

# Smart Girl Identity

## *Possibilities and Implications*

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### BOOK REVIEW

Shauna Pomerantz and Rebecca Raby. 2017. *Smart Girls: Success, School, and the Myth of Post-Feminism*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.

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This book makes a significant contribution to current scholarship on girls who are seen to be functioning in a post-feminist epoch, ready to “take over the world” (1). Drawing from popular sources such as books, magazines, and newspaper articles, the authors interrogate the image of the high-achieving, smart girl whom “we are repeatedly told, is the face of the future” (4).

Rebecca Raby and Shauna Pomerantz “wanted to investigate the smart girl experience precisely because it has become a highly visible story in Western culture with real power to shape how we think about, treat, and allocate resources to girls” (5). (This becomes even more pertinent when media statements suggest that girls are doing better at the expense of boys in school.) But, as feminist sociologists, the authors resist (re)producing universal narratives about smart girls. They recognize that not all girls who do well at school do so in the terms outlined in media stories of post-feminist girlhoods because of intersecting personal and social factors such as socio-economic class, race, age, and nationality.

The authors recruited 57 girls aged from 12 to 18 in Southern Ontario, Canada, between 2008 and 2013, who perceived themselves as being smart. They asked these girls what doing well at school meant to them and if they thought it determined future success in life. Interestingly, not all the girls who volunteered to take part received particularly high grades at school. This pointed to preliminary differences in the definition of smart among the girls to whom they spoke.

In the introductory chapter, Raby and Pomerantz flesh out two key concepts of post-feminism and neoliberal subjectivity that they suggest frame the common narrative that being smart is a viable and easily achievable route for all girls. According to them, “post-feminism suggests that girls in the



West are beyond the need for feminism because they now live in a world where sexism no longer exists. After all, if girls are outdoing boys in school, how can they possibly be experiencing gender inequality?" (11–12). For the authors, post-feminism and neoliberal subjectivity are mutually reinforcing; both concepts support the notion that boys are no longer favoured over girls and it is a matter of individual choice whether a girl wants to take up the position of the smart girl. We see clear evidence of this when girls like Wren and Ella are described as "driven to perfection" (27). The authors point to the immense amount of work and effort that girls put into living out the role of the smart girl. Further, they underscore the fact that girls' notions of what it means to be smart include more than just the ability to excel academically. Ideas about smartness often extend to the supergirl archetype. The authors elaborate, "Not only is the supergirl academically successful and future focused, but she is also able to excel across multiple aspects of school, including extracurricular activities, clubs, sports teams, community service, and peer relationships" (28).

Through the concept of the supergirl, Raby and Pomerantz demonstrate that there is more to the "standardized story" of the smart girl, and the maintenance of this identity is not as "stress-free" (4) or straightforward as has been presented in popular media accounts. The types of schools that girls attend also make a difference to their aspirations. In certain schools, "being smart was in fashion, allowing smart girls a lot more freedom and latitude than in schools where being smart was a potential disaster" (46).

Race and class also play a central part in the constructions and complexities of smartness. The girls in Raby and Pomerantz's study often brought up the differences between prestigious and less prestigious schools, and made references to the "smart Asian stereotype" (139) to explain why other groups of girls were considered to be doing better than they were. Overall, while the construction of the smart girl is seemingly based on meritocratic ideals, Raby and Pomerantz's research reflects that personal talent and a strong desire to succeed is not enough. "Structural supports and class-based privilege play a significant role" (50) in the smart girl's success, especially in her aspiration to become a supergirl. As the authors recount, the girls in their study "who came closest to the media construction of the supergirl were all able-bodied, native English speakers, and white. Most also came from financially secure families" (48–49).

The embodiment of a smart/supergirl identity is contentious. The authors spoke to girls like Virginia who explained that the smart girl identity conflicted with ideals of popular femininity at school. Many girls also men-

tioned that they had to tread a fine line between being smart and being popular. In engaging with the “interconnecting themes of academic investment, gendered peer culture, and physical appearance” (58), Raby and Pomerantz highlight how several girls had dumbed themselves down in order to be more popular or to receive more attention from boys. However, girls who had high levels of parental support in their academic endeavours were less likely to make such trade-offs because “parental commitment helped them negotiate the pulls of peer culture” (77), thus reemphasizing the importance of social class and structural supports in the formation of their identity as smart girls.

Although Raby and Pomerantz incorporated the voices of boys to show how smartness is a similarly difficult identity for them to maintain or take up, in recognizing that some girls accommodated their smartness in ways that ensured their popularity among boys, the authors argue that “narrow, dominant gender practices [still] endure” (92). Moreover, girls’ experiences of sexism included interactions with teachers. Candace, Magda, and Hayden explained that girls are expected to do well in school and therefore they receive less praise from teachers. In contrast, boys are expected to do poorly and if they surpass these lower expectations, they will receive more praise. But, perhaps not surprisingly, given the post-feminist context, the authors found that many girls “struggled or refused to name gender oppression, opting instead to focus on gender equality and a neoliberal construction of individualism” (154). Girls stopped short of identifying certain experiences as unfair or sexist for fear of earning “the potentially socially damaging label [of feminist]” (99). For them, calling out “sexist behaviour might cause [them] to appear unattractive or ugly to boys, as well as to other girls” (99).

In highlighting the flaws of a post-feminist, neoliberal understanding of smart girls, Raby and Pomerantz conclude on a positive and hopeful note. They emphasize that while it is difficult for girls to look beyond the need to manage their smartness in relation to popular femininity, “micro resistances” (156) could still be observed among their participants. The authors suggest that we should be encouraging girls to “embrace a critical voice, and engage with allies who might support that voice in becoming louder” (175).

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