

# **Punk, Gender and Ageing**

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# **Punk, Gender and Ageing: Just Typical Girls?**

BY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

I would like to dedicate this to Islay. May you continue to make me smile with your quirky ways, and may you forever remain strong willed. And may you maybe, just maybe someday, come with mummy to a punk gig.

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## **Author Biography**

Laura Way is a Research Fellow in Family Research at the University of Lincoln. Her research centres on ageing and gender across the life course with a particular interest in punk. Further interests include creative research methodologies and punk pedagogies. She is a steering group member of the Punk Scholars Network.

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# Introduction

This book examines the construction and maintenance of punk identities by ageing, or older, (punk) women. Scholarship on post-youth subcultural involvement demonstrates some evidence of exploring the interplay between age, gender and subculture yet still lacks any research which solely focusses on the experiences of older punk women. Historically, women have been marginalised in subcultural scholarship, and this has been more so the case for ageing, or older, women. In line with the feminist research values, the research presented here therefore gives voice to a previously marginalised sample.

Commonly, punk was theorised as both a male-dominated subculture and one which was 'youth' centred (Hebdige, 1998). There is now growing recognition of the presence of women within punk (see, e.g., Leblanc, 2002). Additionally, the association between punk and youth has begun to change with research on older punk fans within the wider context of 'post-youth' subcultural work (Bennett, 2006; Bennett & Hodkinson, 2012). This reflects an increasing academic interest in the ageing popular music audience more generally over the last 20 years (Bennett, 2018). Bennett (2018) notes that:

the notion of, for example, the aging rocker or the aging punk has attracted significant sociological attention, not least of all because of what this says about the shifting socio-cultural significance of rock and punk and similar genres – which at the time of their emergence were inextricably tied to youth and vociferously marketed as 'youth musics'. (p. 49)

Rather than understanding such individuals as 'clinging onto their youth' or 'refusing to grow up', a cultural ageing perspective on this phenomena can serve to show instead that such youth cultural identities can 'provide the basis of more stable and evolving identities over the life course' (Bennett, 2018, p. 49). Informed by such an approach, and indeed this academic justification, there has been some consideration of the ageing punk (Bennett, 2006, 2012, 2013). However, the very limited inclusion of older punk women in such research samples (discussed further in Chapter 1) means knowledge produced can be critiqued as being 'malestream' (Gurney, 1997; Oakley, 1998). Existing theoretical and conceptual understanding of punks fails then to consider the interaction between ageing, gender and subcultural affiliation and leaves various questions unanswered – what punk means to older punk women, the role punk plays in their everyday

lives and their identification, how punk has intersected with their experiences of gender and ageing and so forth. This book and the research therein fills this academic gap by exploring older punk women's construction and maintenance of punk identities and is the first study to solely focus on this.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The research which this book is based on was carried out for a PhD and was granted ethical clearance from the University of Leicester. All participants received electronic information sheets and consent forms. They were asked to confirm they were happy with what the research entailed and gave consent either physically in writing, electronically or verbally. Participants were given the choice to be anonymous or to be named (justified by feminist, activist approaches to data collection/dissemination). For those wishing to be anonymous, pseudonyms were used and any identifying details removed or changed. For those wanting to be named, first names only have been used.

Within the publication there are three photographs. The first two of clothing were taken by myself, the researcher, and feature no identifiable individual. The third is also a photograph I took – this was a photo of a printed image the participant gave to me to keep.

## Chapter 1

# Playing A-Minor in the Punk Scene or All Girls to the Front? An Introduction

Well, I figured, if I'm gonna grow old, I'm gonna do it as disgracefully as I can. (Sam, late forties)

The primary reason for beginning this research was that when I explored literature concerning ageing, punk and gender, voices such as Sam's were absent. Punk originally was theorised as both a male-dominated subculture and one which was 'youth' centred (Hebdige, 1998), and whilst both of these elements have since been challenged in subcultural scholarship, there still appears to be limited analysis which brings ageing punk women to the fore. This research is concerned with filling that gap.

It would be wrong for me to present only the academic justification for this research and not acknowledge my own personal investment in punk. My commitment to being both reflexive and transparent leads me to introduce here the more personal motivations and reasons for this research which sit alongside the academic one described above. My own personal punk journey started in my childhood, with bands such as *The Clash* featuring in my parents' vinyl collection and seeing photos of my dad as a young punk with the stereotypical look associated with British punk in the 1970s and 1980s – rips, safety pins, band t-shirts and leather jackets. As I began exploring music more in my early teens, I began developing my own collection (albeit it with tapes and CDs rather than vinyl) within which punk bands featured and began playing in bands. Just before I started this research, I was in my late twenties and had become increasingly interested in how my relationship to and with punk seemed to be changing as I aged.

## Introducing the Research Participants

This book, however, is not about me. It is about a group of 22 women I had the pleasure of speaking with across the two and a bit years I was interviewing. Before going any further, it is only right that I introduce them to you now as it will be their voices you will be hearing throughout.

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## 2 *Punk, Gender and Ageing*

I do provide some brief socio-demographic detail where known. These are details correct at the time of the interviews. I also highlight what format their interview took, for example, face to face, telephone, Skype, instant messaging or e-mail. As some of the women I spoke with wished for their real names to be used (something I discuss further in relation to ethics later in this chapter), I have stated where pseudonyms were used. Inconsistencies in 'Additional Information' (e.g. the way it states for some but not others whether or not they have children) reflects the differences in information provided by participants. I did not have particular questions in the interviews concerning things like marital status, employment and so forth, so references to such things instead emerged within the interviews (or not). To avoid any assumptions being made concerning the ordering of this introductory list, I will present this as an alphabetical listing.

*Briony* (30), originally from the United Kingdom but been based in Germany for some years. In employment, in a relationship, has one child. Interview: Skype.

*Ces* (27), Midlands. In employment. Interview: face to face.

*Cheryl\** ('middle aged'), location unknown. Interview: e-mail.

*Christine* (thirties), South of England. In employment, married. Interview: face to face, paired.

*Deedee\** (38), Midlands. In employment. Interview: face to face.

*Elizabeth* (30), Midlands. In employment, in a relationship. Interview: face to face.

*Grace\** (52), location unknown. In employment. Interview: e-mail.

*Hester\** (51), location unknown. In employment, has children. Interview: e-mail.

*Jen* (early thirties), Midlands. In employment. Interview: face to face.

*Jess* (31), Midlands. In employment. Interview: face to face.

*Katie* (early thirties), Central England. In employment. Interview: Skype.

*Kristianne* (mid-forties), South of England. In employment, one child. Interview: face to face, paired.

*Lindsey* (44), Scotland. In employment, studying. Interview: telephone.

*Milly\** (51), North England. Married, has children. Interview: Skype.

*Morag\** (49), location unknown. In employment, in a relationship, no children. Interview: e-mail.

*Myfanwy\** (53), location unknown. In employment. Interview: e-mail.

*Naefun\** (early forties), South of England. In employment, in a relationship. Interview: Skype.

*Naja* (44), originally from the United Kingdom but currently residing outside of the United Kingdom. In employment, married, no children. Interview: Skype.

*Rebecca* (early thirties), Midlands. Studying, married, no children. Interview: face to face.

*Sam* (late forties), Midlands. In employment, in a relationship, has children. Interview: face to face.

*Sharon\** (52), Wales. In employment, in a relationship, has children.  
Interview: face to face.

*Suzy* (33), Northern England. In employment, in a relationship, no children.  
Interview: instant messaging.

\*indicates where a pseudonym was used.

One thing I did find with the age criteria I had set on the research call-out (30 years and above) was that a few women contacted me saying they wished to be involved but were just shy of being 30 years old. In these cases I replied with the fuller research information sheet which gave the context of the research as being about older punk women and let them decide if they still wished to take part. Where they did I endeavoured to include them in the sample as they clearly felt they were separate from punk youths. This highlights complexities around age/ageing with it being difficult to objectively identify old versus young, for example, because of people's subjective experiences and sense of age/ageing (Kaufman, 1986).

## **Aims of the Research**

I begin the research process with particular themes I wished to explore and under these themes key questions. The four key themes that I wanted to explore in relation to older punk women were: subcultural identification, ageing and embodiment, and resistance. I saw an exploration of gender as inherent to all of these. Questions arising from these are detailed below.

- (1) *Subcultural identification*: What does punk mean for post-youth punk women? How do these women enact a punk identity? How does their punk identity interact with other identities they hold? How do they articulate punk as still significant in their lives? Do they encounter any barriers or limitations on this articulation?
- (2) *Ageing and embodiment*: How is 'being' and 'doing' punk negotiated alongside the experience of age/ageing? How is it managed with regard to societal expectations concerning (ageing) women? What relationship has their punk identity played with life events significant to these women? How is the body used in the construction of a punk identity and how do these women respond to the ageing body?
- (3) *Resistance*: In the context of post-youth punk women, is the subcultural concept of 'resistance' still relevant and if so, what form does this take? Does resistance play a role of these women's lives? How is such resistance articulated? Does resistance take different forms? How does resistance interact with issues regarding ageing and femininity?

It is worth noting here that my research initially utilised the expression 'post-youth' in order to distinguish from the punk youth research had predominantly focussed on and at the same time avoid any offence the term 'older' might cause. My sampling method avoided either expression, instead specifying a minimum age.

I did, however, use both 'post-youth', 'older' and also 'ageing' as expressions within interviews with participants to gauge which term sat best with them. There was no challenging of my use of 'older' and 'ageing', yet the 'post-youth' expression caused some laughter amongst participants(!) I decided from there I would have 'older' punk women as the predominant phrasing in the write-up of my research but that all three could be used interchangeably.

### **Methodology and Methods**

The research methodology was informed by both inductivism and feminism. My research, though taking much inspiration from grounded theory, would be considered a 'weak' version of it (Gibson & Hartman, 2014). Whilst theory was grounded in the participants' perspectives (Gibson & Hartman, 2014), characteristics of grounded theory, such as theoretical sampling, were not wholly employed nor was 'openness' fully achieved (an insightful account concerning the difficulties of realising complete openness has been provided by Hodkinson, 2009).

Feminist methodology might only be characterised by the way it is 'shaped by feminist theory, politics and ethics and grounded in women's experience' (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2006, p. 16). Part of my rationale for conducting research on older punk women was to provide a marginalised group with a voice; reflecting how feminist research commonly focusses on women's, and 'other' marginalised groups', lived experiences (Nagy Hesse-Biber & Leckenby, 2004). A feminist informed methodology also involved addressing questions around power dynamics throughout the research process (Nagy Hesse-Biber & Leckenby, 2004). An inductive approach, for example, allowed for themes and foci to emerge from the participants rather than the researcher being 'taken for granted as the knowing party' (Nagy Hesse-Biber, Leavy, & Yaiser, 2004, p. 12). Strong reflexivity was also engaged in throughout the research process (Nagy Hesse-Biber & Leckenby, 2004).

The need for reflexivity was additionally important in this research due to my position as an insider. There are various examples of insider research involving punk (including Leblanc, 2002, and Taylor, 2011) and as Sharp and Threadgold (2019) note there exists extensive writing on techniques of insider research on music subcultures more broadly. Since childhood punk has been an important facet of my identity; indeed, my own involvement in punk was fundamental in choosing to explore punk academically. Reflexivity around this featured across the research process and I was made aware of both the benefits but also pitfalls insider research could pose. Thus my dual identity as both an insider and a researcher demanded a reflexive approach throughout the research process so as to balance potential benefits with potential difficulties (Hodkinson, 2005).

Qualitative data were analysed from 16 semi-structured interviews (one paired) and 5 e-mail interviews. Qualitative methods were deemed suitable as I wanted to explore participants' understandings of the social world (Bryman, 2004). The sample was acquired through a call-out for volunteers online and word of mouth, though some snowball sampling also emerged from this. The initial criterion for inclusion was 'punk women over the age of 30 years old' and potential

participants could decide for themselves whether they fitted this description to avoid any imposition of what was considered 'punk'. Bennett (2006) noted some difficulties in reaching older punk women in his research, musing that perhaps their fandom had become a highly personal, and therefore more private, issue. I did not experience similar difficulties in gathering my own sample of women. It is possible that being a woman helped in this process though it would not be something I could say with certainty.

Ethical clearance was granted from my affiliated academic institution. Though anonymity is considered part of ethical research practice, Downes, Breeze, and Griffin (2013) acknowledge how this might be problematic with research concerned with DIY cultures (e.g. punk). Due to the activist nature of some DIY cultures, research participants might wish to be known or named and the 'practice of imposing pseudonyms and removing identifiable information can undermine participant labour, power and agency' (Downes et al., 2013, p. 108). Such a position is also in keeping with feminist thinking and my participants were, therefore, asked if they wished to be anonymous. More participants than not said they wished to be named.

## **Key Literature**

This chapter opened by highlighting how scholarship initially conceptualised punk as a subculture predominantly made up of young men (Hebdige, 1998). Hebdige's work came out of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) which conceptualised youth cultures, or subcultures, as bounded, homogeneous groupings of committed youth (Hall & Jefferson, 2006; Muggleton, 2000). The CCCS' neo-Marxist framework understood these subcultures as 'collective responses by post-war working class youth to their contradictory and subordinated position in post-war UK society' (Hodkinson, 2016, p. 630) with such groups sharing behaviours, musical tastes and stylistic choices (Clark, 2003). Whilst CCCS scholars claimed to emphasise agency, Sweetman (2013) notes that these subcultures were largely understood through a structural-functionalist analysis with (sub)cultures seen as responses to material/social conditions. Punk was subjected to a semiotic analysis with items worn by subcultural participants (such as safety pins) seen as a way of offering some resistance to mainstream culture/society (Hebdige, 1998). Building on two criticisms of the CCCS' work concerning its marginalisation of women and its focus on youth, I will next set out some key background reading which will help set the context with regard to relevant literature on punk, gender and ageing. After this, I will highlight some key concepts to this research – gender, resistance, life course, career and scene.

### ***Women and Punk***

As mentioned above, the CCCS received criticism for the absence of girls and women in its analysis. Through a feminist re-reading of the work of Willis (1977) and Hebdige (1998), McRobbie (1991) argues that such pieces structurally excluded women through their concepts, adhered to patriarchal meanings

in their analysis and failed to explore sexual divisions (even as they played out in the studies themselves). In early work concerning girls and subcultures, McRobbie (1991) sought to move away from the almost exclusive interest in boys found in such 'classic' work of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (e.g. Taylor, Walton, & Young, 1973; Willis, 1977). It can be argued that this interest in boys (in turn decreeing invisibility of girls) was not reflective of girls' actual non-presence. Girls were present, but perhaps compared to their male counterparts, their subcultural involvement was different in form and arguably, where present, their subordination was retained and reproduced (McRobbie & Garber, 1991). Moving away from the classic conceptualisation of subculture as oppositional or creative can be a way of recognising that girls have alternative ways of organising their cultural life which may offer them different possibilities for resistance (McRobbie & Garber, 1991).

Walby's (1989) concept of private patriarchy is relevant here. Private patriarchy is a type of patriarchy which 'is based upon the relative exclusion of women from arenas of social life apart from the household' (Walby, 1989, p. 228). This notion of private patriarchy emerges through McRobbie and Garber's (1991) work on girls and subcultures in which they suggest young pre-teen girls have less access to public freedom than their brothers and therefore create bedroom cultures rather than participating in street cultures outside of the home. The second type of patriarchy identified by Walby (1989) is public patriarchy which 'does not exclude women from certain sites, but rather subordinates women in all of them' (p. 228). This happens through six different structures of patriarchy, one of which is patriarchal culture (Walby, 1989). Patriarchal culture concerns the way 'discourses on femininity and masculinity are institutionalised in all sites of social life [...] which have cultural production as a central goal' (Walby, 1989, p. 227). This links to the way punk has typically been conceptualised as a masculine subculture (Leblanc, 2002) which may make punk less appealing or even accessible to girls/women.

There has been an increased focus on females within subcultural literature more broadly since the critique made above, including research on girls/women in Goth (Brill, 2007), metal (Hill, 2016), hip-hop (Vasan, 2011), rave (Pini, 2001) and skateboarding (Pomerantz, Currie, & Kelly, 2004). There is also now a growing body of research focussing solely on punk women (some of which are highlighted below) or considering gender in punk more broadly (Hanson, 2017; Liptrot, 2014; Sharp & Threadgold, 2019). Literature concerning female punks has tended to revolve around three broad areas – female punk musicians (Berkers, 2012; Cohen, 2001; Denim, 1977; Kennedy, 2002; Reddington, 2007), female punks as a minority within a male-dominated subculture (Griffin, 2012; Leblanc, 2002; Roman, 1988) and females in relation to riot grrrl (which could be conceptualised as an offshoot of punk) (Davis, 2001; Monem, 2007; Piano, 2003). My research, however, focusses on non-musicians. This is not to say that there are no musicians in my research sample, rather, the primary criteria for involvement in the research was self-identification as a punk, rather than as a punk musician. Given this, along with constraints placed on space afforded, I will not be covering literature concerning female punk musicians; however, I highly recommend Helen



Reddington's (2007) *The Lost Women of Rock Music* which offers a thorough examination of this topic.

Where academia does focus on female punks rather than female punk musicians, the attention is usually framed by the fact that these punks/punk musicians are seen as a minority within a masculine subculture (in terms of male participants outnumbering females and punk being seen to rest upon particular notions of masculinity) (Griffin, 2012; Leblanc, 2002; Roman, 1988). The most notable piece of work which considers punk females, owed to its length and detail, comes from Leblanc (2002) whose research considers how these individuals negotiated gender within a subculture which is typically, as noted above, coded as male (in terms of the themes, behaviours and so forth).

Leblanc (2002) argues the punk subculture is masculinist and that this can be seen in several ways – male punks physically outnumber females, the codes/norms of punk are heavily masculine, and (as found in her study) male dominance occurs through male punks' expectations of and interactions with female punks. The latter is achieved through things such as abuse, chivalry and sexual pressures – all of which involve contradictions being placed on the punk girls (Leblanc, 2002). Exploring how punk males' relations with punk girls construct the masculinism of the punk subculture in these ways allowed Leblanc (2002) to see how this, in turn, affected the punk girls' constructions of femininity and punk identities. Her findings demonstrated that punk girls challenged dominant, or mainstream, culture by identifying as punk and additionally challenged the masculine norms of the punk subculture by combining discourses of femininity with those of punk – they adopted established, masculine punk style yet juxtaposed this with feminine aspects in both their style and behaviour (Leblanc, 2002). Whilst these findings shed a light on the construction of femininity and resistance amongst punk women, it would be interesting to explore such ideas further with the added aspect of age/ageing. Leblanc (2002) focusses on those she terms 'punk girls', and this is reflected in the demography of her sample with only two participants out of 40 being aged 30 years and above. There is limited scope then for considering the relationships between punk, gender *and* ageing.

Space has also been considered in research focussing specifically on female punks (Griffin, 2012; Roman, 1988). Applying geographical theories about gender roles and performing gender, Griffin (2012) focusses on the context of a local UK 'do it yourself' (DIY) punk scene finding that the space was made less inclusive for women due to a reinforcement of the public versus private gendered dichotomy (with males being the public musicians, promoters/organisers) and the importance given to masculine body performances (e.g. through dancing). In addition to scholarly work analysing punk and gender, there has been a significant body of literature more recently which explores gender and sexuality within punk (Sharp, 2019; Sharp & Nilan, 2015, 2017).

Attention to gender has also been provided by research on straight-edge (sXe) and riot grrrl.

sXe can be seen as a subgenre of punk which emerged in the United States in the 1980s from the existing East Coast punk subculture as a response to punk's often nihilistic ways (Haenfler, 2004). It advocated a "clean-living" ideology,

abstaining from alcohol, tobacco, illegal drugs, and promiscuous sex' (Haenfler, 2004, p. 409). Academic consideration given to women within sXe (Haenfler, 2006; Mullaney, 2007) supports the proposition that women within punk can be subjected to particular expectations or treatment because of their gender. Women in sXe were subjected to more scrutiny than sXe males (Haenfler, 2006; Mullaney, 2007); were seen as less capable of doing key elements which the sXe identity relied on (Mullaney, 2007); and participants of both genders seemed to equate sXe men with lifelong commitment, whereas for women, it was seen more as a phase (Haenfler, 2006; Mullaney, 2007).

Like sXe, riot grrrl can be understood as a subgenre or offshoot of punk. Riot-grrrl emerged as a feminist response to punk. Downes (2012) notes how within punk, 'punk women's resistance was constrained by hegemonic gender relations that leaked into punk subcultures' (p. 208). Some argue that the feminist-indebted riot grrrl movement helped women to counteract the subordination they felt they experienced within both the punk subculture and mainstream culture/society (Downes, 2012; Dunn & Farnsworth, 2012; Rosenberg & Garofalo, 1998). Due to riot grrrl being another offshoot of punk, my sampling was open to the inclusion of 'older' riot grrrls. The nature of my sampling allowed for this as the definition of what counted as a punk woman was left open to subjective interpretation and not specified. Because of the explicit feminism underpinning riot grrrl, I planned to consider them a subgroup within the overall sample which could of lent itself to an examination of any differences in findings between them and those who identified as specifically *punk* women (the same could also be said for any sXe participants). However, none of my research sample self-identified as riot grrrls or sXe.

### ***Subcultures Post-youth and Ageing Punks***

In addition to its marginalisation of (young) women, the CCCS has been critiqued for its limited relevance in understanding participants' experiences post-youth. Initial work by the CCCS conceptualised youth cultures, or subcultures, as bounded, homogeneous groupings of committed youth (Hall & Jefferson, 2006; Hebdige, 1998). These groups of youth were viewed as sharing behaviours, musical tastes and stylistic choices (Clark, 2003). Such CCCS' conceptualisations of subculture have been criticised for possessing limited relevance in understanding contemporary youth cultures, leading to the development of 'post-subcultural' approaches (e.g. Bennett & Kahn-Harris, 2004). In this post-subcultural context, alternative concepts for understanding 'youth' cultures have been developed (e.g. 'tribes', 'neo-tribes', 'lifestyles' and 'scenes'), and it is within these that a greater capacity for thinking about 'post-youth' participants emerges. Further consideration of the concept 'scene' will follow later.

It is perhaps then out of this post-subcultural approach that an exploration of ageing punks emerges, and there have been several research studies which have made them their focus (Andes, 2002; Bennett, 2006, 2013; Davis, 2006). Initial work on ageing punks suggested that scope for maintaining a successful punk identity as one ages is limited. In Andes' (2002) consideration of ageing punk