, and inevitably rather thin in its treatment of any of its single strands. Methodologically, such swift shifts across disciplines, genres and levels of analysis inevitably oversimplify political as well as conceptual complexities. On the other hand, broad brush strokes can perhaps highlight aspects of the (disciplinary, epistemological and political) frame within which each feature functions. Further, if some readers are anticipating the argument put forward here, I would invite you to generate *counterexamples*, for the set of overdeterminations surrounding the role of gender within neo-liberalism—as reflected also within educational discourses—are worrying, and routes for mitigating or warding off these conclusions sorely need identification. However the issue is not so much that resistance is absent, but rather that we need some helpful reminders of what—and where—this is. One route may be to attend to questions of cultural specificity. Indeed while much of my analysis, alongside the cultural resources I comment upon, refers to a broader European context, it is likely that—beyond being expressed in English—particular aspects relate primarily to a British context. To the extent that this is the case, situating these arguments within wider intellectual and cultural arenas may be helpful.

### **The feminization of education?**

Britain has recently been rocked by crises within secondary and tertiary level schooling—in terms of the structure, forms and standards of assessment. The unprecedented success of school-leaving pupils in the 2002 and 2003 A level and AS level examinations (taken in the final two years of schooling at ages 17–18 years) have prompted claims of falling standards from conservatives, and posed practical difficulties for universities in accommodating the numbers of school leavers who have fulfilled their 'conditional offers' and so qualify for entry.

Alongside this, there are claims of girls overtaking boys to displace them from top levels of achievement in almost all but the traditionally 'masculine' areas of the school curriculum. Indeed a cursory look at the gender distribution of A level results published in both August 2002 and 2003 shows a now familiar picture, both of girls gaining the highest results and more girls overall gaining higher marks than boys in almost all subjects. However the 'gender divide' within the curriculum still pertains,

with an orthogonal crossover in physics (showing the continuing need for the 'girls and science' projects of the 1980s; see Kelly, 1985; Segal, n.d.).

Of the many debates concerning these gendered patterns of achievement, let us just note that girls' greater success can be seen as entirely consistent with the body of educational literature indicating that girls perform best on continuous assessment, so that the new AS level<sup>1</sup> systems could have been predicted to benefit girls (Goldstein, 1987). Whatever the merits of applying continuous academic pressure upon teenagers, girls—as typically good, hardworking students who conscientiously plan for and work through their workload—appear to succeed under this scheme. Boys by contrast typically seem to rely on last minute flurries of activity to make up in examinations what they lagged behind in coursework to get through examinations.

But so far my account indulges as many stereotypes as the newspaper pundits. Yet before we deconstruct the dominant gender polarities we should note, firstly, that even though such gendered associations are questionable, it clearly *is* a problem for boys' (and for masculinities in general) that conscientious work is seen as compromising of boys' vulnerable grasp on hegemonic masculinity (through associations of femininity). Secondly, we should query the familiarity of the association between falling standards and girls and women's success or predominance within any arena. It seems that wherever girls and women do well, this has a 'contaminating' effect on the status of the subject or profession. Indeed education has often been deemed to suffer by virtue of its 'feminized' status, notwithstanding its mainly male senior management. While the politics of 'feminization' is a central connecting theme of this paper, for now at the very least this shows how broader systems of gendered evaluation are alive and well.

Taking this as our cue we might consider *which aspects* of school success are seen to be so problematic by (or for) boys. This does not concern academic success (especially where linked with being good at sports) as much as betraying the feminized orientation of being a 'swot' with its associations with docility and subordination to the school system. It is this (gendered) imagery of victimology that I want to note here. For irrespective of their veracity, and I will shortly question such notions, boys and young men now attract an equivalent victimized status to that attributed (for better or worse) to women and girls—hence the current policy focus on boys' and men's physical and psychological vulnerabilities. Thus, irrespective of how they become attached to specifically gendered bodies, dominant associations of femininity with passivity and acquiescence clearly do some ideological work whose more far-reaching proportions form my focus later.

#### *Feminization: produced by, or enabling, girls' success?*

Having introduced this conundrum, some critical reflections are needed both to identify, and question, some of what is being presumed or overlooked by the current policy concerns. Blaming girls for the limitations of boys' strategies in relation to schooling seems only a local variant of a well-worn story. It may even reverse the implied causal relationship. For girls' greater success (if such there is), far from

creating a feminization of education may rather indicate the presence of a *feminized culture* that is part of what enables them to succeed. Indeed as critical and feminist educationalists have been pointing out (Epstein *et al.*, 1998), the current moral panic of boys' failure and girls' supposed 'over-performance' runs counter to a longstanding picture of girls' success in primary level schooling—relative both to boys *and* to girls' general educational performance later in education. This trend of girls' early success was seen to progressively 'wash out' at secondary level, and was marked in contexts where girls were taught with boys, and especially in curricular areas where girls were in a minority. As early as the mid to late 1980s Valerie Walkerdine and her colleagues were challenging the then prevalent discourse of girls' 'underachievement' by showing how at primary level girls were in fact succeeding educationally, but that this was not always recognized by teachers. Instead teachers privileged the 'flair' and 'talent' of boys over the hard work of girls, treating these 'traits' as indices of cleverness even where girls actually outperformed boys (Walkerdine *et al.*, 1990).<sup>2</sup>

Walkerdine had earlier highlighted the philosophical origins of this link between gender and nature (with girls' 'work' positioned as by definition compromising, rather than honing or enabling, their 'natural' abilities) (Walkerdine, 1981; Walkerdine *et al.*, 1990).<sup>3</sup> This philosophical legacy posits the forces of nature as implacable (and therefore in need of mitigation via sanctioned expression) in ways that reinforce gendered discourses of aggression. It also obscures the *gendered* character of female authority in relation to boy children in which such evaluations occur (even though—or perhaps precisely because—such philosophical frameworks subscribe to those gendered assumptions).

Indeed in her 1988 book, *The mastery of reason*, Walkerdine argued that it was the apparently feminized culture of early education that discouraged young boys. This was not, or not only, a matter of personnel—i.e., that the vast majority of early education teachers are women—thus underscoring the continuities (including continuities of status) between the feminized domestic space of home and of school. Crucially, Walkerdine highlighted how pedagogical assumptions underlying the *form* of the educational tasks set for children also reinforced particular gendered cultures. The fashion for teaching mathematics by casting arithmetical problems into 'games' emulating everyday activities (such as shopping) drew attention to the ways the early life of children—at home and then reinforced by school—was feminized through women's greater (if not in most cases sole) involvement in *all* aspects of domestic labour, including especially 'care'.<sup>4</sup> Hence Walkerdine argued that the very format that was supposed to render mathematical concepts 'accessible' was in fact creating barriers for some boys, whose difficulty with the tasks (she proposed) was less conceptual than an emotional resistance to its content. Correlatively it has been argued that girls' lesser success in mathematics, physics and (although to a lesser extent) chemistry at the advanced end of schooling arises from their presentation as abstract and socially irrelevant.

The limits of such gender essentialisms are clearly apparent. For, as Walkerdine emphasized, they overlook the gendered and classed cultures of teaching and learning. We now know that girls are likely to do much better at those subjects

they are weakest on if they are taught in contexts where they can receive equal attention from the teacher—i.e., single sex or female majority classrooms, with women teachers. So the question of gender has shifted from girl pupils to the culture of schooling. But, alongside this displacement, gender binaries become unsettled.

The public furore over ‘over-performing’ girls—as threatening to displace vulnerable boys from the benefits of meritocracy promised by education—overlooks how the gendered patterning of achievement rapidly fragments once we attend to class and ‘race’ issues. Indeed many feminist and critical educationalists have argued that this concern with boys’ educational failure and girls’ success is spurious once we look closely at *which* girls are succeeding (and indeed consider also the costs of success) (Epstein *et al.*, 1998). In Walkerdine *et al.*’s (2001) longitudinal study initial class differences came to be exaggerated through educational histories. Similarly just as gender came to be understood to fracture the picture of Black underachievement, so also ‘race’ (and its intersections with class) mediates the picture of boys’ and girls’ educational profiles. That this is a matter for further conceptual as well as policy development was indicated by a recent EU sponsored project on intercultural education (Blom & Severiens, 2002). In this, the earlier theme of education research of immigrant and minoritized girls appearing to be doing better at school than their male counterparts (Mirza, 1992) was noted. This appeared to generate surprise rather than prompting structural analysis of the opportunities mobilized by the intersections of gender, ‘race’ and class, in particular concerning the value students placed on self-reliance as indicating an anticipatory, institutional as well as individual, defence against racism.

Hence gender differences in educational performance are starkly structured by class and associated racialized differences. So if all the publicity concerning girls’ supposed cultural advantage in education is something of a fiction, then, we need to consider not only the conditions of such fabrication but also the cultural-political interests that sustain it. This brings me to my second main area for discussion: neo-liberalism.

### Schooling for neo-liberalism

Discussions of gender and education operate within particular conditions of global capitalism and the market economy. The post-industrial shift into service sector provision both links with and accounts for shifts within gendered cultures. To comprehend these it may be helpful to recall their more local history within the arena of education. In Britain the Education Reform Act (ERA) of 1988 radically changed the face of the school system. In the name of raising and harmonizing standards and drawing on the now familiar neo-liberal discourse of democratization and accountability, it imposed a national curriculum (including compulsory Christian religious education), introduced standardized testing of all pupils at ages 8, 11 and 13 (in addition to qualifying school leaving examinations), and devolved financial administration of schools from local authorities to school governing bodies.

Introduced by the (Conservative) Thatcher government in its last throes, the Education Reform Act was largely regarded as an attack on socialist-inclined local authorities (Jones, 1989). By circumventing local authority control over school budgets, its key effect was to covertly re-centralize national government control. Thus what was foreshadowed was the classic move towards greater centralization of decision-making powers through apparently democratic claims to 'consumer participation' and 'choice' that have become the hallmark of neo-liberal discourse. Far from benefiting all children, British education since the introduction of the ERA has deepened pre-existing class and racialized divisions, with the publication of league tables of school achievement leading to schools excluding, and even being unwilling to admit, pupils with educational histories of difficulty (however acquired). Schemes set up to fund this philosophical shift in pedagogy from liberal improvement and self-expression to instrumental vocationalism (through city technology colleges) were notably unsuccessful, and efforts to reinvent this in variant forms look equivalently doomed.

Clearly this account of the current educational scene is overly grim, ignores some positive changes, and indeed neglects some important continuities between so-called progressive education and its successor that enabled the latter to take root (Avis, 1990). Notwithstanding this the current preoccupation with girls' 'over-performance' arises against this policy and political backcloth. For what is 'over-performance' if not a discursive device to throw such achievement into question, to portray it as artefactual, a product of particular performance features rather than emanating from some stable, internalized notion of ability? After all, we didn't hear much previously about boys' over-performance in relation to girls ...

So the feminization of education (if this epithet has any meaningful currency at all) occurs alongside other feminizations: of labour, including of management strategies. Such notions of feminization import key political ambiguities over the precise politics and subjects they mobilize. In particular, as we shall see, the discourse of feminization threatens to reinstall an *individual* subjectivity behind the collective processes it describes, thus ushering in a covert psychologization. Second, the term has flourished alongside a detachment from the specifically female gendered bodies whose position it originally designated (so that men too are said to be part of the feminized economy, for example). Third, it remains unclear whether feminization is an identity politics or a position call for intervention to escape it. Finally, surely the term normalizes the very gendered processes it problematizes, and so renders more difficult the documentation and conceptualization of individuals and trends that diverge from this pattern (see Burman, *in press*).

Such blurrings surrounding feminization figure later in my argument. For now let us note how the attention to girls' seeming educational success indicates a bifurcation within current discourses: differentiating between the apparent winners and losers under neo-liberalism. The generalization of the feminized conditions of labour to many Black and working class men, as well as women, indicates how they now (as always) endure drudgery, low pay and casual contract conditions. Thus home-working and tele-work call centres not only produce mobile (dispensable)

workforces that are therefore less visible, but this also makes collective organization, including political mobilization and representation, difficult (see also Hutton & Giddens, 2000).

As with education, this discourse of feminization is in fact classed and racialized. But it exists alongside another kind of feminization—of the flexible, mobile (including home) work of the middle class professional who can now exploit themselves more in the name of ‘family-friendly’ policies, discourses of ‘work–life balance’ and flexitime. Instead of authoritarian, ‘masculine’ styles of management, we have a new positive evaluation of the traditionally female ‘people-oriented’ styles of relating.<sup>5</sup> These co-exist alongside the proliferation of a therapeutic culture that includes the euphemisms of offering ‘outplacement counseling’ to workers who have been made redundant—as perhaps the local variant of inappropriately imposing trauma counseling upon survivors of disasters (a practice which is increasingly recognized as iatrogenic) (for specific connections with gender and education debates, see Burman, 2001; Dillabough, 2001).

Indeed feminizations have always functioned alongside other nationalist and imperialist enterprises, as feminist historical work has amply documented (Ware, 1992; McClintock, 1995; Yuval Davies, 1997). Spuriously feminist versions of current discourses of female-affirmativeness currently circulate in which the only terminological continuity between current managerial strategies and feminisms lies in the valuation of individual, personal experience. Thus the institutionalization of feminism (insofar as this has happened) has given rise to a co-option of the slogan ‘the personal is political’ and then reversed it to render the political as *only* personal (Bondi & Burman, 2001). We have been sold short on our feminisms if all we have is rampant individualism and further market penetration via practices of escalating individualization.

Moreover, other effects of a feminizing touch warrant careful scrutiny: the indirect, the covert, the velvet glove (noting the class as well as gendered connotations here; Burman, 2001). Crucially, turning being nice to people, or ‘people skills’, into managerial commodities can obscure the exercise of power. Jose Maria Amusategui’s speech, published in *The Economist* in 2000, provides a good illustration. At a conference discussing economic globalization and its impact on local businesses and economies, Amusategui was a key advocate for free trade policies to include competition in international trade and economic liberalization. As the joint president of a large Spanish banking corporation (Banco Santander Central Hispano) who was active in several key mergers, he championed the free market strategy that positions managers as more important than governments, proposing that the politics (whether right or left) of a government is less relevant than its managerial efficiency:

They have to have the best managers, the very best ... [with] a different management style, more complex, much less hierarchical, wherein one can really set up what are known as multi-functional global teams ... because all big businesses, in fact, are transnational by definition. ... This [global] opening up for trade and capital is, without a shadow of a doubt, a good thing, and here, there are neither winners nor losers, because everyone wins. (Amusategui, 2000, quoted in Gordo Lopez & Cleminson, 2002, pp. 220–221)

AQ2

Everyone wins, supposedly. So if, in this climate of compulsory success, you lose then you must be a real loser—no surprise within this political climate, then, that educationally succeeding girls are anxious and pressured, and failing girls and boys are depressed and despairing (Walkerdine *et al.*, 2001). Gordo Lopez and Cleminson connect these free market policies with their impacts on both immigration policies and consequences for the role of intercultural education in Europe.

Do these changes indicate a transformation within traditional developmental and educational discourses? After all, many critical psychologists and educationalists used to argue that the developing subject, the subject of development, was culturally masculine (Henriques *et al.*, 1984; Walkerdine, 1988; Burman, 1994, 1995). Correlatively the state of development, the state *from which* the developmental subject traveled on their trajectory from lesser to greater rationality, and abstract disinterested competence, is feminized. The answer, I think, is 'no' and 'yes'. That is, we are witness to new twists in the juxtaposition and inter-relations between retroactively produced mythical (and gendered) pasts and current models of political agency. This brings me to models of childhood.

### ***Amelie: or the work of the gendering of childhood in the social imaginary***

Moving from the global to the cultural domain takes us from an exploration of economic conditions to the forms of cultural representation they produce and sustain. This does not imply direct reflection or causality between economic and cultural domains, but rather such juxtapositions *invite* exploration of how they might be related. This is particularly important since recourse to the general category of childhood typically functions to abstract and de-politicize discussion, including in relation to actual children.<sup>6</sup> I will argue that current depictions of children, especially girls, as quintessential moral, feeling subjects—indicated also by depictions of 'female' ways of relating and girls' educational success—function according to a cultural dynamic equivalent to Freud's analysis of jokes (Freud, 1976).<sup>7</sup> In this, Freud drew attention to the ways jokes function as a social defence against areas of prohibition or anxiety. The mask of pleasure that jokes generate permits the circulation of ideas or sentiments that, if spoken 'seriously', would be censored or rejected. I suggest that, seduced by their feminine charms, representations of girls currently warrant the circulation of assumptions that, associated with boys or men, would provoke critical scrutiny. I now turn to the analysis of a specific example.

Released in 2001, the film *Amelie* was a largely unexpected success.<sup>8</sup> Hailed as both 'the quintessential French film' and as 'the key contributor to French cinema's recapture of its national box office' (programme notes), themes of national cultural identification were mobilized. The overwhelming epithet accompanying the film and description of its protagonist was 'sweet'.<sup>9</sup> Indeed this sweetness, together with unsolicited comments from friends, family members and colleagues about the film—about how lovely the film was, positioned me as both malicious (in questioning people's pleasure<sup>10</sup>) and suspicious (about what prompted such pleasure, and what this covered up).<sup>11</sup>

Even though the film narrative is primarily concerned with Amelie as a young adult, trying to make a way for herself in life, the young Amelie figures in interesting and important ways. Indeed she figures as the backdrop to the opening credits, where she is portrayed engaging in quintessential childlike activities (of the kind that the early educationalists—Montessori, Pestalozzi, Froebel and the like—would be proud). The posters advertising the film show a grotesque close-up of the ‘naïve gamine’ (sic, programme notes) adult Amelie (Tautou), with a second showing her younger self as a still from the opening credits, with raspberries stuck on the ends of her fingers that she is about to eat with great gusto one by one (with subtle references to sexual appetite, perhaps?).<sup>12</sup>

What function does the earlier, little Amelie play in the film? Through her, the film provides an explanatory narrative for its plot; that is, why Amelie adopts as her mission in life the project to ‘fix’ things for people, to solve puzzles and right wrongs. As with the most evocations of children in cultural texts, the young Amelie of the opening credits instills or performs a ‘baseline’; she provides the origin point as a normal, playful, engaging and communicative child, who is confirmed by these antics as demonstrably normal, so that this can become retroactively animated as a site of loss and mourning. This is the familiar conflation of logic with chronology central to developmentalist explanations (c.f. Stainton Rogers & Stainton Rogers, 1996; Burman, 1997); in this case it anchors the reading of Amelie as ‘basically’ a normal, happy well-adjusted, inquiring child, to whom life has dealt some difficult experiences.

In such ways Amelie works as the everyman and everywoman of modern Western subjectivity, carefully crafted as the alienated, disconnected and thwarted young person who has lacked crucial conditions in her life to enable her to engage with people, with the world. As viewers of this film, ‘we’ are invited to position ourselves as like her; ‘fundamentally’ good, loving and life-loving. Obstacles have prevented us/her from realizing all she/we wanted to be, so that she/we somehow lack the right skills, the right experiences, to ‘get it right’ (and to find ‘Mr Right’). Life, the world, has stopped us from becoming *what we should have been*, and blocked our access to being the adult that *the child-we-feel-we-were* was promised to become. So, by a peculiar twist that maps our wishes, and senses of thwarted or tainted current life circumstances onto the figure of the child, the therapeutic discourse joins the developmental one, with all its ideological baggage of regulation and normalization.<sup>13</sup>

### The child as therapeutic subject

This analysis of *Amelie* connects with the popular discourse of the ‘inner child’ and its retroactive (and now also prospective) mapping onto children; either the children we were, or the children and childhoods we should have had. This shift to portraying adult needs through the device of children’s vulnerabilities is a tactic wittingly used by national and international child aid organizations. It has also been explicitly harnessed by the British children and young people’s charity, Barnardos, in their advertising campaigns of 2000–2003.

In the 2000 campaign, a series of poster images substituted a child for a young adult in contexts that included being in prison, homeless, on the streets, on drugs or alcohol, about to jump off a skyscraper to a sure death. These images of damaged children were invoked to account for socially useless, often morally degraded people. They dramatically invited the viewer to see the inner, needy or suffering child within the adult. Significantly, the only girl/female image was also the only one specifically mentioning 'abuse'.

In each case the text accompanying the image opened with a claim of original damage/trauma, such as 'neglected as a child ...', 'battered as a child ...'. This was followed by an appeal for understanding and the assertion of a 'possible' link between a childhood history and the current situation of marginalization/self-harm/destitution: 'it was hardly surprising ...' ('... that Carl would turn to alcohol; 'Martin could see no other way out', etc). Here exoneration from the moral discourse of being undeserving of support or as responsible for one's current circumstances (or unhelpful habits) comes at the cost of the attribution of a traumatized past. While this might in some circumstances be practically helpful (in terms of prompting less stigmatizing approaches to work with vulnerable people), the approach poses two obvious difficulties. Firstly, once the past is seen as the traumatogenic place of origin it is all too easy to conveniently 'forget' present day circumstances, with individualized, family-oriented explanations working to exonerate state-neglect or deprivation. Secondly, the campaign paradoxically relied for its impact upon a denial of what is actually the case: the images 'shocked' precisely by virtue of depicting children (rather than adults) taking drugs, sleeping on the streets, or—crucially—being sexually abused. That is, the assumption was that the people involved *were* the children that these adults now *are*. The public debate and criticism generated by this campaign in the British media (over its 'shock tactics') overlooked the obvious fact that children, real chronological children, not metaphorically fixated or developmentally arrested adults functioning as children, *are* in these states on streets the world over.

Did the new Barnardos campaign against child prostitution of autumn 2002 correct these shortcomings? This reversed the device to superimpose older adult faces on children's bodies. With a text that claimed 'child prostitution steals children's lives', the Barnardos 2002 images suggested the 'stealing' of childhood via the depiction of (premature?) ageing. As Cunningham noted, this is a classical nineteenth century rendering of the romanticism of the child, here devoid of its developmentalist claims:

No trope is more pervasive and powerful in the nineteenth century than that of the child with an adult face, old before its time, precocious, and in need of returning to the lost world of childhood. (Cunningham, 2001, p. 2)

Yet the discourse of stolen childhoods clearly normalizes some childhoods over others that—leaving aside obvious contexts of abuse and exploitation—threatens to pathologize non-Western, working and politically active children and young people (Burman, 1995a, b), as well as rendering abuse as something that cannot be successfully survived<sup>14</sup> (Reavy & Warner, 2003). Significantly, the 2003 Barnardos



campaigns have returned to highlight the role of child poverty and material deprivation in the construction of damaged/dependent/vulnerable adults. Just as I wrote this I heard the news that this campaign has been banned as 'too shocking', after generating a 'record 466 complaints to the ASA [Advertising Standards Authority]' (The *Guardian*, 2003).

AQ4

### ***Amelie* as a prototype for the feminizing of the liberal human subject**

Armed with this repertoire of discursive connections we can apply these to analyse *Amelie* further. Significantly, Amelie's traumatic childhood experiences concern emotional neglect and loss rather than sexual abuse (of course a much safer site for audience identification); and her potential to be able to make the transition from autistic isolation into ordinary connection (a traditional psychotherapeutic narrative which so normalizes her story) is secured by the portrayal of her 'original' 'normal/naturalness', the spontaneity and creative prankishness of the little girl. Moreover there is another key effect of such devices.

For this we need to return from the apparently intimate world of psychic developmental dilemmas to our broader theme of gender and neo-liberalism. Scratch below the surface of this *cinema patisserie* (as one widely quoted but anonymous commentator dubbed the film<sup>15</sup>) and what we find in *Amelie* is a variant of liberal humanism in its crassest form, with its dynamic of philanthropy, discretionary magnanimity and implicit, if not explicit, injunction for those helped to be like their helper in their wants, desires and actions (c.f. Gronemeyer, 1993).

While *Amelie* does not seek explicit recognition for her deeds, the film narrative ensures she gains her identificatory satisfaction. There is no space in the dominant reading of the film for people to be appalled by her interventions, or for her pranks to backfire by emerging as key misfortunes that hold together these people's fragile identities without which they disintegrate. Nor is the possibility envisaged that gaining a little bit of what they deserve could simply drive home the scale of their more general deprivation and enrage them more. Rather there is an implied model of the subject receiving these interventions; a grateful subject. Amelie does not ask the blind man for permission to whisk him across the road and enumerate to him all the objects, activities and people she can see (thus emphasizing further all that his disability makes him miss). Yet (within the dominant film narrative) we are so caught up in her own sense of 'doing good' that this barely registers. She does not even ask where he wants to go before she just as peremptorily leaves him at the metro station and moves onto her next 'mission'. Alongside this relation of discretionary patronage (turned matronage?), the film displays an implicitly classed hierarchy of who deserves more. Amelie's colleague in the café gets set up to have a sexual clinch with the jealous twitchy customer in the café toilet; while Amelie has a long and tender (and private) seduction as the culmination of the film's story.

Not only is it as if the objects of her charity have no unconscious (to resist or contradict such interventions) but we are invited to be reassured that things can be made better by bestowing a little care and attention, and goodwill. For the 'good deeds' that

Amelie performs intervene only at the level of the personal and idiosyncratic. Her rescuing of the underdog or marginal person lies outside the domain of any political programme or commitment, and links with key themes of racial purity,<sup>16</sup> while (echoing a neo-liberal representation of subjectivity) her tactics are equivalently opportunistic. She is driven by a crude, universalized identification, alongside the desire to forge an intimate relationship.

So why does all this matter? The film attracted widespread critical acclaim, being called a 'feelgood fairytale' which 'will leave audiences glowing even after the film has finished' (programme notes, October 2001). What could be wrong with a cathartic experience of this kind? But Amelie stands not only in the longstanding tradition of the sentimentalization of children. She is also heir to the structure of subjectivity that invests the young girl/woman as the human prototype in a particularly unreflexive way (Lesnik-Oberstein, 1996), and this unreflexive character arises specifically through the seductive character accorded the girlchild.

The key point here is that, in addition to the underlying gender and heterosexually stereotypical narrative of a young woman's search for 'lurve', the film relies upon her gender (and her youth) for the plot to 'work'. The film's success suggests that Amelie's story of everywoman's maturation has becomes generalized to transcend even gender-specificity. No longer are women and girls atypical or abnormal in their attributes or qualities, but—at least as a source of identificatory connection—they have become normalized. What might this mean? I suggest this indicates an incipient feminization of the liberal human subject that sits alongside the feminization of labour and the proliferating psychological culture that promotes emotional literacy (and therefore self-responsibility) as the route for social progress (rather than affirmative action or investment in public services for examples) (Squire, 2001; Burman, 2001–2002). Surely conducted by a man, the kind of meddling exhibited by Amelie would elicit suspicion, hostility and resistance? But enacted by a beautiful young woman it is presented as charming rather than insulting, patronizing or imperialist; for *as a girl/woman* her very vulnerability and femininity apparently exonerate her from such charges. Indeed some cinema hoardings had her poster image accompanied by the phrase 'She'll change your life!'. Clearly this invitation does not intend to invite refusal. Indeed its very seduction is indicative of the role such feminized representations play. So this time Freud's (1976) jokework, which posits the deep structure of jokes as relying upon particular representations of gender in the sense that jokes are centrally concerned with the humiliation of, or the repudiation of identification with, women, has the last laugh. For reversing his original typology—to make the feminized position as subject rather than object—far from redressing previous heteropatriarchal and racist inequities can instead now be recruited to mete these out more efficiently.

### ***Amelie* as the contemporary Mignon**

My analysis of *Amelie* is informed by Carolyn Steedman's (1995) discussion of how the figure of the little girl has come to function as the exemplar of modern Western subjectivity. Steedman's (1995) historical analysis of the story of Mignon traces the

figure of the little girl/young woman of uncertain origins and transient involvements as an object of fascination and identification for European audiences throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Beyond its original scripting by Goethe in the early eighteenth century, the story underwent mass circulation and was performed widely across Europe throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Steedman argues that the prevalence and varieties of the story of Mignon throughout this period of European modernization and industrialization highlights the consolidation of a structure of subjectivity, as interiority, an inner self personified by the trope of the little girl.

What has happened to these motifs since 1939—the temporal endpoint of Steedman's analysis which also heralded the beginnings of a new world order? Like Amelie, Mignon's familial and 'personal' links are disconnected and disrupted; she is alone and unused to relationships. Steedman highlights the motif of Mignon, as the recurring object of the male gaze, as ultimately resolved into (what would now be recognized as) a narrative of sexual, as well as physical, abuse. But she is also the repository of nostalgic longings for the losses and thwarted desires that modernity has imposed. Along with various markers of atemporality within the film *Amelie* that promote abstraction and universalization, it is this structure of identification that is central to its success. This is a particularly politically expedient strategy of resolving world problems via displacing them onto individual activity.

### Engendering development: developing new agendas

To sum up, I have connected discussions concerning gender and education with macroeconomic neo-liberal strategies as a key context to explore the contemporary status of gendered childhoods. I have drawn on the analysis of a popular cultural text and embedded this within critical discussion of children's charity imagery to highlight the slippages performed in the mobilization of indulgence surrounding the (girl)child. Structures of sentimentalization around (especially girl) children contribute to a de-politicization of available explanations for the conditions of people's misery, away from structural inequalities and towards personal circumstances amenable to relatively simple correction, once right dose of 'feminized' human involvement is supplied. Indeed further analysis could be made of the racist vision installed of a homogeneous society, divided only by apparently 'natural' categories of age and gender relations, and over-determined by classical colonial themes of protecting (White) girls and women from contamination by (Black) men.

I recognize that the analysis I have offered of the film *Amelie* could be understood as providing a rather disempowering reading of a film that adopts a pseudo-feminist rhetoric and refreshingly foregrounds women's development instead of the more usual positing of male-as-norm. While this may be so, we should follow Carolyn Steedman's (1983) earlier advice to attend to the difference between cultural or literary artefacts produced *by* and *about* girls and young women. Moreover even if there are progressive aspects to such depictions, we still need also to consider how why such they have become popular. Surely this is a rather muted and individualized portrayal

of 'girl power' (if indeed there has been any such other variety circulating within popular culture). Or can such nostalgic depictions be seen as de-radicalizing and domesticating the potential threat supposedly posed by so many highly qualified young women potentially entering high places?

Yet insofar the educational and professional success of girls and women indicates that they are now entering traditionally male-dominated seats of power, this happens only on terms set by capitalist meritocracy. The neo-liberal twist to this is to naturalize and then cop-opt women's traditional skills, the skills wrought of subordination into success strategies, to extend structures of exploitation. Not only (as Walkerdine *et al.*, 2001, indicated) are those few girls and women who are (as much owing to class as gender) beneficiaries of this new world order paying their own personal price for their privileged place in the consolidation of existing practices of power (in education as elsewhere), but the rest of us/them are its casualties. Current discourses of feminization distract and disguise the maintenance of actual inequalities—structured around class, 'race' and, yes, gender—perpetrated by neo-liberal market strategies. Combined with structures of subjectivity that sentimentalize and romanticize particular models of childhood, these provide a formidable ideological obstacle to genuine collective re-evaluation and change. The various multiple engenderings of education, then, turn out to exemplify wider potential and cultural themes. Critical evaluation of the role of gendered representations of childhood may help maintain a clearer focus on both what is at stake within narratives of gendered educational success stories and in challenging the inadvertent well as explicit inequalities they perpetuate.

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### Notes

1. AS levels are the British intermediate qualifications between GCSEs (taken at age 16, approximately) and A levels (at 18 years).
2. The reverse however did not occur, with research documenting a longstanding trend of disruptive girls attracting a doubly negative evaluation: devalued as girls and even more so as non-typical girls (Davies, 1984; Clarricoates, 1987; Connolly, 1998).
3. This reflects the ambivalent status of work under capitalism—as something to engage with as a marker of 'growing up' as well as a route to escape or to confirm the possibility of escape from this through the status accorded 'childhood' as a period free from work.
4. And here we might note that the enduring media preoccupation about men's hatred of shopping suggests that even since the invention (and perhaps demise) of the 'new man', alongside the emergence of 'retail therapy', such tasks as shopping attract little male value.
5. However, as Reay (2001, p. 162) notes, 'Despite the rhetorics of "new management" it seems likely that in order to obtain professional success women at, or near the top of, institutional hierarchies have had to modify some, if not all, of the qualities associated with femininity'.

AQ5

6. Though it is also worth noting that such metaphors form an explicit resource within contemporary political theory—see, e.g., Jenson and Saint-Denis (2002).
7. Freud's discussion of jokework is arguably the most social of his account of unconscious functioning—indeed it could be seen as indicating the structure of a social unconscious (Dalal, 1998; Hopper, 2002).
8. Titled in French *Le fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain* ('The fabulous fate/destiny of Amélie Poulain') (dir: J.P. Jeannet, France, 2001), in English goes under the shortened title of *Amélie* (which perhaps also does some work of generalization and universalization, in contrast to the more specified—with first and last names—identification of the French title).
9. One of the promotional images shows Amélie holding a teaspoon to her face, as if it is she herself that we are consuming.
10. C.f. Terry Eagleton's (1981) comment about the popular image of anti-humanists as being people who would want to take candy away from children.
11. This is bolstered by the addendum offered by the said friends etc who say: 'don't analyse it!'—thus indicating that at some level they know their pleasure covers up some more sinister aspects.
12. A third poster shows her sitting in the stalls of a cinema, gazing up at an invisible film screen (which in the film also indicates her efforts to project into reality her own life's desires).
13. See Burman (2002, 2003) for an exploration of the therapeutic consequences of this.
14. A further reading of the images is also to normalize adult prostitution, and pathologizes old age. Thus we see other consequences of political strategies that reply upon developmental rhetorics.
15. Note the discourse of sweetness discussed earlier.
16. C.f. the discussion/reception of the film as being racist for its portrayal of a homogenous city with the only non-White character portrayed as in need of help.

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AQ6

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AQ7

*Childhood, neo-liberalism and the feminization of education* 267

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