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SUB CULTURAL CAPITAL AND THE FEMALE 'UNDERCLASS'? A FEMINIST RESPONSE TO AN UNDERCLASS DISCOURSE

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Abstract

It is often argued that economically marginalized young women occupy a school and post-school underclass and that this underclass has a particular culture associated with it. Such views provoke a profound ambivalence in many of those who work with such young people. On the one hand, they are anxious to acknowledge the culture of the communities to which marginalized young women belong. On the other hand, they wish to avoid the pernicious implications of underclass theories which suggest that disadvantage is the result of the culture and values of marginalized social groupings. This paper offers an overview and feminist critique of the structuralist and cultural or behaviourist strands of underclass theory. It focuses particularly on the work of Charles Murray, a major proponent of the culturalist perspective and the representation of the single mother in this discourse. It then considers how a less punitive theorization of marginalized cultures might be achieved by drawing on and adapting concepts from Pierre Bourdieu's sociology. The paper reflects on how such ideas might serve as a way of exploring how gender impacts on the forms of cultural capital available to young women in difficult economic circumstances.

Introduction

In June 1997, the disappearance of 13-month-old Jaidyn Leskie made Australian news headlines. What gripped the imagination of the public was not just the fate

of the toddler. Of even greater and more horrified fascination was the behaviour of Jaidyn's family and their associates. Initially, they were constructed by the media as victims of social and cultural change, including industry restructuring, unemployment and loss of many state services in the rural town of Moe (Griffiths, 1998). By the time the little boy's body had been found in a dam six months later, sympathy for his mother had long since vanished. She and her associates were regarded as responsible for their own misfortune, as the 'white trash' protagonists in 'a bizarre and pathetic tale' (Tippet & Hewitt, 1997, p. 14).

In one of *The Sydney Morning Herald* features on the case, Jaidyn's mother, 22-year-old Bilynda Murphy, and her older sister, Kadee, were described as follows:

Kadee, a self-confessed wild child who changed her name from Katie in order to 'piss off' her teachers, left home at 14. Younger sister Bilynda stayed at home until she was 17, and has never held a paid job. Between them, the sisters [have] five children [by various fathers, one of whom has fathered a child with each sister]. (Freeman, 1998, p. 40)

Here, as elsewhere, there is an implied, but nevertheless clear link between leaving school early and the young women's status as single mothers; between single motherhood and irresponsible parenting; and between a culture of welfare dependency and anti-social behaviour.

These implications resonate with assumptions informing certain policy constructions of risk. Risk factors for teenage pregnancy, for example, are commonly understood to include a family history of teenage pregnancy, educational problems or not being in education, training or work. They also resonate strongly with a dominant strand of underclass theory which argues that the problem for the 'underclass' is not economic poverty per se, but an

impoverishment of cultural and civic values (Murray, 1999). Insofar as such approaches pathologize and moralize, they are problematic. Indeed, when they are taken up by the press as we see in the case of the Jaidyn Leskie trial and become part of the popular imaginary, such theories tend to reinforce social exclusion (see also Harrison, Angwin & Shacklock, 2002).

The aim of this paper¹ is to explore some of the lines of the inquiry that underclass theory generates in regard to young women. We will argue that to the extent that the underclass debate is often reductive, oscillating between constructing young 'underclass' women as victims and blaming them, a more complex understanding is essential. This paper begins with an overview of underclass theory which has been very influential in the USA and UK and is now gaining considerable currency in Australia. It then offers a feminist critique of the ways in which young women are identified and represented in underclass theory. As an alternative to such theory, we explore the possibilities of another theoretical approach which draws selectively on Pierre Bourdieu's sociology, including the notion of social suffering and theory of capitals. We further draw on and adapt Sarah Thornton's concept of sub cultural capital. This approach, we suggest, provides a conceptual platform from which to explore the ways in which young women in difficult economic circumstances understand and pursue their lives and, at the same time, how this is a function of gender as well as class.

Underclass theory: an overview

There are four strands or positions in the underclass debate and here we focus on two (for an overview of the four stances, see Macdonald, 1997). The first, the culturalist perspective, is the most pervasive, if only because it is frequently taken up in the tabloid press where the underclass is represented as a threat to social, economic and moral order. It has also been influential in public policy and has been used to support conservative education policy in the USA (Apple,

1997). This approach tends to position members of the underclass as responsible for their own plight (Auletta, 1982; Herrnstein & Murray, 1994; Murray, 1990, 1994, 1998, 1999). If, as Murray suggests, it was 'post-war welfare policy [that] had encouraged the growth of a non-productive underclass' (MacDonald, 1997, p. 8), it is the culture and values of the long-term unemployed and never employed that now perpetuates their exclusion from the social mainstream. Indeed, although

Most members of the underclass have low incomes ... its distinguishing characteristics are not poverty and unmet physical needs, but social disorganization, a poverty of social networks and valued roles, and a Hobbesian kind of individualism in which trust and cooperation are hard to come by and isolation is common. (Murray, 1999, online)

From this perspective, the impoverishment of the 'underclass' is considered to be cultural and moral rather than economic (Murray, 1999).

By contrast, the structuralist strand situates members of the underclass as 'victims of circumstance' (MacDonald, 1997, p. 13). It attributes the growth of the underclass to on-going changes to the economy (e.g. unemployment due to deindustrialization and changing work practices) and government policy (e.g. reductions or changes in the provision of welfare relief); a decline in state, social and commercial services in struggling communities; and evolving class structures (Dahrendorf, 1992; Field, 1989; White, 1996; Wilson, 1987). Field (1989) identifies four key factors in the emergence of the underclass. Lister (1996, p. 2) summarizes them as 'unemployment, widening class differences, the exclusion of the very poorest from rapidly rising living standards, and a hardening of public attitudes', and explains that these forces have acted to separate the underclass from society 'in terms of income, life chances and political

aspirations' (Field 1989, p. 196). Field adds that these combine to create social exclusion and 'the loss of a comprehensive approach to citizenship' (1989, p. 153).

As this suggests, the structuralist approach does not ignore the cultural *effects* of systems and structures, but tends to explain the culture of underclass communities in terms of 'cultural adaptation to social structural factors' (MacDonald, 1997, p. 17). It also suggests that although the structuralist approach is more complex and less punitive than the culturalist, and privileges structure over agency, it takes merely a different route to reach the same destination. Giddens' (1998) discussion of welfare dependency and citizenship in *The Third Way* (1998) is a case in point. Here he argues that rather than countering social exclusion, the traditional welfare state has inadvertently promoted it by creating a 'moral hazard' (1998, p. 115). The problem 'isn't so much that some forms of welfare provision create dependency cultures as that people take rational advantage of opportunities offered' (Giddens, 1998, p. 115). As we have argued elsewhere (Bullen, Kenway & Hey, 2000) what is essentially a structuralist account of welfare dependency collapses into the culturalist approach by inadvertently reinforcing assumptions about the moral character of welfare recipients. In such ways, the 'underclass' is ultimately constructed as 'a moral category' (White, 1996, p. 132).

Judgemental notions of welfare dependency are central to culturalist views of the under class. Such views tend to encourage the belief that 'the underclass needs firmness, even compulsion, in its own best interests' (Probert, 2001, online).

Indeed, McCarthy and Dimitriadis (2000, p. 174) argue that as the welfare state shrinks, it implicitly encourages 'a reinterpretation and rearticulation of issues of inequality as matters of individual will, volunteerism and community goal orientation and moral fibre'. In debates about welfare provision, it invokes distinctions between the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor (Probert, 2001), the

'virtuous' and 'vicious' (White, 1996), and a propensity to blame segments of the welfare dependent for their dependency.

Probert calls this process of blaming, the 'politics of grievance'. In Australia, when recipients of welfare appear, to some, to be better off than the working poor, this 'politics of grievance' is driven by resentment (Kenway & Kraack, 2002). One consequence of this is widespread public support for more stringent welfare regulation and onerous eligibility criteria (for analysis of Australian welfare policy, see Mendes, 2003; White, 1996). Such measures include proposed mutual obligation policies with respect not only to the long-term unemployed, but sole parent and disability pensioners. These groups were previously included by the state among those with a diminished capacity or incapacity for work along with the aged, and therefore were considered legitimately entitled to welfare support. Yet, at the same time as sole parents - the majority of whom are women - are being encouraged into the workforce, assumptions about women's dependency and role as child care givers remains enshrined in legislation.

Teenage and single mothers are a segment of the 'underclass' that culturalist and structuralist theorists alike recognise. However, while some, for instance White (1996), acknowledge the role played by the sexual division of labour and the way various welfare measures reinforce traditional gender roles, the role of gender oppression is generally underestimated in standard accounts of the underclass. Insofar as structuralist accounts of the underclass take a political economy approach, there is a tendency to subordinate gender inequality to class inequality. As Arnot explains, the political economy approach in sociology tends to create 'conceptual dichotomies between ... private/public, between family/work and their association with male/female divisions' (Arnot, 2002, p. 12). There is a consequent tendency to focus on the male spheres of work, the economy and public policy. This is not to underestimate the material conditions

of poverty, both economic and political, which underpin the power relations that hold in place cultural constructions of gender. Too often feminists have underestimated this, focusing on agency at the expense of structure (Lovell, 2000). Conversely, political economy approaches to sociological issues have often 'identified the structural basis of women's oppression in capitalism and then neglected or ignored the concrete reality of that oppression in the relationships between men and women' (Arnot, 2002, p. 129).

The culturalist strand of underclass theory does nothing to redress this. Charles Murray's analysis, for instance, is not interested in the reality of gender relationships, in women's experience of poverty and social exclusion, and instead is based on copious and often dubious statistical analysis (Brown, 1996). Indeed, it is even more masculinist in its orientation than the structuralist. The key indicators with which Murray has tracked the growth of the underclass are young men out of the labour market, criminality and illegitimacy. The consequences of being out of the workforce for young women are disregarded. The preoccupation with young women exists mainly in regard to unmarried, and in particular never married, mothers and their (in)ability to satisfactorily parent their children, principally their sons. For criminality and unemployment among young men are an outcome of illegitimacy since unfathered 'young boys grow up with only one visible example of what it means to be a grownup male, the bad one' (Murray 1999, online). And, since Murray (1999, online) claims, 'we know from recent research that the bad effects of single-parenting persist for women not on welfare', his solution is to argue that 'underclass' young women be compelled to have their children only in wedlock.

Elsewhere (Bullen & Kenway, under review) we have analysed some of the shortcomings of this proposal. Here, we make the further point that in this schema, it is not just the traditional notion of the family Murray is endorsing, but

the construction of women as objects, rather than subjects. From a Bourdieuan perspective, women are 'social objects, repositories of value and capital, who circulate between men and who serve certain important functions in the capital accumulation strategies of families and kinship groups' (Lovell 2000, p. 20). They do not accumulate capital as subjects in their own right: a considerable problem for women forced into dependency upon men for whom there is no work or no inclination to work. We go further to argue that those young women like Bilynda Murphy who disrupt the position assigned to them as object in relation to the male subject - by choice or circumstance - are constructed as abject (Kristeva, 1982) in culturalist underclass discourse.

The abject is a threat to decent society, the pure and the proper. The abject is unclean, deviant; it does not respect boundaries, it contaminates. It is precisely the language of the abject that typifies underclass discourse, even that of proponents of the structuralist account such as Dahrendorf (1987, quoted in MacDonald, 1997). Insofar as the abject contradicts notions of order and identity, it must be excluded. The notion of the abject may not be gendered, yet it is the poor single mother who is too often at the centre of culturalist diatribes. Insofar as she contradicts notions of the proper family and respectable femininity, she too is excluded, or at the very least, pushed to the margins. The 'dumping'² of young single mothers in Moe or in struggling housing estates like Scotswood in Tyneside is as much a manifestation of, as a metaphor for, this process of abjection. In that the Moe case resonates with the situation in the UK and USA where notions of the underclass carry with them the added burden of a range of anti-social behaviours and problems such as crime, drugs, violence and 'illegitimacy', it serves to reinforce the construction of the underclass as a threat or danger, and thus social as well as economic exclusion. A corollary of this is the way culturalist representations of the underclass 'promote the idea of an "Other"' and serve to induce 'conformity among the working and middle class'

(Blackman, 1997, p. 112), thus simultaneously reproducing inequality and moral regulation.

This is evident in the way that Moe residents responded to the bad press the town received during the Jaidyn Leskie trial. Local residents, anxious to salvage the town's reputation, published a special issue of the local newspaper in which they distanced themselves from the protagonists in the murder. It was made clear that the rest of Moe were respectable people who subscribe to the values of 'the ordinary (and orderly) family' (Griffith, 1998, p. 114). The young women involved, already marginalized locally and stigmatized nationally, were thus further excluded.

Clearly, not all marginalized young women become single mothers any more than all single mothers are marginalized, and it is significant that understandings of risk are so often reduced to issues of sexuality and reproduction. This preoccupation, however, is not merely with biological reproduction, but social and cultural reproduction. It is clear that from Murray's perspective, illegitimacy in underclass culture creates the circumstances to reproduce and transmit antisocial values and culture from one generation to the next. It is this element of the underclass debate which has provoked most ambivalence among youth sociologists. There is a tendency to avoid the cultural or behavioural elements of the underclass debate and focus instead on economic and social structural factors. However, as MacDonald explains, 'underclass theories will not go away, no matter how much we ignore them' (1997, p. 22). We need to confront our own ambivalence and if we find underclass theories inadequate or pernicious, find 'alternative, more useful explanations of the social exclusion of disadvantaged youth' (MacDonald, 1997, p. 22).

From a feminist point of view, this means reconsidering the lives of young women such as those involved in the Jaidyn Leskie case. It means identifying or developing the conceptual apparatus which will allow us to go beyond the version of underclass femininity that underclass theory constructs; beyond the polarized discourses of victim and perpetrator, beyond patronizing and pathologizing (Sayer, 2001). The so-called 'underclass' is not a product of either social structural or cultural forces alone, but of their interaction. Equally, the construction and representation of 'underclass' culture is a product both of forces internal to struggling communities and external forces such as stigmatization and the manner in which economic rewards are currently distributed. Likewise, the situation of 'underclass' women is a gender issue as well as a class issue. Analysis needs to bring the politics of distribution and recognition together (Fraser, 1997).

Reconceptualizing the underclass: a feminist perspective

Bea Campbell vividly evokes the stereotypical image of single mothers and their offspring popularised by underclass theories when she refers to communities distinguished by 'big dogs, smoking women, wall-to-wall TV, [and] snotty children who learn to say "fuck" before they can say "please"' (1993, p. 321). It is an image which alienates those outside this world and dehumanizes those within. Thus framed,

A woman's impoverished independence is deemed utterly unworthy. It might mean a movement from poverty, as a result of the inequality within marriage, to poverty, as a result of dependence on benefits – not from adequacy to penury. Another cigarette might seem to the New Right and the respectable as extravagance, when to a woman managing a home and the wellbeing of all its inhabitants on less than the means of subsistence it might provide a moment to calm down, to find solitude, shrouded in a

smoke screen. A cigarette might be all that she thinks she can give in return to a neighbour or sister who is relied upon for survival routines. (Campbell 1993, p. 311)

This passage reminds us of Frank McCourt's memoir of his impoverished Irish Catholic childhood, *Angela's Ashes* (1996) and of his mother, the eponymous Angela, who continued to buy cigarettes even when the family's penury was so extreme that three of her children died as a result. In turn, McCourt's book reminds us of the *suffering* created by profound poverty, inviting us to understand not only the reality of social and economic marginalization, but to understand – though not necessarily condone – what one does in order to survive it. McCourt's book provides this insight from the perspective of his own and his family's social experience. In so doing, he disrupts the easy moral judgements that discourses like the underclass debate encourage.

As these contrasting depictions of the 'underclass' mother imply, social space is 'the space of points of view' and these points of view cannot be reduced to the 'single, central, dominant, in a word, quasi-divine point of view all too easily adopted by observers – and readers too, at least to the extent that they do not feel personally involved' (Bourdieu, *et al.*, 1999, p. 3). To attempt to do so is to ignore not only the material suffering of poverty, but the *positional suffering* that goes along with it (Bourdieu, *et al.*, 1999, p. 4). Positional suffering concerns one's social standing and is a function not only of one's perceptions of one's own social reality, but the perceptions and, crucially, the misperceptions, of others. Clearly, underclass theories such as that promulgated by Charles Murray contribute to positional suffering. They reinforce the low standing of 'underclass' young women in particular through the way they classify and position 'underclass' femininities, yet fail to see how class and gender inequalities combine to

reproduce the very femininities they denigrate. Skeggs' work on working class femininities is helpful for understanding this.

Skeggs' (1997) argues that femininity is always classed. Against the ideal of 'respectable' femininity of the upper and middle classes, the working class woman was historically constructed as sexual and via this distinction or division, as 'vulgar', 'deviant' and 'tasteless'. It was precisely in order to avoid being thus positioned, that working class women began to invest in the ideal of femininity in order to prove themselves respectable. However, 'The positioning, codifications and valuing of women as "different" establishes limits on the amounts and forms of capital that are available and can be generated from a particular position' (Skeggs, 1997, p. 101). Drawing on Bourdieu, Skeggs (1997, p. 100) sets up femininity as an economic imperative and argues that 'In the struggle to survive ... women have to know which strategies of investment and which practices yield the highest profit'. She argues that 'when you have restricted access to small amounts of capitals, the use of femininity may be better than nothing at all' (Skeggs, 1997, p. 102) and makes the case that certain forms of femininity may be adopted with a view to limiting loss rather making capital gains.

We suggest that in the twenty-first century, 'underclass' women are positioned in the way working class women were positioned in the nineteenth century: 'as dangerous, disruptive sexual women' (Hall, 1979, cited in Skeggs, 1997).

However, to position them thus is to ignore the fact that without the resources to invest in 'respectable' femininity or communities that value it, the only form of capital young women can trade on may well be their body, their sexuality and their fertility. We can see a parallel here between the point Lovell (2000, p. 18) makes in her commentary on Bourdieu's analysis of working class masculinities and the distinction between classes and cultures which are:

... forged through necessity and a harsh day-to-day struggle for survival, and those that can afford a more contemplative stance towards the world and the self. In the case of working class men, a culture of necessity is generated which celebrates the physical body and the attributes of bodily strength: the form of 'cultural capital' most readily available for accumulation in these circumstances.

There are 'restricted markets' for such masculinities, although as Lovell (2000, p. 24) notes, in particular social fields these are competences, not deficits. The markets for 'underclass' femininities are similarly restricted.

Indeed, if femininity is a commodity 'which itself has very restricted value' (Skeggs, 1997) in wider society, 'underclass' femininities are often valued even more cheaply. Because the cultural, symbolic and social capitals of marginalized women are often unable to convert into much more than single motherhood, welfare dependency and/or sporadic work histories, it has little 'exchange value' within wider society. Indeed, in that the forms of cultural, social and symbolic capital most readily available for accumulation to 'underclass' young women do not convert into economic capital – according to Bourdieu's theorization, the criterion that defines non-economic forms of capital as capital (Lipuma, 1993) – they are technically not capital at all.

Yet, we argue, the resources that marginalized young women draw upon function as capital for them and are not necessarily experienced as a deficit. For this reason, we have introduced the notion of sub cultural capital, extending Sarah Thornton's (1995) hybridization of Bourdieu's theory of capitals with youth sub cultural theory beyond its initial conceptualization in relation to youth leisure, entertainment and fashion (for an extended discussion of the concept, its

limits and possibilities, see Bullen & Kenway, under review). Understanding the currency that sub cultural capitals have and how they substitute for, if not convert into, economic capital, provides an alternative viewpoint that reveals the logic of the social practice of 'underclass' young women. As such, a Bourdieuan notion of sub cultural capitals offers a line of inquiry into the interaction between material structures and individual agency; between class and gender; and between 'underclass' and hegemonic cultures. It helps to bring the politics of distribution and recognition together in ways that the culturalist and structuralist strands of the underclass debate do not.

Sub cultural capitals of the female 'underclass'

It is apt at this point to turn to Campbell's discussions of the plight of marginalized young women in Tyneside in the UK, noting that it is not much different from that of the young women in the Australian town of Moe discussed at the beginning of this paper.³ She explains that 'Single parents or women fleeing from their husbands are unloaded as emergency cases on the hard-pressed estates where they command no respect, especially from the lads who are their contemporaries' (Campbell 1993, p. 173). According to a community worker in Scotswood, a neighbourhood under siege by its own young men, single mothers are vulnerable 'just because they are available for attack. They don't have men to protect them from men. They don't have other networks, other men in their family, to be deterrents. It's not that these women are inadequate, which is what the underclass theory argues, it's just that they're vulnerable' (quoted in Campbell 1993, p. 172).

For some young women, therefore, cultivating relationships with the young men who would otherwise threaten them is about having the social capital to survive in already difficult circumstances. For others, 'young mothers whose parental responsibilities exile them from the culture of their own generation', the lads

who 'nest' in their houses can provide welcome company (Campbell 1993, p. 174). Such forms of social capital are clearly accumulated at the price of respectability. They bring with them risks not only to reputation, but in communities where femininity is undervalued, sexual predation. Yet this may be seen to be preferable to alienating dangerous young men and so risking physical harm, or in the case of a woman new to the neighbourhood who failed to invest in this strategy, damage to her home and the financial costs involved.

In the absence of employment and adequate social services, in communities where the cultural capital of the dominant culture is inaccessible, sub cultural forms of capital take their place. As Skeggs (2001, p. 296) points out, 'All capitals are context specific', and there are resonances between sub cultural and dominant forms of capital, as the following examples suggest. One young woman who left school at sixteen, for instance, began to engage in petty crime (Campbell, 1993). She described it as her 'work'; her probation officers regarded her crimes as a 'series of survival offences'. This was because the goods she stole did not only have a use value, they always 'had to have an exchange value; they became a kind of convertible currency in a local economy where barter coexisted with the straight sterling and with unofficial exchange rates' (Campbell, 1993, p. 215). Campbell also describes young women whose thieving practices sourced basic necessities for poor and single mother households. While there may be an element of cynical expediency to this, it is also the case that this conferred legitimacy to the crime within a disaffected community and thus accumulated symbolic capital.

For other young women, grafting may be the only way to feed their children. There is an irony to this, an irony implied in the conclusion Campbell (1993, p. 225) draws when she relates the story of a woman prosecuted for stealing offences:

Publicly [her criminality] was perceived as an affront to her identity as a woman; economically she had perceived it precisely *as a woman's obligation* to keep the family going. In the olden days she might have been a woman who baked and cleaned the front step, like her own mother. Nowadays, being a good woman, like her mother, had dispatched her to prison.
(emphasis in original)

As Campbell's analysis suggests, various forms and strategies of sub cultural capital accumulation are not simply a consequence of underclass culture or social structural disadvantage. They are a consequence of the interplay between traditional feminine qualities such as 'caring' and inequalities between the sexes as well as the impact of structural and cultural forces upon the sexual division of labour.

Of course, this perspective does not mean suspending judgement about the negative effects of some forms of sub cultural capital. It does not mean ignoring the fact that the femininities that some 'underclass' young women invest in and the survival strategies they practice may indeed create the very circumstances of their stigmatization. Such practices may invert the dominant structures as suggested by Paul Willis's (1983) theorization of the counter school culture of working class young men. There may indeed be an element of 'self-damnation', or what Bourdieu calls *amor fati*⁴, involved. However, we argue that these practices are not necessarily indicative of resistance or affirmation of classed gender identity. From a feminist perspective, this is not simply a class issue, the difference between middle and working class masculinities and femininities, but a gender issue with a long history in the sexual division of labour and the impact of contemporary political and economic change. Rather, we believe there are parallels between the function of sub cultural capitals of 'underclass' women and

the capitals of Skeggs' working class women who invest in particular forms of femininity precisely in order 'to put a floor under their economic circumstances' (Skeggs, 1997, p. 102, drawing on Connell, *et al.*, 1982).

The concept of sub cultural capital helps to show how certain femininities and feminine strategies of capital accumulation operate within struggling communities; how they function as resources for negotiating difficult lives and measures for stopping things from getting worse. At the same time, however, it must be understood that such capital, though not necessarily experienced as negative or compromising, is intertwined with the 'positional suffering', that is, the low standing these young women may experience within and beyond their communities.

Conclusion

Many analyses have moved discussions of poverty beyond economics. Some such studies have focused on the effects on the poor of social and cultural marginalization and stigmatization and on the subjective experiences of deprivation. Studies of the underclass are loosely related to such analyses. But as we have shown, the very term underclass remains problematic. It renders those it refers to as other, as less than, as deviant and dangerous; as abject. As our analysis has indicated, even a feminist re-engagement with its debates cannot change many of its underlying assumptions. However, in offering alternative conceptualizations via an enriched notion of sub cultural capital informed by Bourdieu's ideas on social suffering and his theory of capitals, we provide a more sympathetic and less judgmental line of analysis that acknowledges the interplay of structure, culture and human agency. This allows us to see Bilynda and Kadee Murphy from Moe and those young women in economically deprived Scotswood not just as victims of economic restructuring and poverty, or as irresponsible and sexually promiscuous welfare mothers. Rather it allows us to

see them as young women trading on the capitals available to them in order to survive and 'have a life' in very difficult circumstances. This line of analysis has the potential to refocus feminist inquiry into the lives of young women who are economically, socially and culturally vulnerable.

Notes

¹ This paper represents some of the early conceptual work of the Australian Research Council Project Australian Research Council (Discovery grant, 2002-2005), *Young women negotiating from the margins of education and work: towards gender justice in educational and youth policies and programs*, Researchers on the project are Jane Kenway, Alison Mackinnon and Elizabeth Bullen, University of South Australia, and Julie McLeod and Andrea Allard, Deakin University. This project seeks to develop new understandings of such young women's experience of school and post-school life and of the ways in which family, friends, work, education, youth culture and youth services converge in their lives. The first phase of the project, involving girls aged 13 to 15 years, has been completed and the second phase has begun. This involves young women aged 19 to 25 years.

² 'The Moe community group People Together told *The Age* the town became a "dumping ground" for Melbourne's single mothers because of its cheap government housing' (Freeman, 1998, p. 40).

³ We recognise that there are significant differences between the specificities of place and the ethnic and racial constitution of the UK communities and our own research site. We do not underestimate the importance of these factors, but do not here attempt to analyse their impact. Likewise, although there is a strong racial element in the American underclass analysis, we do not address the implications of this in this paper.

⁴ According to Moi (1999, p. 269), *amor fati* means 'love your destiny' or 'self-fulfilling prophecy'.

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