

'Ladettes' and 'Modern Girls': 'troublesome' young femininities

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Abstract

'Ladettes' are argued to be a sign, and product, of contemporary development and change; their fortunes are presented as inextricably related to the conditions of late modernity. Using the past to shed light on the present, this paper considers whether fears and claims about the behaviour of some contemporary young women in Britain are exclusive to the present. Two data sets inform the discussion: first, representations of ladettes in national and local newspapers from 1995 to 2005; second, materials relating to the 'modern girl' published in the popular print media between 1918 and 1928. Although there have been important changes in the conditions of girlhood since the 1920s, this historical comparison highlights continuities in the representation of 'troublesome' youthful femininities. We explore similarities and differences in the characteristics attributed to the modern girls of the twenties and the ladettes of recent years, and the dominant discourses that underpin popular constructions of troublesome young women.

'half dressed, loud voiced, cigarette smoking'

'She doesn't really care whether she gets married or not, so long as she can earn a comfortable living and have a good time . . .'

'[she] crawls home at three or four in the morning, a haggard, weary-eyed creature, unable to raise her head from the pillow till lunch-time the next day.'

'Ladettes' are, according to many press reports, a late twentieth and early twenty-first century phenomenon and a product of women's increased equality with men in late modern society. But as the above quotes from the 1920s reveal, the ladette is not unique (*Times*, 8 August, 1921: 9; *Girls Weekly*, 24 January, 1920: 3; Webb-Johnson, 1927, reproduced in Braithwaite *et al.*, 1986: 90). Drawing on two case studies of popular (especially print media) constructions of youthful femininity – the 'modern girl' of the 1920s and the ladette of recent years – we explore features of young women defined as troublesome. Using the past to shed light on the present, we consider whether fears and claims about the behaviours of some contemporary young women in Britain are exclusive to today.

There are several reasons why this question is important. As Pearson (1983) has shown, there is a recurring amnesia about the youth of each generation which means that today's youths are always perceived as shockingly different from those of yesteryear. This amnesia obscures recurring patterns of concern and representation. Such patterns are, however, revealing both of social relations and the historically-constituted discourses through which we know and talk about young people. These discourses are both 'enabling and constraining': 'as discourse facilitates thought and actions it also works to constrain them, as it sets up parameters, limits, and blind spots of thinking and acting' (Aapola *et al.*, 2005: 19). History throws the contemporary into relief, offering fresh perspectives on the present. By comparing the past and present we can identify entrenched cultural motifs and, in doing so, begin to explore the cultural lenses through which we understand youthful femininities. Identifying the recurrence of certain themes in the media and popular literature prompts questions about society's expectations of, and concerns about, contemporary young women.

Of course, discourses on troublesome young femininities are not specific to the 1920s and post-1990s. Sexually precocious young women are recurring 'problem' figures (Nava, 1984). 'Teenagers', 'teenyboppers' and girl members of youth subcultures have also featured in discourses of disapproval in the 1950s, '60s and '70s, although they were eclipsed by popular and academic discourses on 'problematic' young masculinities (Davis, 1990; McRobbie and Garber, 1991; Osgerby, 1998).¹ However, our aim is not to trace the history of discourses on problematic youthful femininities, but to use one historical case study to cast light on aspects of contemporary discourses on 'troublesome' young women. Constructions of 'problematic' youthful femininities are also not exclusive to Britain: 'troublesome' modern girls appeared in the Irish press in the 1920s for example (Ryan, 1998), and in recent years 'Mean Girls' and 'Queen Bees' have emerged as negative constructions of girlhood in the USA (Chessney-Lind and Irwin, 2004; Gonick, 2004; Ringrose, 2005). Whilst international comparisons would be a fruitful avenue for future research, they are beyond the scope of this paper.

A review of historical research (especially that of Melman, 1988 and Tinkler, 1995) on representations of young women led us to identify the modern girl as a fitting figure of comparison for the contemporary ladette. The paper draws upon materials on the modern girl collected during several research projects; materials include representations in girls' and women's magazines, advertising, national newspapers, social commentaries and academic studies (Tinkler, 1995, 2003a, 2006). Data relating to ladettes were gathered through a search for the term 'ladette' in all national and local newspapers available in Lexis-Nexis². Level of coverage was noted for each year from the ladette's first appearance in the database in 1995; coverage rose yearly from 2 articles in 1995 to 403 articles in 2003. The large number of articles in the database mentioning ladettes (2,216 to the middle of March, 2005) meant that not all of them were subjected to detailed analysis. Textual

analysis was undertaken on all reports published between 1995 and 1998 (the early reports) and from January, 2004 to March, 2005 (the most recent included in the study). Reports between 1999 and 2003 were read and those in which ladettes were key to the article (rather than mentioned in passing) were subjected to closer analysis.

Youthful figures: portraits of modern girls and ladettes

During the final years of the First World War and throughout the 1920s, modern girls (often referred to also as ‘flappers’)³ were frequently prominent in public discourse. They were white,⁴ single, young, urban women aged 16–30 years, usually upper or middle class (Tinkler, 2003b). Disapproval often characterised representations of the modern girl, although she also had supporters (Bingham, 2004).

Portraits of the ladette are almost invariably critical, and frequently hostile. The UK media first depicted the ladette in the mid 1990s, and since then she has been represented in fairly diverse ways in terms of age and class, although she has remained unethniced. Initially, the term ladette was associated mainly with post-school-age young women (*Mirror*, 9 July, 1998: 9). UK celebrities presented as having spearheaded ladette culture include DJs Sara Cox and Zoe Ball, and television presenter Denise Van Outen (*Guardian*, 5 February, 2005: 22). More recently, newspapers have suggested that schoolgirls are becoming ladettes: ‘the “ladette” culture has filtered down from women in their mid-20s to girls who are still at school’ (*Guardian*, 15 December, 2004: 10). Though separated by 80 years, representations of ladettes and modern girls have much in common; we consider these representations before discussing why these figures achieved prominence in their respective eras.

Ladettes and modern girls are portrayed as hedonistic, driven largely by interests in partying and fun. In both cases this hedonism is commonly attributed to increased financial and social independence. The pages of the *Daily Mail* and *Daily Express* ‘overflowed’ with features about the modern girl’s dancing, frequenting night clubs (Melman, 1988) and generally having fun: ‘the cry of pleasure for pleasure’s sake’ (*Daily Mail*, 5 February, 1920: 7). These behaviours were juxtaposed against those of her old-fashioned sister who was portrayed as homely, domesticated and keen to assist her mother in running the home. The importance of the modern girl’s leisure time and pursuits was reinforced in fictional representations. For example, in *Girls’ Friend* (a magazine for upper working- and middle-class young women) in 1925, nineteen-year-old Barbara was presented as a well-paid private secretary to the head of an important firm: ‘she was essentially a “modern girl”’. Her spare time was her own – that was the attitude she took . . . She reserved the right to seek her own pleasures’ (21 March, 1925: 1).

The ladette is also presented as a pleasure seeker and popular explanations for her 'hedonistic tendencies' refer to women's increased financial independence and lack of family commitments: 'they are more financially independent. In the past, women were settling down and getting married in their early 20s. Now the independence years last right the way through the 20s. There is a longer period of "hedonistic" lifestyle' (Eric Appleby, Chief Executive of Alcohol Concern, quoted in the *Daily Mail*, 19 January, 2004: 33). So current concerns about women's hedonistic lifestyles are not new, neither are the explanations. It seems that today, however, commentators are worried that women are simply having too much fun for too long!

An important dimension of young women's hedonism is its public visibility. Both the modern girl and ladette are presented as occupying space outside the traditional feminine domestic sphere, and crucially, as taking space once regarded the principal or sole preserve of men. The modern girl's leisure was spent in commercial, public spaces such as clubs, bars, restaurants, cafes, and department stores. She enjoyed all manner of physical activities – golf, tennis, swimming – but was particularly keen on dancing, parties and shopping. The ladette's visibility also stems from her use of public spaces; she is portrayed as regularly frequenting pubs and wine bars and alcohol is central to her identity, she is a 'binge drinker'.⁵ The centrality of alcohol to constructions of the ladette identity is highlighted in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* which defines the ladette as 'a young woman who behaves in a boisterously assertive or crude manner and engages in heavy drinking sessions' (emphasis added). Representations of ladettes suggest that they are taking over the once-male preserves of pubs and bars and competing with men unit for unit. For example, Marsh (*Daily Mail*, 19 January, 2004: 33), wrote under the headline 'The Ladette takeover', that 'A generation of women are hitting the bottle harder than men . . . women are now more likely than men to indulge in regular binge-drinking'. Alcohol is presented as a major cause of alleged increases in 'problem' behaviours amongst contemporary young women (see later section). For example, reports claim that some women get so drunk that they: lose keys or valuables; fight; have unprotected sex; lose consciousness; and walk home alone.

Whilst drinking is presented as central to a ladette identity, substantial variations between representations of ladettes reveal a distinct lack of precision regarding definition. Initially, pint-drinking was central to the ladette identity. In the first newspaper article on ladettes Debbie Jackson wrote 'you won't find her in trendy wine bars, but downing pints in the local' (*Daily Record*, 9 March, 1995: 27; see also *Guardian*, 9 October, 2003: 10). However, representations have shifted and broadened; now ladettes are presented not only as pint-drinking 'lager louts', but also (and perhaps more often) as drinkers of excessive amounts of wine or 'fashionable cocktails' (*Sunday Mail* [Scottish], 31 December, 2000: 11; *Daily Mail*, 24 September, 2004: 13). This redefinition means that ladettes now include young(ish) women who drink any

sort of alcohol to excess (officially, more than six units in one session for women).

Ladettes are portrayed as being working or middle class. For example, a five-part 'reality' television series entitled 'Ladette to Lady' broadcast in 2005 focused on working-class women. The series was described as taking 'ten bawling, brawling, boisterous young [working-class] women and groom[ing] them for five weeks at a finishing school to discover if they *can gain true class*' (*Daily Mail*, Weekend, 15 January, 2005: 20, emphasis added). By contrast, some representations are undoubtedly of middle-class ladettes who are sometimes dubbed the 'Bridget Jones' generation (Institute of Alcohol Studies, 2003, online; *Guardian*, 6 February, 2004: 28). But whilst ladette behaviours are represented as spanning social class groups, this does not eradicate their working-class associations; the excessive (drinking, smoking, sex), disruptive (social order), crude (swearing, rudeness), aggressive (verbal and physical), 'open' (sexual), behaviours attributed to ladettes remain associated with the 'least desirable', 'unrespectable' elements of working-class lifestyles (Skeggs, 1997; 2004).

Although alcohol consumption was not as central to the identity of the modern girl as it is to the ladette, the modern girl, unlike her predecessors, was portrayed as immersed in drinking culture. Prior to the First World War middle and upper class women consumed alcohol in moderation and in formal dining contexts; heavy drinking was clandestine and enjoyed in the relative privacy of the home. Modern girls, however, were portrayed as drinking to excess, and drinking in new, public contexts. In 1928 Alfred Summers referred to women's drinking being on the increase: 'quite young girls now enter public bars at all licensed hours; while the pernicious "cocktail" habit prevails in higher social circles' (p. 81). According to Summers the modern girl consumed 'cocktail after cocktail' even though she loathed them, 'because otherwise she will be regarded as out-of-date', and she was even acquiring a taste for beer (pp. 102–3). Writing in *Good Housekeeping* magazine in 1927, Dr Webb-Johnson described how a regular concoction of 'cocktails, champagne and liquer-brandy' were typical amongst many young women (Braithwaite *et al.*, 1986: 91).

Alongside alcohol, cigarettes also feature commonly in portrayals of both ladettes and modern girls. For example, Ridley's (*Daily Mirror*, 19 March, 2004, internet) definition of a ladette suggests 'she can smoke eight fags at once . . .' However, although cigarettes feature in representations of ladettes, alcohol is given more emphasis. By contrast, smoking was the defining characteristic of the modern girl (Tinkler, 2003b, 2006). Smoking was particularly significant in portraits of the modern girl because prior to World War One it was principally a masculine activity and women were rarely seen smoking (Tinkler, 2006). Cigarette smoking signified young women's modernity and emancipation.

Both the modern girl and ladette are typically represented as displaying behaviours ranging from the unrefined to the overtly coarse and crude. In

1928 Summers (pp. 97–9) described the ‘Modern Miss’ as ‘a wild-cat and a savage’ who exhibited ‘vulgarity, immodesty, brazen abandon (bordering on immorality), and a queer kind of masculinity most unbecoming!’ Additionally, she had ‘a vocabulary made up of coarse slang (which she considers smart and “cute”)’ (p. 99). This critique echoed others in the press, including a letter in the *Times* which complained of ‘The modern girl, . . . loud voiced, . . . and bumptious mannered’ (8 August, 1921: 9). It also echoes representations of contemporary ladettes. ‘Coarse’ is how archetypal ladette Sara Cox is described (*Guardian*, 9 October, 2003: 10), while a ‘crude manner’ is a defining feature of ladettes in the *Collins Dictionary*. However, the exhibitionism and assertiveness of the ladette include ‘spectacular’ transgressions that extend far beyond those of the 1920s modern girl. For example, the media recounted how Denise Van Outen, who along with Sara Cox was cast as one of the original ‘hard drinking party girls’, was barred from royal events after stealing an ashtray from Buckingham Palace in 1998 (*Observer*, Review, 25 March, 2001: 3). Another example is the media representation of Sara Cox, who said live on Radio 1 that the Queen Mother ‘smells of wee’ (BBC News Online, 4 August 2000; *Guardian*, 9 October, 2003: 10).

In addition to being criticised for their behaviours, modern girls also dressed in ways that provoked criticism. By contrast, the dress of ladettes receives little attention, perhaps because they wear mainstream women’s clothes – she ‘likes wearing tight jeans and skimpy tops’ (*Daily Mirror*, 19 March, 2004, internet) – and so her attire does not stand out as unusual or new. The modern girl, however, looked very different to young women of her mother’s generation and dress was key to her image. Modern girls were often criticised for wearing their hair short, often in a ‘masculine’ cut, and sporting a youthful or ‘boyish’ look through their clothing; womanly styles which emphasised feminine curves and breasts were unfashionable. The modern girl’s rejection of traditional conceptions of feminine beauty in favour of an ‘androgynous’ or ‘boyish’ appearance prompted many comments. Much was made of the apparent difficulty of distinguishing between female and male youth, and so subtle indicators of gender became all important (*Punch*, 27 April, 1927: 455). The ‘boyette’, for example, was ‘discovered’ by reporters at southern seaside resorts at Easter in 1927: ‘In age she appears to be in the last years of flapperdom [late twenties] and her ambition is to look as much like a boy as possible’ (*Daily Mail*, 19 April, 1927: 7). Importantly, however, ‘feminine’ mannerisms or signs reveal her gender: ‘her dainty shoes betray her secret’ (*People*, 12 June, 1927 cited in Doan, 2001, Figure 11b) or she cannot ‘manage her cigarette like a boy’ (*Daily Mail*, 19 April, 1927: 7). These ‘feminine’ signs ‘show her to be just a healthy, high-spirited young hoyden amusing herself by a masquerade that is harmless enough, though some people may disapprove of it as ultra-tomboyish’ (*Daily Mail*, 19 April, 1927: 7). Paradoxically, whilst modern girls were criticised for looking like boys, they were also criticised for displaying too much ‘feminine body’. ‘Scantily clad’ or ‘half dressed’ were frequently-repeated descriptions of the modern girl who wore

her skirts short and showed her legs, and who paraded publicly in a bathing suit (for example, *Daily Mail*, 5 February, 1920: 1; *Times*, 8 August, 1921: 9; Summers, 1928: 36).

Prioritising careers and boyfriends over marriage, motherhood and domesticity are lifestyle preferences ascribed to ladettes and her 1920s counterpart. *Girls' Favourite* (a magazine for upper-working-class and lower-middle-class young women) declared that unhindered by the Victorian practice of chaperonage, the modern girl 'no longer looks upon marriage as the one and only thing for her' (12 March, 1927: 122). Sometimes magazines resorted to outright attacks on what they perceived as the modern girl's misguided self-assessment and ambition.

The modern girl is . . . so terribly independent! She doesn't really care whether she gets married or not, so long as she can earn a comfortable living and have a good time . . . there is a tendency on the part of the modern girl to over-rate her own good qualities to consider herself more than the equal of man, and to adopt towards him an objectionable 'we-can-easily-do-without-you' sort of attitude. (*Girls' Weekly*, 24 January, 1920: 8)

However, the modern girl's 'new' approach to men and relationships was not always problematised. An advert for Player's cigarettes, for example, portrayed a modern girl smoking: 'Men may come and men may go', the text explained, 'but Player's are constant ever' (*Woman and Home*, April, 1927: 44).

The cavalier sentiment in this advert comes close to presenting the modern girl as possessing an active sexuality like her ladette counterpart. It is, however, designed to be humorous. Whilst the modern girl was portrayed as enjoying male company and sometimes as flirtatious, there are few explicit references to sexual activity. By contrast, media representations of the ladette are of sexually experienced and predatory women: the ladette 'cheats on her lovers . . . [and goes] out in groups of friends to hunt for men' (*Mirror*, 9 July, 1998: 9). In these representations, which constitute a prominent discourse within the print media, women are construed as powerful and men as objects of desire (see Day *et al.*, 2004). For example, under the headline 'Women take charge thanks to *Sex and the City*, it's men who submit in the bedroom', Kelly (*Daily Mail*, 14 February, 2005: 5) describes the ladette as the 'girl who prides herself on sexual conquests.' According to most press reports the ladette is into casual sex rather than long-term relationships: 'the UK ladette is likely to change her man four times more often than her duvets.' (*Guardian*, 9 October, 2003: 10; see also Day *et al.*, 2004). However, again we see contradictory representations. For example, the ladette is sometimes equated with the fictional Bridget Jones, who whilst flirtatious and keen on sex, is motivated most strongly by a desire to secure a long-term heterosexual relationship and marriage.

Reports are often disapproving of the modern girl and ladette's approaches to relationships; many attempt to persuade young women of the value of marriage and motherhood, and some attempt to scare them away from

alternative lifestyles. So, for example, mindful that their readers may have self-defined as modern girls, young women's magazines of the 1920s attempted to persuade their readers that they desired marriage (see Tinkler, 1995).

But is there a modern girl for all her modernity and, perhaps, her occasional scoffs at romance who doesn't deep down in her, look forward to a time when she will make a little home for herself and the boy she loves? Even though she may affect to despise and detest housework, and threatens to expire at the mention of darning a manly sock, doesn't she in her inmost thoughts rather love the idea of doing these same despised things for the one who can endow them with magic charm? (*Girls' Favourite*, 12 March, 1927: 122)

Representations of ladettes similarly encourage women to 'settle down' with a man and have children. Even archetypal ladettes have been presented as discarding their wild ways and 'growing up'. Zoe Ball, for instance, is reported to have metamorphosed into a sensible woman and mother who prefers sparkling water to lager and who is keen to spend more time with her family than clubbing. 'My ladette days are long gone', Ball assured an interviewer recently, 'Going to The Ivy and film premieres was fun, but after I got married I grew up and my priorities changed' (*The Mirror*, 11 December, 2004: 23). Another attempt to reassure the public is provided in a report titled 'No ladettes please, we're modern women'. The journalist argues that 'despite their boozy and loud ladette image, Britain's young women still believe in marriage, children and a stable family life. Their values are much more traditional than their parents . . .' (*Daily Express*, 14 October, 2004: 10) In a manner akin to magazines of the 1920s (Tinkler, 1995), the press also attempts to scare young women into rejecting 'ladettism' and into accepting long-term relationships: 'Being single is as bad for you as smoking – or worse. For the Bridget Jones generation of 30-something single women, a major study brings the worst possible news – that on top of the cigarettes, wine and anxiety about weight, the very state of being single takes years off your life' (*Independent on Sunday*, Home, 29 August, 2004: 5).

Although there were fears about the future of the first-generation ladettes, the biological clock is presented as tempering female rebellion as it was with modern girls of the 1920s; being a ladette or 'miss modern' is cast as a feminine fad. The difference between the contemporary ladette and her 1920s counterpart, however, is the duration of this phase and the perceived damage done while it lasts.

Dominant discourses in representations of modern girls and ladettes

Although the modern girl was subject to much public criticism, she did have some defenders. By contrast, it is exceptionally rare to find a newspaper article

that adopts a positive angle on any aspect of ladette lifestyles; according to the British press there is little or nothing to celebrate about ladettes.⁶ We now consider why ladettes and modern girls are often portrayed so negatively; we explore three dominant discourses that underpin constructions of these figures: health; social dis/order; and gender dis/order.

Health

The lifestyles, and especially the consumption patterns, of ladettes and modern girls are frequently presented as posing health risks. The dangers of modern girls' drinking and smoking habits, for example, were outlined by some medical professionals in the 1920s. In *Good Housekeeping* magazine, Dr Cecil Webb-Johnson (Braithwaite *et al.*, 1986: 91) expressed concern about the 'infinite deal of harm to the growing womanhood of England' caused by supper-and-dance clubs: 'It cannot be good for a young girl to dance night after night in the vitiated and nicotine-tainted atmosphere of a club and crawl home at three or four in the morning, a haggard, weary-eyed creature, unable to raise her head from the pillow till lunch-time the next day.' Immoderate alcohol consumption was linked to a range of health problems, including deterioration of the brain, stomach and nerves. Webb-Johnson feared that it could also lead to addiction to more dangerous drugs: eventually alcoholic beverages 'cease to have their real "bite."' Then comes cocaine or heroin; and after that – the abyss! Webb-Johnson and other critics of the modern girl sometimes singled out smoking as particularly damaging to female health: 'their [cigarettes] evil effects, when smoked to excess (and the night-club girl never does anything in moderation) are well known. They are bad for the digestive tract, for the eyes, and for the nerves' (Braithwaite *et al.*, 1986: 91). The young woman's lifestyle, especially her craze for dancing, smoking and slimness were presented on the front page of the *Daily Express* as the cause of cancer, venereal disease and 'deterioration of the brain, bones and muscles' (Melman, 1988: 23). Another report referred to 'modern women degenerating' as a result of feminine body ideals and being more prone to tumours, cancer and problems in childbirth (*Daily Express*, 29 December, 1924: 7). Although these concerns refer explicitly to the health of individual girls, they are also shaped in part by anxieties about the future of the nation and the 'race'; it was feared that unhealthy women would be unable to give birth to, and bring up, healthy children. For example, *The Express* (29 December, 1924: 7) referred to 'a grave danger to women themselves and the future of the race', while Webb-Johnson made implicit reference to this in his talk of the 'growing womanhood of England' (Braithwaite *et al.*, 1986: 90).

Although health was an issue for critics of the modern girl, it is far more prominent in critiques of the ladette. As with the modern girl, health concerns about ladettes relate principally to the consequences of drinking and smoking, although the dangers of drinking are given most coverage. Anxieties are sometimes expressed in fairly general terms, for example: 'Ladettes overtake

boys as boozing youngsters face a health timebomb' (*Express*, 15 December, 2004: 8). Alternatively, they relate to specific diseases such as cancer, heart or liver disease, and strokes. For example: ' "Ladette" trend is blamed for soaring rate of mouth cancer. Binge-drinking and smoking are to blame' (*Daily Mail*, 10 November, 2003: 22). Or: 'Ladettes at high risk of heart disease' (*Daily Mail*, 28 January, 2004: 36). Specifically-female health problems are also identified in some reports which echo the language and concerns from the 1920s: 'Long term drink-related health dangers could include osteoporosis, sexual dysfunction including infertility, shrinking breasts, anaemia and other ailments' (*Daily Mail*, 26 November, 2002: 18).

Reports generally stress the dangers to, and problems for, the women themselves. However, as with the modern girl, broader social concerns underpin these accounts. Similar to 1920s' concerns about the reproduction of the race, population issues arise in relation to ladettes because their behaviours are deemed to increase risks of 'infertility, [and] shrinking breasts' (*Daily Mail*, 26 November, 2002: 18). These particular concerns are probably exacerbated by current anxieties about an 'ageing population' (Hunt, 2005). Responses to ladettes and their earlier counterparts also indicate that the state of youth acts as a social litmus test. As Griffin points out, 'Youth is still treated as a key indicator of the state of the nation itself' (1993: 9). Finally, the burden ladettes place on the NHS and therefore on all tax-payers is implicit in reports, although occasionally it is explicit: 'If we go on like this, today's ladettes will be costing the NHS billions in liver transplants in 30 years' time' (*Red*, June 2004: 94).

Social dis/order

Ladettes are also presented as a cause for concern in relation to crime and social order. These concerns almost always relate to alcohol consumption and operate at two levels: that ladettes no longer act as caretakers of men, and that ladettes commit crimes.

One set of concerns relates to the apparent decline in women's 'civilising effect' upon men. The report below from the *Daily Mail* cites David Blunkett, then Home Secretary, as lamenting the 'fact' that women no longer calm men and discourage male-male violence. Interestingly, unlike other reports discussed later, Blunkett suggests that women do not participate in violent acts. However, it seems that they are too preoccupied with pursuing their own 'selfish' goals to act as caretakers of men.

Binge drinking among women is helping fuel the surge in alcohol-related violence in our streets, David Blunkett said yesterday. The Home Secretary spoke of the rise in what he called 'lager loutettes' – young women who increasingly rival men in alcohol consumption and drunken antics. He said it was transforming Britain's pub culture and contributing to the 'thuggery and intimidation' linked to heavy drinking. Instead of helping to calm

situations as they once did and discouraging men from fighting, he said young women were increasingly part of the problem. . . . While there is little evidence as yet that women are taking part in violence, he said the trend was changing the culture of pubs. 'They may be the ones to countenance violence rather than calm it,' he said. 'It is not chauvinistic to say the presence of women has often been a calming influence, in terms of young men starting to lay about each other' (*Daily Mail*, 19 July, 2004: 33).

In addition to ladettes allegedly neglecting their 'responsibilities' to police male behaviour, they have also been accused of a range of criminal activities.

'Ladettes' on crime spree. Scotland's most senior police officer has warned that the country is in the grip of a [sic] unprecedented crimewave fuelled by violent, binge-drinking women. John Vine, president of the Association of Chief Police Officers Scotland (ACPOS), has expressed his alarm at the rising number of crimes – including murders, serious assaults and robberies – committed by the 'ladette' generation. (*Sunday Times*, Home News: Scotland, 2 May, 2004: 1)

Much of the crime is reported to be violent, with fights between women being particularly common: 'The number of women who are seeking treatment at hospital casualty units after being injured in drunken catfights is rising sharply, consultants warn. Late-night brawls between women who have been binge-drinking are resulting in horrific injuries such as facial wounds caused by "glassing", broken jaws and bleeding scalps, where girls have had their hair pulled out' (*Telegraph*, 19 September, 2004: 15).

Increasing numbers of reports suggest that schoolgirls are also being drawn into ladette cultures (see Jackson, 2006a and 2006b). For example, Henry (*Sunday Telegraph*, 7 September, 2003: 13) wrote: 'The number of delinquent girls being held in secure units is rising sharply, according to government figures that will prompt renewed concern about the impact of "ladette" culture in Britain's schools . . .' Similarly, a regional newspaper in Wales blames the ladette culture for girl gangs that are 'plaguing' residents in Caldicot and Magor where they 'intimidate and bully passers-by, drink alcohol, swear and even damage property' (*This is Gwent*, 3 February, 2005, n.p.).

Gender dis/order

Some of the health and social dis/order concerns may be legitimate. There are health risks associated with frequent and excessive alcohol consumption for example. But we are not concerned with assessing the factual accuracy of the reports, although a critical assessment of them in future research would be interesting and valuable. Our concern is to explore and analyse discourses that shape media representations of modern girls and ladettes. Why are modern girls, and particularly ladettes, portrayed in a negative manner? Can discourses

about health and social dis/order really account for this negativity? In this section we argue that the answer to the last question is no. When these constructions are examined closely, the ladette and modern girl's key threat to society is their capacity for gender disorder. We argue that when viewed through a feminist lens, popular discourses on modern girls and ladettes are, in large part, responses to the perceived erosion of gender differences in society. Our analyses suggest that dominant discourses on gender differences are key to understanding hostile representations of the ladette and the modern girl. Central to gender-difference discourses are beliefs that women and men (and girls and boys) are (naturally) different, and that these differences are manifest in ways of behaving, looking and speaking. In other words, femaleness is equated with normative versions of femininity and maleness with hegemonic masculinity.

Ladettes and modern girls are presented as displaying behaviours and attitudes that transgress normative femininity and so are criticised for being 'too masculine'. Media reports about both ladettes and modern girls are littered with references to them becoming like men. Modern girls were described as deliberately aping men: 'The days are so strange now when women are doing their best to become like men in dress, smoking and drinking . . .' (*Our Own Gazette* [YWCA magazine] cited in Woollacott, 2000: 213). Numerous descriptions of modern girls referred to their adoption of masculine habits. A letter in the *Daily Express* commented that the girl in uniform 'puts her feet on the mantelpiece, sprawls on the rug, smokes, and, abomination of abominations, whistles' (10 June, 1918: 2), while 'wise words' in *Girls' Favourite* lamented that girls were taking the 'boyish line' too far (23 October, 1926: 271; see also Melman, 1988: 23 and 29 December, 1924: 7). Many commentaries on the ladette are similarly preoccupied with them becoming like (working-class) men. For example, ladettes feature under headlines such as 'Women copy men's bad habit' (*Plymouth Evening Herald*, 2004: 24) and 'Women workers are turning into men' (*Western Mail*, 24 January, 2005: 6). Another account referred to 'the growing "ladette" drinking culture, where women ape the worst excesses of loutish [working-class]⁷ male behaviour' (*Sunday Telegraph*, 19 September, 2004: 15). Williams (*Guardian*, 5 February, 2005: 22) suggests that the differences between the 'lad' and 'ladette' are minimal, and physical: as well as being drunk, 'the characteristics of the ladette were all those of being a lad, only with breasts – sleeping around, swearing, having no sense of responsibility'.

Whilst the ladette is critiqued within the mainstream (and particularly tabloid) press for attempting to be 'like a man', she is also commonly derided for struggling or failing to meet 'male standards'. As Day *et al.* (2004) point out, in relation to alcohol male consumption is constructed as the norm, a benchmark, against which female consumption levels are judged. The notion that women and men compete to be the best (or worst) is frequently evident in headlines, which recently have very occasionally suggested that women and girls are out-drinking men and boys: 'We are the champions! Binge drinking

has reached epidemic levels among teenage girls, who are outstripping boys for the first time' (*Daily Mail*, 15 December, 2004: 16). The assumption of 'male as norm' is also evident in the headlines presented in the last paragraph. In these and many other reports ladettes are presented as exhibiting a fake or inferior masculinity, and frequently the accompanying message is that ladettes (and women in general) are not good enough (or sometimes 'bad' enough) to do what men do, and should not try to be. Day *et al.* (2004) point out that even the term ladette is illustrative of the assumption of male as norm, and is typical of ways in which a 'male'-established term is adjusted with a diminutive suffix to make a 'female version'.

Central to discourses around gender differences and femininity is the discourse of women as carers.

To care is to feel concern or interest. To care is to take responsibility. To care is to put others before oneself. . . . To care can be a worry. The good woman, like the good mother, is caring. . . . She takes responsibility for the care of her family. She puts others before herself. . . . Caring is seen to be an essential part of a woman's subjectivity. Thus if a woman fails to care, if she fails to put others before herself, if she fails to take responsibility for others' needs, if she fails to show compassion, she is not a woman at all (Hughes, 2002: 72).

As Hughes suggests, caring – which means a woman must put others before herself and look after her family – is regarded as an essential part of a woman's subjectivity. This is as true today as eighty years ago when learning to subjugate oneself to the needs of others, namely men and one's children, was posited as an essential element of adolescent feminine development (Dyhouse, 1981; Tinkler, 2003a). Yet ladettes and modern girls are presented as shaking the foundations of normative femininity by their apparent rejection of traditional caring roles. Indeed, they are presented as displaying attitudes and behaviours that are antithetical to caring and domesticity. For example, they are hedonistic rather than self-sacrificing, party-animals rather than homemakers, assertive rather than subservient, frequenters of pubs for their own enjoyment rather than to police and look after men, into casual sex rather than marriage and family life. In these ways, modern girls in their day, and ladettes today, are seen to engage in practices that counter the dominant 'women as carers' discourse, and that disrupt the gender order.⁸

Media representations of the ladette are revealing not only about the gendered discourses around caring, but also about discourses around caring and social class. Although caring is an important feature of femininity in general, it has particular significance for constructions of un/respectable working-class femininities. As Skeggs (1997) and Hughes (2002) argue, caring is a key way in which working-class women gain status, respectability and some moral authority, although this is never secure and must be continually proven. As such, working-class women who reject caring roles are presented as

particularly dangerous and in need of restraint. Ladettes are portrayed as cross class (middle and working class) and as exhibiting behaviours associated with the most uncaring and unrespectable elements of the working class, so they invariably appear in negative terms. By contrast, although the modern girl transgressed gender norms about caring, she maintained certain respectability and acceptability by virtue of her social class positioning (she was portrayed almost exclusively as middle or upper class), so her transgressions were presented principally as those of gender, rather than gender *and* class.

Many feminists have challenged assumptions that women are 'naturally' carers. That representations of modern girls and ladettes in some ways counter these notions is, therefore, a cause for celebration. Yet the counter-discourse itself may be regarded as problematic by some feminists. As Hughes (2002) argues 'the operations of hegemony mean that counter-discourses can be appropriated by more dominant discourses' (p. 73). In this case, although representations of ladettes may counter the women-as-carers discourse, ladette behaviour is being appropriated into another problematic dominant discourse, that of competitive individualism.

Discussion

Ladettes are argued to be a sign, and product, of contemporary developments and change. In her examination of contemporary discourses on girls, Harris (2004: 14) argues that the issues young women encounter are presented as 'new and specific to their historical location'. The fortunes of contemporary young women are regarded as intricately interwoven with late modernity; they are seen either as successfully exploiting contemporary opportunities or as at risk. Our use of a historical case study has enabled us to focus more clearly on the present, to unpack it and to identify long-term patterns. This historical focus shows that ladette-type behaviours were noted in the press as a cause for concern in the past. Indeed, our work indicates that recurring themes and concerns characterise constructions of youthful femininity in the 1920s and in the years since 1995. This is not to deny that there have been important changes in the conditions of girlhood and in the behaviours and expectations of young women over the decades since 1920, and especially in recent years (Jackson, 2006a and 2006b; Arnot *et al.*, 1999), but to highlight continuities relating to the *representation* of youthful femininities.

Anxieties about the behaviours of contemporary ladettes are framed and justified largely in relation to health and social order issues, but these issues cannot explain fully the ways in which ladettes are (so negatively) portrayed. As we have argued, what seems most threatening about the ladette is her capacity for gender disorder and, more specifically, her disruption of dominant discourses on gender differences and on women as carers. Gender disorder was also the most pressing concern about the 1920s modern girl, despite colourful references in the popular press to the health hazards of her lifestyle.

The ladette is a manifestation of concerns that have arisen from social, economic and political features of contemporary life. At least four of these features and the concerns they generate are not specific to late modernity. Indeed, these features have a history of over eighty years as they were also characteristics of the heyday of modernity.

First, both the ladette and modern girl emerged in periods when women were considered to have made significant advances in society. The modern girl was presented as having 'new-found freedoms' in terms of educational opportunities, paid work, relationships with men, mobility and dress. These changes were attributed in part to three effects of World War One. First, women were recruited into the labour force and paid relatively good wages to replace men enlisted into the military. Second, less encumbered by Victorian traditions, women experienced new social freedoms. Third, owing to the loss of men's lives, women outnumbered men in the population. They were also soon to be enfranchised; women of 30 years and over received the vote in 1918, and in 1928 this was extended to women on the same terms as men.

At the turn of the twenty-first century women and girls have again been cast as making enormous advances. The Sex Discrimination Act (1975) and subsequent equal opportunities initiatives in a range of areas including education, paid work, and political representation have been presented as privileging females over males. In recent years there has been repeated reference to girls and women doing better than boys and men (for example, see McDowell, 2003; Osler and Vincent, 2003). Following periods of actual or alleged advances for women, anxieties surface about the disintegration of the foundations of the gender order. Hostile reactions are not uncommon, as women's apparent gains are perceived to be at the expense of men. In recent years feminists have observed a 'backlash' against feminism (Faluddi, 1991). In the 1920s there was also a backlash against the advances that women had made, and a hostile reaction to their further advancement through the extension of the franchise in 1928 (Braybon, 1981; Melman, 1988).

Gender relations are not the only reason why the ladette and modern girl are related. Both figures are also products of anxieties about shifts in age relations. From the beginning of the twentieth century there has been an expanding period between the 'dependent child' and what is regarded as 'settled' adulthood. For women in the 1920s this settled, 'mature' state was popularly associated with the constraints imposed by a husband and dependent children. Today, 'settled' adulthood is most commonly associated with dependent children and a male partner. Anxieties about young women without these familial obligations underpin representations of ladettes and modern girls⁹. Such anxieties prompt the press reports discussed earlier that attempt either to reassure the public that being a ladette or modern girl is just a passing fad, or to persuade young women that their real desire is to settle down.

The consumer power of youth constitutes the third element common to the emergence of both ladettes and modern girls. An income, whether from pocket

money or earnings, is presented as key to youthful independence. Abrams (1959) heralded the arrival of the 'teenage consumer' in the 1950s, but she first appeared in the inter-war period. Single women in their teens and twenties were targeted by magazine publishers from the late 1800s, and by the 1920s this market was thriving; teenage girls also attracted the attention of inter-war advertisers (Tinkler, 2000). Today, young women are a powerful economic force. In the 1990s the spending power of 12–17 year old British girls was estimated at 1.3 billion pounds (Harris, 2004; Aapola *et al.*, 2005). The risk that ladettes and their predecessors pose to themselves and society is attributed in large part to their economic power.

Finally, ladettes and modern girls are both products of the mass media. The early decades of the twentieth century witnessed the growth of the newspaper industry and its establishment as a mass media. In 1910 the national dailies sold 4.5 million copies, by 1939 this had risen to 10.5 million. By 1939 69% of the population aged sixteen and over read a national newspaper and 82% a national Sunday paper (Stevenson, 1984, pp. 402–3). Davis (1990) argues that since the Second World War a 'youth spectacle has come to occupy a prominent position in the overall output of the media' (p. 23). He observes that 'what becomes apparent is not merely the sheer disproportion of volume of media output devoted to such images . . . but also the general degree of overstatement almost invariably associated with them' (p. 24). The appearance of the modern girl on the front page of 1920s' newspapers indicates that youth spectacles emerged earlier than Davis suggests, indeed the modern girl was the prototype. The growth of the mass media has necessitated news and youth have been consistently newsworthy.

The persistence of these four features of social life explains the common characteristics of the ladette and modern girl. Aapola *et al.* (2005) argue that there is currently a backlash against 'girl power' (p. 39) although they say little about it. We suggest that the ladette is one of the ways this backlash is manifest, but also that this phenomenon is not specific to the present, it also happened in the 1920s. Negative representations of ladettes and modern girls are products of a backlash against the perceived power of 'unsettled' and power-hungry female youth in a society where spectacle and/or moral panics are the lifeblood of the media. It is worth noting that while contemporary women, and especially young women, are now presented as 'the icon of the post-modern world' (Arnot *et al.*, 1999: 106; also McRobbie, 2000; Harris, 2004), the modern girl of the 1920s was heralded as the icon of inter-war modernity.

Although there has been much recent interest in discourses on contemporary girlhood, the ladette has received very little attention. Harris (2004) identifies two main discourses on contemporary girls, the 'can do' and the 'at risk' discourses; a similar framework is employed by Aapola *et al.* (2005). The 'at risk girl' is presented primarily as a passive victim of circumstances. In contrast, the 'can do' discourse is a celebration of girls' competence and potential. The 'can do girl' believes in herself and is determined to shape her

life as she chooses; she plans her education and career, she becomes successful and affluent, and she fits motherhood around her other ambitions. Although there is a fleeting mention that the 'at risk girl' includes the 'wilful risk takers who use girl power to their own (self) destructive ends' (p. 26), this is not explored fully. We argue that the ladette is, in part, a reaction to the 'can do' discourse, and an articulation of public anxieties about the exercise of girl power. Hostile representations of the modern girl are also, in part, a reaction to a 'can do' discourse. While the 'can do' element of the modern girl was applauded by those behind commercial enterprises that relied on young women's spending power, criticism focused on her new powers being taken to extremes. Representations of the ladette and the modern girl cannot, however, be understood solely in terms of either the 'can do' or 'at risk' discourse; both figures are employed in complex ways to express anxieties about disruptions to the gender order and to attempt to maintain it.

Ladette and modern girl are ill-defined and elastic constructs that serve to incorporate almost any female behaviour deemed problematic or new. The fact that both figures have achieved public prominence for at least a decade is indicative of their flexibility and serviceability. Following from this, these constructions are often characterised by inconsistencies and contradictions. The modern girl was criticised for behaving and even looking like a man at the same time as she was attacked for revealing too much feminine flesh. Ladettes are similarly lampooned for behaving like men but are also described as exhibiting distinctly feminine types of behaviour, for example, fighting like cats. Additionally, although the ladette is heralded as a specifically modern phenomenon, instances of women drinking or having a good time prior to the 20th century are now described as examples of ladette behaviour (BBC News Online, 8 October, 2003).

The application of gender double standards is striking in the press' negative representations of ladettes and modern girls. When viewed through a feminist lens, many 'troublesome' features of constructions of youthful femininity can be defined as positive. The modern girl emerges as a young woman claiming her right to space, movement, opportunities and pleasures. The ladette, eighty years later, is still making this claim; asserting her right to use public space, to be heard and seen, and to engage in pleasures that are considered relatively unproblematic for boys and young men.

Negative discourses on young women can mask anxieties about the direction and implications of female emancipation; they can serve as a smokescreen for conservative reactions to women's advances. In the 1920s many critics of the modern girl were vocal about the damaging effects of feminism (Summers, 1928). Others pointed to the modern girl's adoption of masculine behaviour as misguided emancipation: 'To waddle admiringly in the rear of man, picking up his cast-off inelegances, is not the same thing as to challenge equality with him' (Clyde, 1934: 70). In the 21st century such claims reappear amidst a 'backlash' against feminism (Faluddi, 1991). Ladettes, according to one 'government

advisor', represent the 'dark side of the female revolution' (*Sunday Times*, 2 May, 2004: 1).

The implications of negative discourses about young women should not be underestimated as they can work to constrain acts of feminine assertion and claims to equality (Harris, 2004; Aapola *et al.*, 2005). As Gonick cautions (2004: 397), 'Once these meanings enter our "common sense" lexicon their pervasiveness results in a narrowing of vision and imagination for the multitude of ways in which girls' self-expressions might be read and engaged.' In other words, popular discourses about girls have real consequences for the ways in which girls are perceived and treated. For example, Aapola *et al.* (2005) argue that in the USA increased media and public attention to the 'mean girl' or 'bad girl' – a white, middle class, suburban girl – has led to increasing surveillance, regulation and criminalisation of all girls' behaviours (see also Ringrose, 2005). They point out that because of the dominance of 'mean girl' discourses, girls are now being arrested for 'crimes' such as schoolyard fights that would have been ignored or dealt with in school ten years ago. In a similar vein, Jackson (2006b) argues that in the UK recent media-generated concerns about ladettes are leading to increased surveillance and regulation of girls and young women; importantly, it is generally the least powerful girls in class and 'race' terms who are most easily subjected to surveillance and regulation. These authors warn that contemporary discourses on girls are beginning to restrict them in areas where girls have just started to gain more freedom, choices and opportunities; they also have important implications for how girls conceptualise their own identities and actions.

The ease with which the media construct, reconstruct and draw on the ladette discourse to classify young women is problematic. Ladette has increasingly become an ever-expanding umbrella term under which important differences between young women become invisible or, at best, marginalised. The term ladette is applied to young women who smoke, 'binge' drink, party and have casual heterosexual encounters. However, it is also used to classify young women who engage in any activity associated with ladettes: those who 'binge' drink but do not smoke, those who drink a lot but do not have casual heterosexual encounters, or those who engage in casual sex but are not interested in parties, drink or cigarettes. Whilst it is debatable whether ladette-type behaviours are a problem for women or society, there are young women who do engage in high-risk activities such as regular heavy drinking and/or smoking. The needs of these women may be obscured amidst a panic about any young woman who drinks a few pints or hangs out with her friends in the park sharing an alcopop.

Popular discourse on the ladette also masks the complexity and causes of women's behaviours. The identification of hedonism as the driving force within ladette culture obscures other motivations for drinking, smoking, or having casual sex. For example, studies demonstrate that poverty and gender-specific stresses influence levels of smoking among women (Graham, 1993; Daykin, 1993). The media's enthusiasm to apply labels that are underpinned by

simplistic assumptions can render invisible the real problems that young women face. The emphasis on hedonism leads to a culture whereby individuals are cast as having only themselves to blame for problems and failures. Social factors are de-emphasised and societal responsibilities are sidestepped.

It is perhaps not surprising that we should identify problems with the press' obsession with the ladette. She is, after all, a 'folk devil' who has achieved notoriety on the wave of a moral panic about the leisure practices of contemporary young women. A moral panic, as Cohen (1972: 9) explains, occurs when 'a condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests'. The British media have played a unique role in generating an increasing number of moral panics in recent years (Thompson, 1998). These panics are achieved through what Hall *et al.* (1976: 77) describe as a 'signification spiral'; in other words, the perceived potential threat of an issue spirals through the way it becomes signified, especially in the media. The representation of the ladette reveals this spiralling process. The media and the government (*Daily star*, 22 January, 2005: 9; *The Express*, 22 January, 2005: 5.) have been increasingly keen to identify ladettism in diverse examples of youthful feminine behaviours. The threats she poses to herself and others are often unsubstantiated, exaggerated, or as yet unrealised – a 'timebomb'. These threats also relate to shifting definitions of 'dangerous' behaviour. For example, recently introduced guidelines on levels of 'safe' alcohol consumption have formalised notions of 'excess'; six units of alcohol in one session now constitutes the benchmark against which women's drinking is assessed. Folk devils are frequently cast as a threat to the family. It is not surprising then that the ladette – one of only a handful of specifically female folk devils (Thompson, 1998: 111) – is cast as a threat to the foundation of the family (Day *et al.*, 2004). She is perceived as both an indicator of, and contributor to, the erosion of the gender order which is the bedrock of British society. She represents a clash between new and old values (Wallis, 1976), but she is also a product of a 'politics of anxiety' and serves as the 'necessary threat' (Cohen, 1972) in the reassertion of the established gender order. While the ladette phenomenon may pass in a few years, similar 'problem' girls/women will no doubt emerge. As the example of the modern girl illustrates, in spite of the changes associated with the transition to a late-modern society, there remain features deeply rooted in British society that continue to provide the conditions for the media's (re)discovery of 'troublesome' youthful femininities.

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Notes

1 There has not yet been a published study of popular discourse on troublesome youthful femininities 1950–80.

- 2 Lexis-Nexis is a searchable electronic database of over 150 UK newspapers.
- 3 Between 1870 and 1920 'flapper' was a derogatory term for a young woman (Woollacott, 2000). It was seldom used in the early 1920s but was readopted in 1927 to refer to young women who were soon to be given the vote (Melman, 1988).
- 4 The modern girl was portrayed as white because she represented mainstream young British womanhood which was assumed to be white. Black, British women were invisible in the press even though Britain's population included a small proportion of women of African and Asian origin. Recurring media panics about 'foreigners' and drug crime focused on men (Kohn, 1992).
- 5 Government guidelines define binge drinking as 8 units of alcohol for men and 6 units for women consumed in one session (Department of Health, 2004).
- 6 Ladettes feature in broadsheet and tabloid newspapers that span the political spectrum. Negative portraits of ladettes occur across the range, but are particularly common in the tabloid press; the few exceptions tend to be in the left-of-centre broadsheets (for example, *The Guardian*, 6 February 2004, p. 28 and *The Guardian*, 5 February, 2005: 5).
- 7 As Muncer *et al.* (2001) point out, the attitudes and behaviours attributed to ladettes are associated particularly with working-class masculinity.
- 8 Historically constructed patterns of power relations between men and women and definitions of masculinity and femininity (Connell, 1987: 98–9).
- 9 Teenage pregnancy is represented as equally problematic, thus highlighting the relative narrowness of the age window within which women must have children in order to be socially 'responsible' and 'acceptable'.

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