APPROACHES TO FIELDWORK

VOLUME II

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The Importance of Being a 'Lady': Hyper-Femininity and Heterosexuality in the Private, Single-Sex Primary School

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The 'Lady': Some Introductions

It is sometimes like … well, you just feel like they [the teachers] just want you to be a proper little lady… you have to sit with your legs crossed and your back straight and talk like this: 'la de dah' … and, oh I don't know … like, talk to your friends about sewing or something! (Gayle)

This paper seeks to explore what it means to be a 'lady' for girls in one single-sex, private primary school; to examine what it means to embody this classed and gendered discourse in contemporary society. Indeed, as the opening quotation demonstrates, the 'lady' discourse was one that was felt to hold a dominant position in the school where my research took place; ladylike behaviour was something that the girls felt was demanded and expected of them by their teachers and their parents. And yet it is important to recognise that the 'lady' has a long history in English society – emerging in some Saxon and medieval texts, for example – and in the ideas surrounding femininity, romance and 'courtly love' in the eleventh century (Lewis 1936). Therefore, before the paper moves on to explore the girls' contemporary experiences of this discourse in any more depth, it is first necessary to locate the 'lady' within its historical context.

A Short History of the 'Lady'

The emergence of the 'lady' as a dominant discourse is something that appears to be specifically traced back to the eighteenth century and to the etiquette guides that emerged during this era (Poovey 1984; Langland 1995; Morgan 2004). As Poovey (1984) proposes, it was through these texts that particular ideals of feminine behaviour emerged (such as calmness, ease, restraint and luxurious decoration). These appeared to have an affinity with the upper classes and eventually, Poovey suggests, came to be encapsulated in the identity of the lady. Texts like the popular *Etiquette for Ladies* guide in 1837, for example, set out certain feminine ideals, such as: how women should dress in their finery at certain times of the day, how the home should be a 'haven' and a place of 'class display', how women should attempt to pursue a 'social career', and also how they should become involved in charity as a way of 'saving' working-class women and 'refining' them (Langland 1995, 56).

As Langland (1995) proposes, it is important that we do not see these texts as unambiguous accounts of middle-class life at this time, nor the lady identity as something that was necessarily 'natural' or 'real', even if that is what the authors of these texts were claiming. Rather, these texts should be viewed as discursive practices that helped to produce this identity positioning. Indeed, Langland believes that generally these texts were not aimed at self-betterment for working-class women (as is commonly accepted to have been the case), but instead were specifically aimed at the middle class as a way of consolidating its base in society through strategies of exclusion and regulation. These texts, she posits, construct the figure of the middle-class lady as a way of policing and maintaining classed and gendered boundaries, and in doing so contribute to the rhetoric that naturalises these differences.

Sara Delamont (1978) has further proposed that the 'lady' was a dominant discourse in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century English education. Even when a common system of education emerged for girls in this era (after years of education only in the basic 'accomplishments'), Delamont suggests that girls were still subject to strict classed and gendered ideals. Delamont (1978, 145) refers to this as a practice of 'double conformity', where for girls to continue in education their educators had to uphold principles of decent feminine behaviour. Indeed, it appears that even the feminist reformers of this time had to conform to these ideals if they wanted to be taken seriously. As Emily Davies (one of the pioneering campaigners for women's rights to university access) is reported to have stated, 'I feel confident now that one is helped rather than hindered by being as much like a lady as lies in one's own power' (Stephen 1927, 59).

And so, as the work of Delamont and others suggests, these feminine ideals continued well into the nineteenth century, where the figure of the upper-middle-class lady took central place as a sign of ideal womanhood (Dyhouse 1981, Moore 2003). Femininity became seen in this era as the

property of those middle-class women who could prove their 'respectability' through conduct and appearance (Skeggs 1997). It was a position that allowed them to gain some power from their positioning, albeit as relatively 'passive and dependent creatures', but in ways that meant they could distinguish themselves from the 'vulgar' working-class masses.

And indeed, today it is certainly the case that we can see a resurgence of interest in the 'lady' and in 'ladylike' behaviour. This is exemplified in the emergence of a number of 'new' etiquette guides for young women,[1] in the current popularity of the ritual of afternoon tea and in the number of etiquette courses that are presently being offered to commercial firms for staff training purposes.[2] It is also something that can be witnessed in the recent popular British television programme *Ladette to Lady*, where several supposedly 'aggressive, working-class, party' girls are chosen to take part in an etiquette course where they will eventually be transformed into ladies 'skilled in genteel conversation, elegant cooking and the womanly arts' (Sundance channel 2007).

Of course, as Skeggs (1997) suggests, the discourses that surround this identity do not remain identical throughout time, nor are they passively accepted by all subjects in society; instead they are resisted, changed and reformed. Indeed, many would argue that society has been tremendously transformed in recent years owing to feminism, globalisation, de-industrialisation, and the rise of new information technologies (Beck 1992; Furlong and Cartmel 1997; Harris 2004). Some would also suggest that as a result of these changes, girlhood has also been reconstituted; that femininity has been reworked through discourses of neo-liberalism (seemingly offering an exciting new array of possibilities for girls who have the 'will' and 'drive' to continually reinvent themselves), and that girls are now increasingly seen as powerful, agentic and (hetero)sexually desirable beings, as well as metaphors for social change and mobility (Aapola, Gonick, and Harris 2005; McRobbie 2004; Harris 2004, 2005; Ringrose 2007).

These ideas of girls 'having achieved it all' surround us in contemporary society, and some of the more recent etiquette guides appear to pick up on these themes – stressing, for example, that they are designed to be more compatible with modern life and that they not only teach girls how to sew but also how to engage in self-defence. Picking up on the 'post-feminist'[3] motto of 'girl power' and the neo-liberal 'DIY' mentality, these texts appear to claim that girls can now do anything they want, if only they buy the book and put their minds to it.

Aims of the Paper

Given these changes in contemporary society and the current popular obsession with turning 'ladettes' into 'ladies', there is a real need to explore the lived experiences of embodying the lady discourse; to explore what it

means to be a lady in 'post-feminist', 'late modern' society. This paper will attempt to explore how girls in one single-sex, private primary school negotiated these discourses, in a setting where respectability and sexual propriety was expected of them but where the pressures of hyper-femininity and heterosexuality of modern girlhood were also keenly felt.

The title for this paper is deliberately drawn from one of Oscar Wilde's (1995) plays, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, in order to parallel his ironic and double-edged use of the word 'importance'. As the title suggests, Wilde's play is about the Victorian obsession with the importance of earnestness. However, Wilde also uses the play to satirise these imposed standards of morality and to mark them out as impossible to live up to (see Raby 1995). In the same vein, this paper seeks not only to explore the importance of being a lady (as a dominant discourse in this school setting that was enforced in a myriad of ways by the girls' teachers and parents), but also to examine the impossibility of embodying such an identity given the competing 'post-feminist' demands of heterosexualised hyper-femininity (the need for girls to be sassy, sexy and successful).

By exploring the clash between these two sets of discourse (the daily negotiation girls faced between being a 'respectable upper-middle-class lady' and a 'proper heterofeminine girl'), the paper will examine the lived experiences of these identity intersections, in particular, seeking to examine what Butler's (1990) concept of the heterosexual matrix meant for these upper-middle-class girls. The paper will conclude by suggesting that things may well have changed for these girls in recent years, but that the 'lady' discourse still has an enduring and powerful presence in their lives. For the girls in this study at least, 'girl power' was not about absolute freedom to 'make themselves' as they pleased; rather, it was about being powerful in ways that enhanced and maintained heteronormative (upper-middle-class) femininity.

Background to the Research

The paper is based upon research in one single-sex, private primary school in the South of Britain – Taylor's Girls' School.[4] Taylor's is a prestigious, academically selective school that is largely composed of a white, affluent and middle-class pupil population. The school is extremely proud of its long history as a provider of girls' education, and of its reputation for gaining above-average examination results (99.7% pupils gaining A–C grades at GCSE); and this is reflected in the ethos of the school, where an attitude of 'girls can do anything' is promoted and where noticeboards are crammed with stories about ex-pupils who have excelled in a range of careers since leaving the school (see Allan 2006).

Undertaken across two school years, with one class of twenty-five girls (initially aged ten and eleven), the research was an ethnographic exploration

of young middle-class girls' experiences of gender and academic identity construction. The project sought to examine the classed, gendered, sexualised and aged discourses that constituted these girls' identity formations (as 'upper-middle-class', 'girls', 'pupils' and 'children'), as well as to understand the multiple positionings that girls held within these discourses. The methodological techniques employed in this study included participant observation, focused group interviews, photographic diaries and participative analysis sessions (see Allan 2004, 2005 for more detail). This methodological approach is located in an ethnographic tradition where children's voices are taken seriously in research that focuses on them (Thorne 1993; Davies 1993).

The girls' accounts are not, however, to be understood as 'authentic' knowledge emanating from true or unified subjects, just as the interviews that generated them are not to be thought of as 'pipelines' to people's interiors – as simple forms of data-gathering in which participants speak directly to the researcher, who is able to capture self-evident truths or precise data that can be categorised and reported on (Alvesson 2002; McLeod 2000). Rather, both are to be viewed as constructions and as partial truths that allow researchers to explore the multiple subject positions people speak from as the effect of discursive practices (Alldred and Gillies 2002).

Indeed, the paper draws upon feminist post-structural theory to make sense of the girls' processes of identity construction and their positioning in discourse. In particular, the paper utilises Foucault's notion of discourse, recognising it as referring to the 'socially organised frameworks of meaning that define categories and specify domains of what can be said and done' (Bhuman 1994, 2), and as containing a formative power that can 'reach into the very grain of individual's lives', providing them with a range of subject positions that denote who they can be and how they are able to understand the world (Foucault 1988, 107).

In line with this approach, gender is recognised in the paper as a key site of discursive struggle, where the meanings of masculinity and femininity are negotiated by subjects located in discourse. Connell's (1995) conception of hyper-femininity will be drawn upon in order to highlight the dominant ways in which girls felt they had to present themselves in order to be understood as 'proper girls'; as an ideal form of femininity that was hard to live up to on a daily basis (Butler 2004). Butler's (1990) notion of the 'heterosexual matrix' will also be utilised in order to explore the ways in which these 'intelligible genders' were embedded in a structure of presupposed heterosexuality; to examine the ways in which 'doing gender' was simultaneously seen as 'doing heterosexuality'.

And yet it is important to recognise that none of these discourses (nor the subject positions that they provided) were immutable or all-powerful. Nor were they freely chosen and available to everyone. For as Foucault (1981, 101) suggests, discourse transmits and produces power (providing subject positions and prescribing normal and natural ways of behaving), yet also

'undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it' (offering subjects possibilities for resistance). Although the account that follows focuses specifically on the dominant discourses that produced and determined the girls' identities as ladies, it is important to recognise that these were not the only discourses available to them. Indeed, other discourses that they drew on offered them alternative ways of being (albeit often precariously and momentarily, but moments of resistance and difference all the same).

Hyper-femininity and the Importance of Being a 'Lady'

The 'lady' discourse was something that appeared to hold a dominant position in the school where my research was based: it was something that was mentioned both in the informal conversations that I observed and as part of the more formal interview discussions. Almost all of the girls that I spoke to as part of my research told me that they felt they were expected to behave like ladies in their school; that 'ladylike behaviour' was expected and demanded of them by their teachers and their parents. Many of the girls' teachers also talked to me about these expectations, some suggesting that it was a dominant aim of their own, if not also of the school, to 'produce girls who could be considered as ladies'.

And yet, the teachers' talk about 'being a lady' and behaving in a 'ladylike manner' appeared to have multilayered meaning. Admittedly, on some occasions during my time in the school the teachers appeared to be using the term 'lady' to denote and classify 'sex', or 'ladies' to refer to the girls in the plural, as a group of young women. However, there were a number of other times when the teachers used the term more directly to refer to certain expected standards of 'polite behaviour' or conduct: 'nice ladies open doors for others to walk through', 'ladies are polite to one another', 'ladies do not talk with their mouths open'. Indeed, this was something that I was subject to on occasions, as the following field note demonstrates:

> As I fetched my lunch from the serving counter today, I was asked by one of the teachers to join her at the teachers' table. Feeling obliged, I followed her to the table to continue a conversation we had started before lunch. Not having had the time to take any rest breaks during the morning, halfway through lunch I felt a real urge to go to the toilet. Just as I was about to make my excuses to leave the table, one of the girls from the year five class came to the table, and, with a mouth half full of food, told one of the teachers that she was leaving the dining hall to go to the toilet. The teacher then proceeded to firmly tell the girl off ... did she not know that 'it was impolite to leave the table once seated for lunch'? Did she not know how much 'ruder' this became when she 'talked about it with her mouth full'? Having been severely reprimanded, the girl returned to her table while the teacher continued to discuss her 'rudeness'. The conversation ended with the following comment: 'My goodness ... that is part of

the reason why girls are sent to this school! To learn proper manners and to become ladies! How is she going to survive if she can't master these basic functions?'. Feeling suitably embarrassed myself, for even contemplating to leave the table, I remained in my seat and hurriedly finished my meal before I felt confident enough to make my own excuses in order to leave.

During other events that I witnessed in the school, the term was also used by the teachers to refer to expected standards of appearance. The next extract, for example, is taken from one occasion where, though the word 'lady' was never mentioned, its meaning still seemed to be implicit in the teacher's talk.

> Well, like one day we had PE last lesson and so we all decided not to get changed but to go home in our PE kits ... except I got to the gates and I was called back in by Mrs Fairhead. She asked me why I thought I could go home in my netball skirt and said that I shouldn't do this ... I should not be seen to be dressed like this by people from outside of the school ... I could run into builders and perverts on the way home and everything! (Jasmine)

In this instance, the teacher clearly reprimanded the girl for not adhering to certain standards of appearance that were expected of the girls by the school. Through her talk the teacher appeared to cite a number of discourses (the protosexual, erotic little girl, the perverted older man and the innocent child; see Walkerdine 1999; Jones 2004), and in doing so positioned the girl in very specific ways, all of which rested heavily on certain classed, gendered and sexualised expectations of respectability. Even by doing something as supposedly simple as wearing a netball skirt to travel home from school, this girl appeared to be caught up in judgements about her moral and sexual behaviour.

As this extract demonstrates, being and behaving like a lady was also something that the girls picked up on and talked about in interviews themselves. In some conversations, the term was used by the girls to describe the behaviour or lifestyles of certain classmates:

> Well, I mean Ebony is just such a lady! Some lunchtimes I can't believe the way she behaves ... strutting down the field in high heels with an evening bag hanging off her arm! (Ingrid)

> Some people say that Ebony has servants at home... that she is a real lady and that no one in her family has ever had to wash up because they either get their servants to do it or they throw the plates away! (Caroline)

However, it was not often that the girls used the term 'lady' in this way. Nor was it common for them to use the term when referring to their own identities as 'girls'. In fact, the term 'girly girl' was used far more regularly by the girls in order to explain what they felt was expected of them as 'girls' by their peers; to refer to a particular embodiment of hyper-femininity, both in terms of looks ('pink', 'fluffy' and 'well made-up'), and also in terms of behaviour

(as 'nice' and 'compliant'). As Paechter (2006) points out, hyper-femininity can be best understood as a particularly exaggerated, emphasised and ideal performance of femininity. In this school context, hyper-femininity (and being a girly girl) was certainly held up by the girls as the ideal. It was a positioning that many girls struggled to negotiate for themselves, far more than that of the 'lady'.

In fact, there was one group in the class who were felt to inhabit this hyper-feminine identity most closely; and it was these self and peer-identified 'girly girls' who (despite not being very well liked by their peers!) were regarded as the most popular group of girls in the class. Like Hey's (1997) 'All-Star Girls', these were girls who were considered to 'have it all'; they were pretty, rich, considered to be popular, and clever; and their positionings within dominant discourses of hyper-femininity appeared to lend them a great deal of symbolic capital within the school. As some of the girls explained to me in one interview, they (as 'girly girls') could be described as:

Jennifer: Pink, fluffy, hair, make-up, boys, straighteners, hairspray ... um and hairdressing, playing with hair, cheerleading!
Vicky: Girly, fluffy and you dress up like Ebony does all the time. I know a good girly cheer...
AA: Go on then.
Vicky: Oh my God I just got a manicure. The boy is there I need to do my hair, 2, 4, 6, 8 he is waiting at the gate, 3, 4, 5 I hope I look alright!

As both the talk leading up to the rhyme and the rhyme itself demonstrate, the girls felt that a great deal of their identity as girly girls depended on their appearance, dressing up and 'being sexy'. One thing not mentioned in the rhyme, but mentioned on several other occasions, was that these girls wanted to be seen as 'nice' girls. Part of this need to be nice was a need to be seen as a good friend – as trustworthy, reliable, loyal and dedicated (see Ringrose 2006). In some cases, the girls would test one another on their skills as ladies to be nice to one another; like a form of 'niceness litmus testing' (Bloustein 2003, 25). By striving to present themselves in these ways, as beautiful, attractive and well-behaved, the girls appeared to be positioning themselves within dominant discourses of hyper-femininity, and as such were able to maintain a privileged and elite position as 'the most popular friendship group in the class'.

Heterosexuality and the Heterosexual Imaginary

What also became apparent from the girls' talk about hyper-femininity, however, was the inevitable intertwining of gender and sexuality in the constitution of these identities (as Sedgwick 1990 proposes, the indissoluble knot of

gender and sexuality). Of course, this was not something that the girls always described explicitly in their conversation with me. However, if we move back to consider the 'girly' rhyme for a moment ('the boy is there I need to do my hair ... he is waiting at the gate ... I hope I look alright'), we can begin to glimpse the importance that boys and the male gaze had in the constitution of these hyper-feminine identities.

The girls' talk, in an interview, about their classmate Frankie is another example of the intertwining of heterosexuality and hyper-femininity, for it was commonly accepted that Frankie had been accepted into the girly girl group because of her popularity with a number of boys from the nearby private boys' school. By having a relationship with a boy from this school, Frankie was fulfilling a dream that many of the girls hoped for themselves. By keeping it a secret (or more specifically, by pretending to keep it a secret and sharing her relationship details with only a few of the girls), Frankie was one of the only girls who was able to position herself confidently as a heterosexually desirable member of the girly girl group.

The importance of heterosexuality in this school setting is perhaps not an entirely surprising finding, for Butler (1990) has written convincingly about the compulsory nature of heterosexuality in the formation of gender identities and of the heterosexual matrix that structures social relations. Similarly, a number of authors since Butler have commented on the dominance of heterosexuality in educational settings (Epstein and Johnson 1997; Epstein, O'Flynn, and Telford 2003; Renold 2005; Youdell 2006; Rasmussen 2006; Letts and Sears 1999). Thorne (1993, 170), in particular, suggests that hyper-femininity is often negotiated through the heterosexual in schools, and that 'girls are often pressured to make themselves "attractive" to get a boyfriend; to define themselves and other girls in terms of the heterosexual market'. More recently, it is also the case that a number of authors have remarked upon the 'modernisation' of femininity in explicitly sexual terms within contemporary society; the dominance of 'raunch culture' (Gill 2007, 5) and the neo-liberal, normative demands for girls to make themselves as (hetero)sexually desirable subjects in 'late modern' society (see also Gill 2006; Harris 2005).

However, what was particularly interesting in this school context was the fact that a number of girls in the class claimed that they did not know any boys. Although some of the girls claimed to have had relationships with boys they had met on holiday, on summer camps, or even on the way home from school, many of the girls told me that they 'did not know any boys at all' and so could 'only imagine what they were really like'. In Ingraham's (1996) terms, it seemed that the heterosexual really was imaginary in this school – not only because it was obscured from view (its dominance often went unnoticed in everyday school life), but also because it remained a kind of fantasy/imaginary ideal for these girls; a kind of 'boys in the head' fantasy/imaginary picture of what it would be like to go out with boys, rather than a relationship that was practiced (Holland et al. 1998).

What was also interesting, however, was the fact that the girls felt hetero-sexuality to be even more of an issue for them because of their school's single-sex nature. Because only girls were present in the school, the girls told me that they felt even more pressured to present themselves as heterosexual so that they could not be (mis)recognised as lesbians. Hyper-heterofemininity appeared to be intensified in this setting due to the absence of men. This is perhaps a surprising finding, since many authors have claimed that histori-cally single-sex education has allowed girls more freedom in their romantic relationships with girls of the same sex. Griffiths (1997), for example, men-tions a number of instances where it was expected that girls in single-sex schools would have 'crushes' on girls older than themselves. Yet as Sedgwick (1990) suggests, it is often separatism and sameness (such as that found in single-sex schools) that leads people to suspect 'homosexuality'.

Indeed, the girls in this school felt that many more comments were made about their sexuality because of their separation from boys; they felt that it was automatically assumed by their peers outside of school that they were lesbians. On one school trip, this was something that I witnessed for myself, when a boy from a local state school who was travelling with his class to the same exhibition as us leaned over one of the girls (Gayle) and to her horror pulled her hair whilst shouting to his friends: 'it's a shame you know ... she is very pretty ... but she must be a lesbian because she's a Taylor's girl!'.

On this occasion, it was not just Gayle who appeared to be somewhat traumatised by the boy's comments (although she did seem to run for the exit of the bus fairly swiftly as it reached the entrance of the school); the event also appeared to bother the other girls for some time to come, and it was recalled to me with horror in interviews even up to a year after it took place. Nor was this just something that only happened with peers from out-side of the school, for many of the girls also told me that their peers inside school were suspicious of lesbianism too. Because of the single-sex nature of the school, the close and intimate form that friendships could take, and the dominance of certain age-old stereotypes relating to the predatory and explicitly sexual nature of lesbians (Rofes 1998), many of the girls felt that they had to go to great lengths to protect themselves from these claims and from this potentially injurious identity.

Class(iness) and Respectability

These fears and judgements about the respectable nature of homo/hetero-sexuality cannot, however, solely be understood in terms of gender (as the fear of not being recognised as a 'proper girl'). They must also be understood in terms of class (as the fear of not being recognised as upper-middle-classy enough) and in relation to the ways in which they clashed with the dominant discourse of the 'lady' in this school setting. Both Hart (1994) and Skeggs (1997) suggest that the lesbian identity has always been pathologised,

classed and criminalised in popular discourse. It has always been seen as something to be avoided (as something that is perverse, dangerous, deviant and contaminating), whereas the reverse has been true for heterosexuality (identities that have always been seen as markers of white, middle-class respectability). This could perhaps be understood as a further reason why the girls in my research did not want to be recognised as lesbian; for fear of being recognised as non-respectable and overtly sexual subjects (Vicinus 1992).

Yet, as Skeggs (1997) also suggests, non-heterosexual identities have gradually shifted in status over time, becoming more acceptable positionings for some middle-class women. Skeggs explains this in terms of the emergence of a 'bourgeois' lesbian identity, which she believes has appeared in recent years due to the 1960s and 1970s counter-culture of freedom, self-expression, rebellion and individual choice. Taylor's (2007, 351) work would also seem to suggest that is infinitely easier for middle-class girls to be recognised as non-heterosexual, due to the differing amounts of social and cultural capital that they have at their disposal and the fact that they will not be punished for the 'double deviance' of transgressing both classed and gendered norms. Arguably, however, these were not identities that would have been accessible to many of the girls in my study, positioned as they often would have been in discourses of childhood innocence and therefore prevented from being seen as sexual or free to choose any form of sexual orientation.

Even heterosexuality (in its myriad forms) was not easy for the girls to negotiate, for although it was regarded as a respectable subject positioning within this school it was still subject to classed judgements of respectability (Skeggs 1997). Within the school, it certainly appeared as though the girls were limited in their performance of hetero hyper-femininity because of the way this transgressed certain boundaries of sexual propriety and, therefore, also clashed with the school's expectations of them being respectable ladies.

During the focused group interviews, for example, a number of the girls complained to me about the strict ways in which their teachers and parents regulated their appearance. I was told that uniforms were regularly checked so that skirts could be adjusted to 'acceptable' and 'appropriate' lengths, that the girls were chaperoned during school discos to prevent any 'unsightly behaviour', and that school reading books were censored for 'explicit sexual content'. One morning during my field work, I was also stopped by some of the girls, who asked me what the word immorality meant. Wondering why they wanted to know such a thing, I asked the girls about the context in which they were using the word. One girl replied by telling me:

> Well, my Mum says that I can not watch Grease[5] the movie, because it is immoral ... I don't know what the word means, but I know she doesn't want me to watch it because it is all about sex!

However, it was not just the girls' parents and teachers that enforced these standards, for they also appeared to 'police' one another in these ways too;