

## Mapping Girlhood Studies: The Journal and the Academic Field

### *Girlhood Studies: Prospects and Setting an Agenda*

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#### INTRODUCTION

It was difficult to decide whether to talk first about the journal *Girlhood Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* or the broad field of girlhood studies as an emerging disciplinary area linked to feminist studies, women's studies and childhood and youth studies. Background on the journal may help to situate the area and so the paper starts with 'mapping the journal'.

#### **PART 1 MAPPING THE JOURNAL *GIRLHOOD STUDIES*: MORE THAN HALF A MILLION WORDS LATER**

In this first section I embark on what might be described as a reflexive moment in Girlhood Studies. I speak as one of the founding editors of *Girlhood Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, along with Jackie Kirk and Jacqueline Reid-Walsh. Jackie Kirk was tragically killed in Afghanistan just shortly before the first issue of Girlhood Studies was published and so Jacqueline Reid-Walsh and I carry on as co-editors and with the support of Ann Smith as Managing Editor. What can be learned from starting up the journal and sustaining it now for 5 years? The 10<sup>th</sup> issue of the journal (GHS 5:2) has just been published. These first 10 issues amount to close to 70 articles, and another 12 or 15 book reviews. At 60,000 words per issue this puts us well over half million words. There are several key areas I would like to consider.

**Girlhood as an interdisciplinarity project.** When we conceived of the journal and when we put together the editorial board members, we tried, as much as possible to cut across such areas as health, architecture, education, literary studies, sociology, history and so on. I think that we thought that every issue of GHS would in some way be interdisciplinary but that is a hard thing to achieve. I think that our thematic areas, girls and health, girls and space and so are perhaps more successful in constructing the area as a whole in an interdisciplinary way, and perhaps less so at the level of the specific issue. The review process is a challenging one sometimes, not because people won't review, but that when people are having to step outside their disciplinary zone, it may be difficult.

**Over there and over here:** A second issue relates to what one of our founding editors, the late Jackie Kirk used to call the ‘over there and over here’ phenomenon. What happens when we embark upon a journal that seeks to step outside of girlhood as only a western construction, or only as ‘in the developing world’? Recently someone who has a strong development background was very critical because the article they were reviewing didn’t problematize developmental contexts enough. And while the environmental issues that were being addressed were sufficient and the reviewer didn’t comment on whether the way girlhood was being taken up was sufficient, her concern was about ‘othering’ and did the author (a western author working in East Africa) have the right to write the way she did. In the same issue, another reviewer wanted to insist that in an article that dealt with menstruation the author should make it clear that she was talking about menstruation in development contexts. It is a tricky issue, and we have tried to avoid as much as possible alternating ‘western’ and ‘non western’ but then perhaps we need to take a different slant if that is what we intend to do.

**Language and geography.** While we have published articles from contributors from Europe, the UK, China, Rwanda, Ethiopia, Kenya, South Africa, Norway Sweden, Australia, the US and Canada, it is important to note that the bulk of the contributors are from the US. It is also to be noted that the majority of the researchers have referenced so far in the paper are from the US, the UK, Australia and Canada. How do we work towards building a stronger global network? In accepting the invitation to be at the conference, my thought was to begin to see how this might happen for the journal in relation to Russia.

**What about the boys?** I have to ask this question, although there have been fewer debates than we initially expected. The one I love though is from my former Dean who at the team we were starting the journal and we seeking some office space, said ‘what about a journal for boyhood?’ I was of course happy to say that there was already such a journal *Thymos*. Boyhood studies as an area of scholarship I think it is quite different from Girlhood Studies with its origins through Men’s studies and Masculinity Studies, and *Thymos* (the Boyhood Studies Journal) and journals like GHS need to co-exist. However, this does not mean that Girlhood studies should avoid asking question about boys and men and vice versa and the question ‘so what about the boys’ is one is absolutely appropriate within ‘on the ground work’ (alliances, coalitions from time to time, and strategic areas of investigation). Probably the most critical study on a global scale is a recent study from Plan International’s *Because I am a girl* series which two year’s ago focused on the issue: ‘So what about the boys?’. Within academic discourse I think that there are many questions to be asked, and one of the areas we have considered is a

themed issue for GHS on this very question ‘what does boyhood studies have to do with it?’ What can girlhood studies learn from a study of brothers, and at the same time what how can boyhood itself be informed through turning a feminist lens on brotherhood?

**Who is Girlhood Studies for?** On the one hand it is a peer review academic journal and although we include sections of the journal that are more reports of projects and so on, and those aren’t peer reviewed, the journal as a whole is meant to make scholarly contributions to the field. It is worth noting that ‘reaching community’ is something that GHS has become known for, and in 2010 the journal was the recipient of the ‘Highly Commended Certificate’ for the ALPSP best new journal award. From the judges we heard “The journal demonstrates ambitious and high quality publishing which aims to reach beyond a purely academic audience to have real impact in this area of study”.

**Ensuring that GHS is a scholarly endeavor:** It is important that contributors receive academic credit. We feel a level of responsibility to this new field of study. There are many academics just starting out in the area of girlhood scholarship. They have chosen to work in a field that may not have the long standing history and may even receive flack for having chosen to work in this field. So we as seasoned academics, you could say, need to make that happens. But it is more than ‘just the journal’. New scholars are often in the process of transforming a thesis on girlhood into a book. What do we think of the idea? Or the book is out, can we help them by reviewing it? The article has been accepted for publication but it can’t come out until late next year- yes we will write a letter. It is a community unto itself and the number of letters supporting tenure, assuring the academic audience that this is indeed a legitimate area of study and so on. Our Managing Editor, Ann Smith has close relationships with virtually all of the authors. She is a seasoned academic from Literary Studies and would not let things pass through that have not been properly edited.

**What is the place of girls – real girls – and not just imagined girls?** We are committed to the idea of ‘with, for and about girls’ in terms of highlighting the idea of ‘girl method’ but that is a tall order in terms of an academic journal. ‘About girls’ is fairly straightforward. ‘With girls’– we try to include in every issue some type of project that includes the voices of girls ranging from collage making to photography. This is somewhat problematic because the journal (any academic journal) doesn’t really target girls, so it is only when a contributor wants to report on a study that he or she has carried out with girls and in participatory ways that we are likely to get a strong sense of this. We have to think about ‘for girls’ then

very critically. Perhaps we need to be more consciously accessible. A few years ago, Jacqui Reid Walsh and I edited a two volume encyclopedia on Girl culture On the one hand, it was fascinating to try to work out what our entries would be: moral panic, the Listening Guide, tween culture. Essentially what are the key terms that “construct” girlhood? On the other hand it was a complex project that involved over 150 contributors writing 300 entries. But what made the project interesting was the ‘mandate’ we were given by the publishers which was to make the writing as accessible as possible. It was of course a marketing strategy in that they hoped that secondary schools would purchase the encyclopedia for Women’ s Studies options, and universities would see it as something that could be read and appreciated by first and second year university students as well more senior academics. In the end, we were probably successful but it took a lot of work with authors in order to work with abstract concepts.

**Building and sustaining a community of girlhood scholarship.** I have hinted at community when I have spoken upon the mentorship, the review process, getting girls involved. It is a bit of an old fashioned notion – ‘sisterhood is powerful’. But there is also the emergence of new community structures and there is now an International Girls Studies Association ([mail.usyd.edu.au](mailto:mail.usyd.edu.au)) that reflects the idea of larger community of scholars, activists and girls themselves.

## **PART 2: MAPPING THE FIELD**

In this section of the paper I consider some of the ways of mapping the field of girlhood itself. This I sub-divide into 3 areas: (1) Tool and theories; (2) Global, national, regional and local contexts: and (3) Participatory methods and girls mapping their own experiences.

### **Tools and Theories**

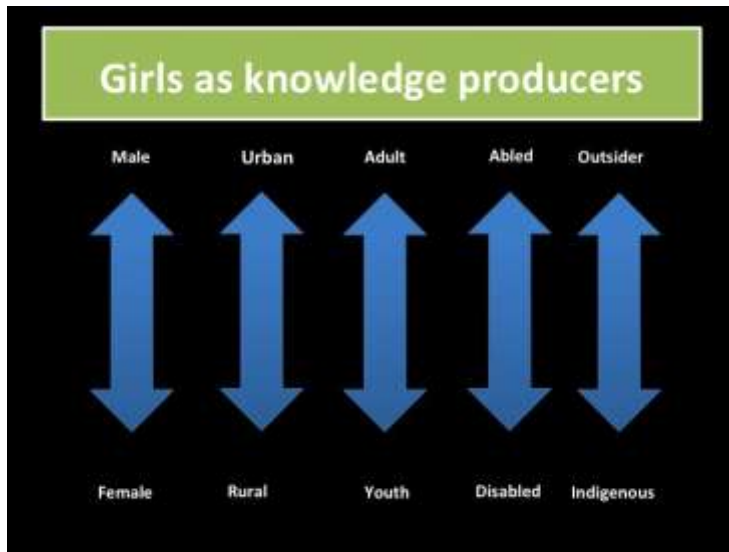
A few years ago Jacqueline Reid-Walsh and I came up with a mapping tool for engaging in a ‘scoping’ of who is doing what, why, how and with what effect in girlhood studies (Mitchell, Reid-Walsh, Blaeser, & Smith, A., 1998); Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2009). Later we refined it further in a chapter that we co authored with Jackie Kirk (Kirk, Mitchell, & Reid-Walsh, 2010) and it is also highlighted in Methodologies for Mapping a Southern African Girlhood (Moletsane, Mitchell, Smith, & Chisholm, 2008).

1. How is girlhood defined and why? Who is a girl?
2. What are the geo-political spaces in which the research takes place?

3. Who is engaging in this kind of research? Who isn't?
4. What is the critical reception of this research? Who funds girlhood?
5. Who are beneficiaries of the research on girlhood?
6. What are the kinds of questions that are being taken up?
7. What is the history of this field? How has the focus of the work changed over time?
8. How does the research link the lives of girls and women?
9. To what extent does the research draw on gender relations?
10. What is the main agenda of the work? To what extent is it regulatory and protective? Advocacy and action-oriented? Policy-oriented?
11. What methodologies are being employed? How do girls and women participate? To what extent is the work girl-centred?

This set of questions can of course be expanded and perhaps some of them will eventually become redundant. However, the set of tools overall remains for me a useful example of the types of tools that are needed if we are to advance in the field and might usefully sit aside other girlhood tools such as Brown and Gilligan's (1992) Listening Guide.

At the same time we need to advance theory in the area and while it is beyond the scope of this paper to cover this in detail I offer the diagram below as an example of adopting a theoretical perspective built on the idea of girls as knowledge producers.



**Fig 1: Theorizing knowledge production**

**Global, regional, national and local contexts**

Another way of looking at map is to position the work in relation to geography and social development. How do we look at events, their location and who is organizing them?

National contexts

*Improving economic prospects for Canadian girls* (Canadian House of Commons Standing Committee on Status of Women). This was an extensive collaboration across Canada in April and May 2012 that resulted in a report that gives a strong sense of ‘next steps’.

National and international conferences

“Girlhood and the Politics of Space: New Paradigms of Research” which was hosted by the Institute for Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies (IGSFS) of McGill University in Canada, 10–12 October 2012, which brought together researchers, community groups, policy makers and girls to deliberate on critical issues relevant to girls. The symposium participants sought to develop and discuss new analytical tools and conceptual frameworks to study girlhood through cross-disciplinary and cross-national dialogue. We are pleased to report that a future GHS issue will feature a set of the papers from this conference. This roundtable on: “Girlhood Studies: Prospects and Agenda” which brings together researchers based in Russia and their international counterparts is a good example of nationally based internationally collaboration.

Another example of this work can be seen in the work of regional organizations such as *FlickForsk! Nordic Network for Girlhood Studies*. It is interesting to note that scholars in the Nordic region are currently developing a themed issue on Nordic girlhood for GHS and they raise questions such as the following:

- How might Girlhood Studies be regarded as an anomaly within the context of the Nordic welfare states?
- How can the absence of theorizing of girls and girlhood be understood in relation to the presence of a strong and dynamic tradition of Women's Studies?
- How have Nordic girls of various ages and different generations interpreted their lives?
- How has the partial dismantling of the welfare state during the last two decades affected girls?

### Global contexts

While the United Nations Girls Education Initiative (UNGEI) is a good example of an organization which gives focus to the issues of girls' education around the world, there are other initiatives such as Plan International's *Because I am a girl campaigns and reports*. The latest one was issued in conjunction with the *International Day of the Girl* on October 11, 2012 and focused on girls' education.

### **Participatory methods: How might girls be involved in mapping their own experiences and concerns?**

A third critical area relates to the participation of girls themselves. How in particular might visual methods such as participatory video, cellphones, photovoice, and drawing be used? (See also Mitchell, 2011)



Figure 1: Girls and participatory video (South Africa). Figure 2: Girls' images of unsafe toilets (Swaziland and Rwanda)

While there is increasing documentation in this area and here I would like to draw attention to the extensive body of work that we are building up through the Centre for Visual Methodologies for Social Change ([cvm.ukzn.ac.za](http://cvm.ukzn.ac.za)) in South Africa and the Participatory Cultures Lab at McGill University ([www.participatorycultureslab.com/](http://www.participatorycultureslab.com/)), here I just highlight some of the questions that need to be asked if we are to advance in this area in relation to girlhood studies as an academic discipline:

- What are the most effective of ways of linking girls' images to policy dialogue?
- Can we create an inventory of 'working models' on participation into policy-making?
- What is the fall- out when adults close their eyes to the images produced by girls? Is there a downside to a participatory agenda?
- How do we ensure the presence of missing voices and missing images and how might we use tools of intersectionality to do this?
- What technologies would support and expand an agenda of 'from the ground up' policy-making through girls' participation?

## CONCLUSIONS

Girlhood Studies is a dynamic new field of study. It brings together veteran



scholars like myself who have been working in the area of feminist research and gender studies for 3 or 4 decades and new scholars who see girlhood studies as an inevitable area linked to media studies, development contexts, and new theories of age and place. Perhaps the most important component of this work is its obvious links to the past, present and future and as such calls for advancement in the kinds of tools and approaches that I have outlined in this paper. The importance of exploring girlhood issues in comparative and intersecting ways not only from Montreal to Moscow but around the globe. Only 6 weeks ago two girl-focused events highlighted why we need to develop in this area. Malala Yousafzai of Pakistan was shot by members of the Taliban for mobilizing for girls' education. Amanda Todd of Canada committed suicide right around the same time as a result of cyber-bullying. These events both have their origin in patriarchal structures and call for serious scholarship, serious activism -- and new alliances -- between and amongst scholars, NGOs and girls.

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