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Gendered emotion work and the micro-practices of heterosexuality: two middle-class teenage partner relationships

Abstract

This paper uses close analysis of two couples to examine the micro-practices and processes of gendered power within middle-class young people's intimate partner relationships. It is based on in-depth interviews with 14-16 year old young people in an affluent area of England. The paper argues that intimate relationships can be spaces of intense pleasure, as well as providing a site of calm and escape from the peer surveillance of the broader social network. However, they can also be oppressive sites of constriction and control, and reproduction of traditional gendered narratives; in these couples, the young women were rendered responsible for the "emotion work". The young women, though, often disavowed and downplayed inequalities, negotiating the contradictory and schizoid nature of contemporary girlhood.

Keywords: emotion work, heterosexuality, heterosexual relationships, young femininity, teenage relationships

Young people's intimate relationships take place in the context of widespread anxiety around teenage sexuality; they are often overshadowed by the compulsory social setting of school. Much work has been done on the construction and performance of (hetero)sexual identities in peer cultures, with feminist research in particular exploring the influence of gendered discourses on young women's sexual subjectivities. This paper builds on such work by focussing on the intricacies of everyday heterosexuality within the space of young people's intimate partner relationships. Such relationships can be spaces of intense pleasure as well as providing a site of calm and escape from the broader social network; they can also be

oppressive places, sites of constriction and control. The discussion is based on qualitative research with 14-16 year-old young people, with the analysis foregrounding their classed as well as heterosexualised identities. It concentrates on young middle-class people (in the British sense of the term: that is, whose families occupy relatively high social and economic status), attending a state-funded comprehensive school in an affluent area of England. In common with recent work focussing on girls' experiences of private and elite education (Charles, 2013; Maxwell & Aggleton, 2013, 2014; McCall, 2015), it seeks to critically examine the lives of young women (and men) whose lives represent the privileged centre from which others are marginalised. Unlike this work, however, it focusses on a population whose privilege is less marked and less acknowledged (both by wider society and by participants themselves). The fees at British preparatory schools (private schools for pupils aged 5-13) are “around half the income of a family on the middle rung of the income ladder”, and at secondary schools they are “appreciably higher”. “Overwhelmingly”, therefore, “pupils at private schools are rubbing shoulders with those from similarly well-off backgrounds” (Green & Kynaston, 2019). In a comprehensive school, even in an affluent area, there are a significant number of pupils from less-well-off backgrounds, and the negotiations of these differences were a factor in the relationships I investigate here.

Young people's experiences are, of course, shaped by their unique contexts. In particular, we know that the experiences of teenagers, as of others, is profoundly shaped by social class; middle-class teenagers' experiences are likely to differ in important ways from those of their working-class peers – even when they study together. This paper explores the particularities of gendered relationships as they are negotiated within a classed context.

By studying two couples' partner relationships in depth, I illustrate how young people's masculinities and femininities are performed and shaped in interaction with each other in this context. In particular, I investigate the subtle (and not-so-subtle) flows of gendered power

within these contexts, and the ways in which they contribute to wider discourses of heterosexuality. I show that, for these teenagers at least, negotiating their intimate relationships was beset with affective complications, as young women experienced the pushes and pulls, the contradictory and schizoid nature of contemporary girlhood. Of course, they were also balancing their heterosexual identity within partner relationships and the broader pressures of family, peer cultures, education and looking towards the future. The pressure was greater for the girls in these intimate relationships; it came to seem inevitable and natural that they did the emotional work for two, carrying boys on their shoulders. This worked with other gendered (and classed) discourses, like that of the masculine sex drive, and the hegemony of individual agency, such that it seemed these young middle-class women were loaded with the burdens of making good choices and wise decisions: not only for themselves, but for the boys around them too.

Reading (young) heterosexual relationships

A substantial amount of research has explored young people's gendered negotiations of partnered (hetero)sexual activity. Much of this builds on the classic "Male in the Head" work (Holland, Ramazanoğlu, Sharpe, & Thomson, 2004, first published 1983), a large-scale empirical investigation which analysed young men's and women's talk about sex in detail, and argues that young heterosex (re)produces a set of discourses of masculinity and femininity in which relations between women and men are implied to be "natural, oppositional and hierarchical" (ibid., p. 21). In these accounts, young men are positioned and position themselves as sexual subjects, in charge of the sexual encounter and relationship, while young women have little sexual autonomy; sex was constructed and conceived of around men's pleasure and desire.

In seeming contrast to this picture stands the more recent figure of the post-feminist sexual subject: a young woman who is confident and empowered, constantly "up for it" sexually, seeking out her own pleasure, and embodying a hyperfeminine heterosexuality. For instance, Ros Gill (2007, 2009) has outlined and extensively analysed this discourse as constructed through media and advertising, and a significant body of work has explored its enduring power as a discourse (McRobbie, 2009). Others have examined young women's negotiations of their own subjectivities in relation to this "ideal" (which, as well as heterosexual, is tacitly constructed as Western, white, thin, attractive and middle-class) (Gill & Scharff, 2011; Ringrose, 2013). Much of the empirical work has highlighted the contradictions and complexities of young women's experiences, their "schizoid subjectivities" (Renold & Ringrose, 2011). They must walk a tightrope between sexy and *too* sexy: young women are still regulated and policed for having—or being thought to have—too much, or the wrong amount of sex (Jackson & Vares, 2011; Ringrose, 2011; Ringrose, Harvey, Gill, & Livingstone, 2013; Tolman, 2005). Such sexual regulation is also implicitly classed: while young middle-class women must be "up for it" sexually, excessive feminine sexuality is figured as working-class (Skeggs, 1997; Tyler, 2006; Wilkins & Miller, 2017).

Young people negotiating consent and pleasure in their early sexual relationships, then, are picking through thorny thickets. Recent empirical research has indicated that, despite the changing sexual landscape, post-feminist sexual subjectivity and the increasing discursive space for female sexual pleasure, negotiating heterosex remains beset with persistent gendered inequalities. Revisiting the research on which the *Male in the Head* was based twenty years on, Holland and Thomson discussed the continuities as well as the changes in negotiating "fledgling sexual relationships": still, "[g]irls worry about being sexy yet not sexual, boys worry about how to appear knowing when they are not" (Holland & Thomson, 2010, p. 348). Their arguments are supported by other authors, who highlight a persistent

double standard whereby boys are expected to pursue sex and girls to act as gatekeepers (Allen, 2011; Allen, 2005; Powell, 2010), and where—despite the oversignified female sexual body in popular culture— there is often little space for young women's desire or pleasure (Carmody, 2015; Tolman, 2005). This is, of course, not universal: some work has highlighted young women's capacity for sexual agency within relationships (Maxwell & Aggleton, 2010), while other authors have discussed the complexities of pursuing a performance of mandated "neoliberal sexual agency" while simultaneously negotiating the traditional "slut/prude/virgin continuum" (Tolman, Anderson, & Belmonte, 2015).

Much of this work on young heterosexual relationships has investigated in detail the gendered dynamics and inequalities of sexual negotiation, both within and outside partnered relationships. Some has discussed in detail the ways that being in a partnered relationship can influence young people's exploration of their sexuality (Powell, 2010; Schalet, 2010), potentially allowing for greater freedom and pleasure than more short-lived encounters. However, there has been much less focus on the broader landscape of young people's intimate relationships, beyond the sexual. This paper contributes to the literature on gender in young people's heterosexual relationships by exploring the everyday gendered micro-practices within these relationships, beyond and around the sexual encounter. It argues that these micro-practices can both enable and restrict young women's pleasures, desires and worlds; but that gendered inequalities are still at work, and in particular, that middle-class young women at least become responsible for performing the bulk of the emotional work within their relationships.

The term "emotion work" was coined by the sociologist Arlie Hochschild (1979, 1983) to describe the management and regulation of feelings – both one's own, and those of others. While Hochschild focussed primarily on emotional labour in paid work settings, others have

explored emotion work within interpersonal relationships. The distribution of this work is highly gendered, especially in the context of heterosexual relationships, with the girl or woman taking on the bulk of the management of the relationship and emotions within it (Duncombe & Marsden, 1998; Duncombe & Marsden, 1993). Similarly, Thea Cacchioni (2007, 2015) analyses ways in which women engage in "sex work" - not referring here to paid labour, but to the "unacknowledged effort and the continuing monitoring" (2007, p. 201) women devote to managing their own and their partners' sexual desires and practices. Unequal distribution of emotion work may additionally be shaped by other intersecting inequalities, such as disability (Liddiard, 2014). The concept of emotion work has also had a recent resurgence in popular feminist discourse (Hackman, 2015; Hartley, 2018). However, both academic and popular discussion has largely focussed on adults' relationships as domestic partners. This paper concentrates on how heteronormative expectations shape young people's intimate relationships and practices of emotion work, long before they form households.

For young men, "traditional" forms of masculinity are often associated with lack of emotional expression or commitment, but heterosexual relationships can be portrayed as a site for men to express their emotional vulnerability (Allen, 2003; Holmes, 2015; Korobov & Thorne, 2006); a theme that arose frequently from both male and female participants in the wider study this paper is based on. In Claire Maxwell's (2007) discussion of elite young men and women's attitudes towards gender roles in heterosexual relationships, she shows her participants negotiating between "traditional" gendered narratives (for instance, male=active vs. woman=passive, themes of male jealousy and possession), and "alternative" narratives, including men expressing desire for equal and emotional relationships. She explores how different narratives could co-exist, and how "ideals" of relationships often differed from actual experiences.

I suggest, however, that the "traditional" and "alternative" narratives themselves are not as far from each other as Maxwell indicates. For instance, she highlights women who "described pursuing more active roles within these more emotionally connected romantic relationships, in which they invested energy and commitment to supporting their partner to change and/or reach their potential" (2007, p. 546). This "active" role, though, fits very well with the construction of the romantic relationship as a place where a young woman cares for a supposedly emotionally-underdeveloped man. Doing gendered emotion work often relies on the presentation of men as vulnerable and "soft" in heterosexual relationships because of their need to perform a "harder" masculinity elsewhere, and of more emotionally-skilled women as "fixing" them. Donna Chung (2005) shows how young women talked about their emotional competence and relationship work as a discursive strategy in interviews to account for their relationships with boyfriends as equal. Similarly, Donovan and Hester's (2011) work highlights how survivors of violent same-sex relationships conceived of themselves as the stronger, more resilient partner, and felt responsible for their partner's emotional wellbeing. While explicitly focussing on "healthy" relationships, in this paper I explore a similar dynamic at work between the young women and men discussed.

"It's not that kind of school": setting and methodology

The data presented in this paper stem from a wider study exploring gender, power and violence within middle-class teenagers' relationship cultures, based in a large, high-performing state comprehensive school in an affluent, ethnically homogenous (white) area of south-east England. Participants were aged between 14 and 16. The broader research also involved a survey, investigating the extent to which young people had experienced different forms of emotional, sexual and physical relationship violence; paired and small group interviews, exploring young people's experiences and understandings of relationships and

sexuality; and observation of sexuality education classes. However, the data in this paper are drawn from in-depth, loosely structured individual and paired interviews.

The study aimed to explore the imbrication of class, sexuality and gender within young people's everyday relationship cultures. The research was given ethical approval by the university ethics committee; negotiation of ethical practice – including confidentiality and its limits under child protection, continued and reiterated consent, attempt to avoid harm, and listening (critically) to young people's perspectives and voices – was an ongoing and central aspect of the study. Pseudonyms, chosen by the participants, are used throughout this paper.

This paper looks specifically at gendered interaction within the heterosexual relationship itself, taking as its focus two case studies of young couples: Christina and Matt, and Katie and Alex. The purpose of this examination is not to generalise to a wider population, but rather to allow for an in-depth, extended examination of the everyday intimacies and intricacies of teenage relationships and negotiations of masculinity/femininity within a particular context (Fletcher, Bonell, & Rhodes, 2009; Renold & Ringrose, 2011).

Christina was interviewed alone (although approached, Matt did not wish to participate in an interview). Katie was interviewed individually, Alex with his friend Steve, and Katie and Alex later took part in a joint interview. The ways in which these differing settings shaped the research interactions will be discussed further in the analysis sections. My own positionality as a white, middle-class woman in her twenties, from a similar background to the participants, also shaped the dynamics of the interviews. The interview is considered throughout as a social space in which people (re)construct their gendered, sexual and classed identities. As Skeggs and colleagues' middle-class participants used “scholarly and critically distanced views on ‘reality’ television, involving lengthy elaborations” (2008, p. 9), so my participants discussed themselves, their relationships and other teenagers in articulate,

measured and often distanced language. They were aware of adults' perceptions of teenagers, of talking to me as an adult, and tailored their speech registers accordingly.

This paper looks critically at the norms and assumptions of my young participants, in an attempt to understand and partially destabilise these norms, as well as allowing a space for young people to express their own understandings and experiences. I take a feminist, queer perspective in studying gendered, classed and heterosexualised norms and assumptions, following empirical research into young heterosexualities which works at critically investigating and questioning heteronormativity (e.g. Haywood, 2008; Powell, 2010; Ringrose, 2013).

The words that the young people used, and the way they used them, were analysed for “ideas, beliefs, norms, discourses, reproduction of culture, and their effects” (Ramazanoğlu & Holland, 2002), as they circulated around gender, sexuality and class. I sought to examine the underlying discourses of heteronormative masculinity and femininity, how young people negotiated these in their talk about their own and others' experiences, and the ways in which young people tried to construct themselves as coherent subjects. Subjectivity was situated in its wider social contexts, considered as being produced through interaction with and imagination of others. The term “relationship cultures” is used to illustrate the ways in which young people's (sexual) subjectivities were bound up with their friends and peers, and to highlight the extent to which young people's peer cultures were heterosexualised within school.

As part of examining this intersubjectivity, I was concerned to understand what was not so coherent: the contradictions, differences and tensions in young people's accounts. For this purpose, I drew on psychosocial analysis (Hollway & Jefferson, 2005), paying particular attention to equivocation, denials, disavowals, downplayings, and minimisations of emotions,

statements and experiences. As McClelland and Fine argue in their methodological discussion of studying teen women's sexual desires, this can 'help us think through how we might take a young women's words at face value *and* analyze what she may or may not necessarily be able or willing to see, feel, speak, know or reveal' (2008, p. 243). While not privileging my own interpretation of young people's experience over their own, this acknowledges that not all positions are consciously known, willingly accepted, or freely shared, and that people represent their experiences in particular ways for particular reasons. As much recent work on girls has emphasised, young women's "schizoid subjectivities" see them in a state of constantly negotiating "multiple pushes and pulls" (Renold & Ringrose, 2011).

Both of the couples discussed in this paper had been together for an unusual length of time, in the context of their age and the research setting (more than six months). As such, they are not representative of the population as a whole. It is precisely for this reason, though, that they have been selected for this analysis. Within recent academic, policy and public discourse on relationships and sex education, there is a clear trend advocating the promotion of "healthy relationships" (Allen, 2007; Bell & Stanley, 2006; Carmody, 2015) – often contrasted positively with more limited, biological forms of sex education, focussing on prevention of pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections. This has been echoed by non-governmental bodies providing guidance on RSE (Brook PSHE Association and Sex Education Forum, 2014). In England, the long-awaited revised guidance on RSE education places a greater emphasis than previous emphasis on relationships, requiring the teaching of "respectful", "healthy one-to-one intimate relationships" in secondary schools (Department for Education, 2019), though how far practice will follow the approach of the Welsh government, which has placed sex education in the context of wellbeing more (Welsh Assembly Government 2010), remains as yet unclear.

The school in which this research was carried out was fairly progressive in its approach to RSE, and in fact offered lessons on "healthy relationships" as part of its personal and social education programme, which I observed as part of the wider study. The couples in this paper were both mentioned by other participants as examples of strong, positive, lasting romantic relationships. They function, then, as an illustration of how gender and heterosexuality are practised in a "good" teenage relationship, in a "good" school.¹

Christina and Matt: discursive independence as a strategy for accepting boundaries of gender, age and class

Christina and Matt had begun their relationship six months prior to our interview, after being best friends for some time. Their relationship was considered unusually close within the context of the peer group (according both to Christina, and her friends, in a separate interview). This intimacy was manifested physically ("constantly hugging" in both private and public), temporally (spending most of their free time together), and emotionally. It was also enacted technologically: they were engaged in what Ito et al. (2010) call "always-on communication", constantly messaging on a casual basis such that each always knew what the other was doing. They also bonded through their use of Twitter, which was unusual among their peer group, affording them a space for interaction liberated from the intense social surveillance that characterised the school (digital) peer culture. In line with this, Christina discursively constructed their relationship as a place of escape. Maintaining this space to breathe required a strict compartmentalisation: most notably, she scrupulously concealed or denied sexual aspects of the relationship around school friends, defending

¹ In fact, the school was categorised as "outstanding" in official (Ofsted) inspections around the time the research was undertaken.

against the norm of social circulation of sexual knowledge, the peer culture's hierarchy of acceptable sexual acts (cf. Lewis, Marston, & Wellings, 2013), and the presumption that all couples would have sex after a few months in a relationship. The negotiation of their sexual intimacy falls outside the scope of this paper, but the preservation of secrecy around it speaks both to Christina's skill at managing emotions, and to the importance of their couple relationship as a private space.

This intimacy, though, could also be oppressive, as Christina raised early in the interview:

he's just really sweet and I can tell that he likes me, and he makes me feel better about myself and stuff [Researcher: sure] – he's quite clingy though!

As an illustration of this "clinginess", she offered:

he thinks that he *has* to see me at least two days out of three at the weekend
[Researcher: OK] – I mean, not that I mind, it's not like – but he just makes me feel quite bad if I don't see him that often.

The backtrackings and qualifications Christina displays in this quote were typical of her talk about Matt throughout the interview, hinting at the work she was doing to reconcile the conflicts and difficulties with the continuation of their relationship. There is ambivalence over whether she sees Matt's attitude and/or behaviour as a problem in this situation; what is clear is how she internalises a negative affect ("makes me feel quite bad"). In turn this moves her to change her social practices to accommodate his desires (seeing friends and spending time apart from Matt less often), employing "emotion work" to manage her own feelings and those of her partner.

In a similar fashion, she carefully navigated the fraught waters of economic difference which affected the activities she and Matt could participate in together:

Um he, I don't, this is going to make me sound really snobby but like he hasn't
[laughs] I don't know, I don't want to sound... but he doesn't, like, he doesn't get
that much money [...] so he can't really afford to just like go out loads [Researcher:
yeah] so we just go to the park or something, or, do you know the lake round here, it's
like really hidden and it's really nice there.

Christina is evidently self-conscious here, reluctant to explicitly discriminate on socio-economic grounds, uneasy with naming (and thus making) difference; her discomfort resonates with the work of Johnson and Lawler (2005) on managing and negotiating class within adult romantic relationships, in which they describe class difference as "one that must be guarded and defended against".

There was a pattern, then, of Christina reconfiguring both her emotions and her practices to more closely fit Matt's desires for the relationship. In comparison, Matt responded rather differently to aspects with which Christina was unhappy. For instance, she told me about an ongoing disagreement over Matt's use of an image-centric social media site; through this, he had met (online) many "really pretty" girls and they were texting each other frequently.

Christina's discussion of this focussed not so much on the interaction with other girls, but on how Matt responded to her reaction.

Christina: And he was like, OK, I promise I won't text them? And I was like, I didn't really want him to make that promise [Researcher: sure] cos I knew he wouldn't keep it? and so basically he kept on texting them again and every time he promised he wouldn't do it again and I was like, [Researcher: just don't promise] yeah, just say you won't text them as much, like that's just what I wanted from the beginning [...]
Researcher: Mm. So does he not, he doesn't try and like fight his corner, if you see what I mean, I mean you say, look –

Christina: Yeah, it's weird, he just says, oh I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry and it's like, well, why do you keep on doing it then?

She found his continuing placatory responses disingenuous and unsatisfactory. Although he seemed to accept her feelings of jealousy as valid (rather than arguing, say, that the texting was harmless and she should not be worried), they did not affect him to change. Tellingly, too, she introduced this story by downplaying the validity of her emotional response:

It's going to sound so pathetic now!

This dynamic, whereby Christina took on responsibility for both her own and Matt's emotions, was notable not only in itself but for its lack of congruence with the relationship narrative she constructed throughout the interview. She viewed Matt as more dependent on her, and on their relationship, than vice versa ("I reckon in relationships there's always someone that likes the other person more?"), and said that there were parts of her life she didn't share with him. Christina's presentation of her identity as the more detached, independent partner is notable for how it plays into the gendered narratives of relationships previously discussed, whereby the heterosexual relationship is a place for men to express their emotional vulnerability, and the woman is constructed as more emotionally skilled.

Christina's construction of self echoes these findings: she defends against an interpretation of their relationship as overly involved and "clingy". Such a relationship might be incongruent with post-feminist discourses of gender equality and female autonomy (whereby girls ought to be independent, not defined by their position in a relationship) and of age (whereby teenagers shouldn't be involved in relationships that are 'too serious'). Both these strands are tied in with a normative figuration of the middle-class teen girl, focussed more on educational aspiration than on intimate relationships (see Elley, 2011). Christina's discursive construction

of herself as emotionally independent, then, can be read as a strategy to position herself within the boundaries of acceptable gendered, aged and classed relationship behaviour.

For Christina, her relationship with Matt was both a space of freedom and ease, where they could escape together from social surveillance, and a space where she sometimes felt stifled, uncomfortable, and alienated from her friends. Their emotional intimacy could be a source of tension, as she experienced herself as more autonomous than him, and her negotiation of her own and Matt's needs involved considerable work on her own and his emotions.

[Katie and Alex: entanglements with peer surveillance and conflict negotiation](#)

Like Christina and Matt, Katie and Alex were drawn on by other participants as an exemplar of a close relationship. My first interview with Katie—smiley, vivacious, and forthcoming—took place eight months (to the day!) after she and Alex had started their relationship. She said that Alex would be talking to me, but would be coming with a friend because "he doesn't like talking about his feelings" (again here the male partner being constructed as emotionally lacking and underskilled). I interviewed Alex a few weeks later with his friend Steve. He was, indeed, less forthcoming than she (and than Steve): witty and laconic. I later interviewed Katie and Alex together, at his house. In all three interviews, they characterised their relationship as one of openness, honesty, and ease:

I think that we're, like, we're sort of better than every other couple – well, it's true!

It's just it's never awkward, there's always something to talk about even if there isn't, we don't need to talk, we don't feel the need to fill that gap of silence (Alex, couple interview)

Their conversational and physical ease with each other was observable through the joint interview. There were, though, significant points of conflict and contention. While Christina

and Matt built a kind of bubble, away from peer surveillance, Katie and Alex's relationship was entangled with the heterosexualised peer culture. One of the most problematic entanglements concerned Alex's relationship with a female friend, Natalie.

Natalie, another of my research participants, was blonde, self-assured, attractive and popular; she was a longstanding close friend of Alex's, and their families were also close. While both Katie and Alex were conscious of the contention around Natalie, they emphasised different aspects in their discussion. In the individual interview, Katie delineated the ways in which Natalie embodied hypersuccessful classed heterofemininity: "she's very very rich"; "she's very pretty, she's a model"; "she's very good-looking, she's perfect, skinny". In his joint interview with Steve, Alex focussed on the bodily aspect of Katie's insecurity, referring to Natalie as a "really little" friend, and stating "Katie was upset cos she thinks, like, she [Katie]'s too big". This could suggest that Alex was choosing to focus on the aspects of Katie's jealousy that could be easily attributed to her individualised (and archetypally feminine) insecurities, as opposed to the relationship between himself and Natalie.

This connection was construed by Natalie and Alex as familial, with Natalie maintaining she and Alex were like "brother and sister". Katie, however, found this disingenuous:

She's a very hard person to get on with when you're a boy [Researcher: really?] cos she'll be all over you, like I've been there when she's just put his hands, her hands up his top, and just started feeling him, like been 'Oh, muscles!' and she'll be like 'oh lovely'

Katie viewed Natalie's sexuality as dangerous, deceitful and manipulative, the above quote hinting at a heterogendered dynamic whereby boys are positioned as helpless in the face of feminine sexual power. This longstanding discourse of the male sex drive as irrepressible (W Hollway, 1984) solidified later in the interview as Katie said:

um, I don't think that he can reaaally resist to be honest, when she, you know...

Throughout the interview, the vast majority of her discussion of Alex and Natalie revolved around denigrating Natalie's actions and attitudes, rather than Alex's. This reflected a wider tendency within the relationship cultures in question – and the broader culture – for hostility towards girls/women, rather than boys/men, in situations of "inappropriate" sexual relations, and the double standard of denigrating women for their "excessive" sexuality (and what has recently been termed "slutshaming" (cf. Ringrose & Renold, 2012; Tanenbaum, 2015).

Katie said that Alex dismissed her worries about Natalie, and she seemed resigned to this, not expecting Alex to do anything to assuage her feelings. After trying to articulate all the reasons she *shouldn't* be worried, she said:

I don't really, I can't really have that much of a problem about it because it's fine

Her re-framing here of "don't" to "can't" seems to speak an affective experience of being immobilised, unable to effect any change; as in Christina's discussion of Matt's online interactions, the boys seemed to take little action to manage their relationships.

Katie and Alex co-constructed a narrative around their relationship and their respective identities within it. Katie spoke of herself as very open and honest, wanting to air problems when they arose. In contrast, she felt that Alex was unwilling to engage in arguments, preferring to avoid conflict (similar to Christina's complaint about Matt). This, she said, often led to arguments that were "one-sided":

Alex: You always do that after arguments –

Katie: – We'd just had a massive argument –

Alex: <*mimics Katie*> So, what are you thinking, Lexy? <*they laugh*>

Katie: well, it's because —

Alex: <*stubborn tone*> Well I'm watching Friends, so I'm thinking about Friends

Katie: Well, we weren't watching Friends at that point earlier, I said, what are you thinking and you were like, "Nothing", cos I always think, I say I talk about what's upsetting me, and then he'll not say anything, and then I'm like, I don't know what to say, it really annoys me cos I really wish you could say what you're thinking, you must be thinking something, you're just not very good at telling me

Narrating the relationship, they spoke of Katie as the angry partner and Alex as the easy-going partner. Clearly, though, there were times when Alex did get angry. In contrast to the light-hearted, teasing tone of the discussion above around Katie's issues, in which they seemed to work together on reproducing the mythology of their relationship, talk of these past events brought up some tension.

Alex: Yeah, those arguments, yeah. But they're —

Katie: — they're what?

Alex: They're proper arguments [...]

Katie: wait, so what, you're saying the things that I get upset about are pointless, but the things that you get upset about —

Alex: I don't really get upset about stuff.

<*Pause*>

Katie: Really?

Alex: Not really.

Katie: I think you do.

<*Pause*>

Katie: Okay! You get upset about stuff.

Alex: I do kinda

Katie here is not happy that Alex elevates "his" arguments above "hers", trying to put them on a more equal footing, but Alex is invested in maintaining the roles that they play, arguing that he doesn't "get upset". These less-spoken tensions between the two, implied here by the pauses in conversation, changing tones of voice, and briefer exchanges of words, influenced aspects of the relationship that she did not talk about in the paired interview, but did in her (earlier) individual interview. Given the oft-rehearsed narrative of their roles, his anger was disruptive and frightening.

Yeah, but when he is angry that's the scariest bit, cos he's never angry, he's always, everything's always a little bit of a joke [Researcher: OK] and he's always making the jokes – even when I'm upset, he'll make jokes and er and that'll make me more angry, but when he is angry, that's a really scary time, when he's, when I've managed to make him that angry

The locus of responsibility shifts in her description; she seems uncomfortable with placing the responsibility for her fear solely on him, and there is a discursive shift from his anger to the reframing whereby she "made him" angry. Like Christina, Katie takes on responsibility for Alex's emotions. His anger was most evident in relation to other boys; Alex didn't want Katie to go to parties without him, fearing her infidelity. Katie recalled an incident where a close male friend had assaulted her, kissing her when she was asleep at a party.

I had to tell Alex, I can't lie to him [Researcher: sure] but he was – very upset, but I convinced him I didn't cheat on him [Researcher: yeah] and that he'd rather know than not know, and I said that it would never happen again, I guess I'll just have to be quite careful not to fall asleep near any guys! [Researcher: yeah! Absolutely] And, but obviously he will use that against me now, every argument [Researcher: really?] we

have, he'll be like, but you cheated on me, even though I didn't, I fell asleep on the floor [...] not provocative at all

Katie was clearly distressed and angry at this assault, speaking of it as "really disgusting", and in the quote above she sarcastically parodies the idea that she might share any blame. Alex's response, however, echoes victim-blaming discourses (cf. Carmody, 2015) which ran through the peer sexual cultures, and were particularly acute in relation to drinking alcohol. Despite Katie's confidence in her own blamelessness, Alex's reaction had led her to closely monitor her drinking at parties, and to minimise her social participation every other weekend, when Alex was away.

These discussions have highlighted certain imbalances in the approaches and responses to conflict within this relationship. While Katie was unhappy with Alex's friendship with Natalie, he did not end their friendship, and frequently associated with Natalie in ways that Katie found upsetting; yet still, she was resigned to it, and discursively mitigated Alex's responsibility. In contrast, Alex's unhappiness with Katie's actions at parties (including a non-consensual incident) led to Katie restricting her social life. Katie did not voice resentment over the restriction of her activities, even in her individual interview; it was presented as inevitable. This echoes previous findings, particularly from research into experiences of and attitudes towards gendered violence, that men exerting control over their girlfriend's actions within a relationship (particularly for reasons of jealousy) is often tacitly considered acceptable by young people (Barter, 2009; McCarry, 2010). In negotiating Alex's expectations for her, Katie is rendered responsible for managing and negotiating men's emotions and actions towards her—including those over which she has little control.

Katie and Alex's relationship was deeply based in friendship and a feeling of mutual comfort; they saw it as very mature in comparison with others' relationships. Their reproduced and

practised routines and roles and constructed them in gendered terms, with Katie as emotional and Alex as stoical and silent. As with Christina and Matt, though, the discursive representation of their relationship which constructed the girl as the more powerful partner obscured some of the more uncomfortable undercurrents between them—such as Alex's control of Katie's social life. Alex's emotions, though discursively downplayed, profoundly affected the relationship, and Katie bore the burden of managing his emotions as well as her own.

Conclusions

This paper has presented an in-depth examination of two middle-class teenage relationships, aiming to illuminate the gendering of everyday intimacy and interaction within the space of the intimate heterosexual partner relationship. It builds on literature that has examined the ways in which sexual negotiations between young partners are shaped by gendered discourses (e.g. Holland et al, Powell), extending this analysis beyond the sexual arena, to illustrate the everyday gendered micro-practices within relationships. More specifically, it has critically examined the workings of heterosexuality within “healthy” relationships, as idealised among particular academic and policy discourses, and within the type of social setting generally considered unproblematic, in contrast to the anxiety around (for instance) working-class expressions of young sexuality.

I argue that in this setting, the space of the partner relationship can work subtly both to enable and constrain; to open up, and to close down. For both couples, their relationships served as sites of safety and pleasure. They also—especially for Christina and Matt—formed a place to escape from the often suffocating social surveillance of the school and related social

networks; gendered and often sexist regulation which was acutely evident in the wider study, and has been highlighted in much research on young people's peer cultures (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2014; Chambers, Tincknell, & Van Loon, 2004; Miller, 2016; Ringrose et al., 2013; Summit, Kalmuss, DeAtley, & Levack, 2016).

At the same time, though, intimate relationships could be stifled, uncomfortable and alienated; and these examples formed another site for playing out gendered narratives that were often detrimental for girls. I have employed the concept of “emotion work” to analyse the gendered interactions in the relationships that have been explored here, in which these young women took on the day-to-day responsibility for the smooth running of the partnership and for their partner's emotions as well as their own. Both young men and young women struggled with feelings of distress, anxiety and anger over their partners' interactions with other people. These feelings were discussed, debated and argued over within relationships, but it was the girls' subsequent actions which were curtailed and restricted – by themselves as well as their partners. Girls spoke of dissatisfaction but resignation over their partners continuing in patterns they were unhappy with. This discussion of teenage relationship cultures contributes a new dimension to the substantial literature in which emotion work has been associated with femininity and women's practices, particularly within domestic partnerships (Duncombe & Marsden, 1998; Duncombe & Marsden, 1993; Erickson, 2005; Fahs & Swank, 2017).

In addition, this paper contributes to the burgeoning literature on young women's gendered, heterosexualised subjectivities, providing an analysis of the construction of subjectivity within a heterosexual couple, entangled in the broader relationship cultures of the school peer group. A prevailing discourse around teenage sexuality and relationships, particularly for young women, is one of risk and danger: the girl is always already a potential victim. This discourse was a constant presence within these interviews, as Christina and Katie defended

against such an identity, resisting victimhood—what Baker terms "post-feminist obligations" (2010). Self-conscious and self-aware in their accounts of their self, participants disavowed, downplayed and deflected potential interpretations of their relationships as unequal, denying difference. The neoliberal imperative for young women to be independent and agentic—as discussed in much recent work on young femininities—rendered these girls unwilling and/or unable to synthesise an interpretation, for instance, of their boyfriend as influencing or controlling their behaviour with a coherent sense of their own successful femininity. Such imperatives were bound up with the expectation for privileged middle-class young women, in particular, to perform a successful, autonomous identity, focussed on the future and on education. The narrative of tacit gendered inequalities discussed above was incongruous with Katie and Christina's performances of identity as independent and in control.

The findings presented in this paper are, of course, limited in their scope. By design, the findings speak specifically to the experiences of white middle-class young women and men, examining the negotiation of relationships within a relatively affluent setting. Although many of the gendered discourses that shaped the worlds of these participants have a broader reach, the specificities of how they are negotiated and intersect with other aspects of identity would work differently among different groups of young people. Similarly, the negotiation of gendered identities within queer or LGBT young people's relationships would present a different picture.

For the young women in this paper, negotiating their intimate relationships was beset with affective complications, as they experienced the pushes and pulls, the contradictory and schizoid nature of contemporary girlhood. Of course, they were also balancing their heterosexual identity within partner relationships with broader pressures of family, peer cultures, education and looking towards the future. While the findings are not generalisable to the experiences of all young people, the everyday micro-practices within these partner

relationships illustrate pervasive yet subtle flows of gendered power within heterosexual relationships that speak to a lingering construction of heteronormativity whereby women do the emotional work for two.

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