

Interactions in the text: becoming a woman in 1970s teen magazines

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Abstract

This paper uses a case study from 1970s girls' magazine *Honey* to demonstrate how paying attention to reader contributions published in magazines can give a richer, more nuanced view of the relationship between magazine and reader. The case study, a debate on why women assume they will have children, offers a new understanding of the way that these interactions in the text contributed to the development of young women's understanding of the increasing freedoms available to them in the 1970s.

Keywords

Textual interactions, teen magazines, 1970s, feminism, motherhood, teenagers

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In December 1974, young women's magazine *Honey* published an article by Anna Coote entitled 'Why do women feel they should have children?' in which Coote questions the assumption many women make that having babies will be a central part of their lives. She sets out in some detail many reasons not to have children, covering topics such as financial independence, careers, romantic relationships and the lack of equality between mothers and fathers in terms of who bears the brunt of child-rearing. The article suggests that many women who have, or want, children, are unable to articulate the reasons why, although Coote also admits some equivocation for herself: 'there are still occasions when I find myself thinking that perhaps, after all, I *would* like to have one or two' (*Honey*, December 1974, p. 72). She provoked a debate in the magazine's letters page, with readers both thanking and criticising Coote, and exploring the way her arguments relate to their own lives.

In this essay I use Coote's article, and the responses it provoked, as a case study to explore how a close examination of reader responses published in magazines can offer us a hitherto unexplored view of young women's attitudes to the new possibilities that the 1970s were beginning to open up for them.

This is a new approach to the study of girls' magazines, which has previously focused largely on either the messages conveyed by the magazines (e.g. Garner, Sterk, & Adams, 1998), the intentions of magazine editors (e.g. Keller, 2011), or the extra-textual responses of the magazines' readers (e.g. Currie, 1999, 2001), with little attention paid to the interventions that readers make in the text itself (albeit moderated by the magazine's editors).

Other scholars have made use of the published interactions between reader and magazine to offer a fresh perspective, or to fill in a gap in conventional histories, such as Teresa Gerrard's use of the 'Answers to Correspondents' section in the *Family Herald* to provide information about the reading habits of the 'common reader', who had been neglected by previous research (2011), and Laurel Brake and Julie Codell's edited collection *Encounters in the Victorian Press* which aims to show a broader view of the relationship between the press and Victorian society (2005).

However, this approach has not been more widely adopted, and has not yet been applied to the teen magazines of the twentieth century, and to what we can learn about transitions in the lives of young women as the results of second wave feminism began to be felt.

Consideration of the way that magazines used the voices of their young women readers is particularly important, since these readers are often portrayed as being easily influenced by the messages of the media and society around them, and seen as having little or no critical faculty through which to filter these messages. However, in magazines for them — perhaps the medium with the closest relationship to the teenage girl throughout the twentieth century — we can see evidence of girls like those responding to Anna Coote, who take issue with what the magazines are telling them, and argue back. Analysis of this sort of interaction can give us a new view of girls' magazines, the girls who read them, and their relationship to wider society.

This attention to the contributions of young women readers to their magazines, in an attempt to redress the way that their input has been largely ignored, has the potential to offer rich new insights into their lives, their magazines, and the way that they related to this moment of transition in the possibilities open to young women.

Our existing view of what it meant to be a woman in the late twentieth century relies largely on work with and about already-adult women. For example, research into the distribution of domestic and emotional labour between married couples shows us an inequitable situation with women who work outside the home returning home to the 'second shift' of housework, as well as maintaining the emotional side of family life (e.g. Daniels, 1987; Erickson, 2005). Recent research (e.g. Sullivan, 2013) shows that progress on this front is slower than feminists have hoped. While women are now expected to work outside the home, and most do¹, the gender pay gap, and gender-segregation of some sectors of employment, persists (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2010).

¹ 70.8 per cent of women were in employment in November 2017, up from 55.7 per cent in December 1974 (Office for National Statistics, 2018)

Those researchers who have investigated girls' attitudes towards the women they might become, such as Sue Sharpe's research with working class Ealing schoolgirls in the 1970s, demonstrate that expectations around how women will spend their lives were in flux, and often contradictory. Sharpe's respondents showed some confusion about this, with girls having 'firm vocational aspirations' at same time as a continuing belief that their primary purpose was home and family (1994, pp. 48-49).

What has not yet been thoroughly researched is the way that magazines for girls and young women intervene in this transition. My case study from *Honey* magazine will demonstrate that the magazines of the 1970s did not present a single straightforward view of the adulthood awaiting their readers, but that they prepared their readers for the transition to a contested adulthood by portraying that complexity in their pages, by discussing the balancing act between domestic/emotional labour, and economic labour, and showcasing some of the opinions and feelings their readers might have about it. Magazines for teenagers and young women in the 1970s engage with this transition in the articles they publish, but also in publishing letters from readers, so that the voices of the young women for whom this will soon be a pressing question are themselves represented within the magazine pages, interacting with the messages that the magazine has offered them. With the multi-author nature of magazines, and this inclusion of reader voices, the teen magazines of the 1970s offer a layered and nuanced view of the complex transition to womanhood.

Societal changes

Until the mid-to-late 1960s, magazines for girls and young women such as *Heiress*, *Boyfriend* and *Jackie* had peddled the idea that the main purpose of girls' lives was to find husbands and become mothers, and that this was the only viable version of adulthood open to their readers. A typical example is a quiz in *Boyfriend* which asks girls how much they agree with a variety of statements of submission to their potential-husband's authority, and to the tedium of domestic chores, and warns those who are insufficiently compliant that 'it would be disastrous for you to attempt to make a success of marriage until you are a little more grown up in your outlook and character' (9 January 1960, p. 23): being grown up, for a woman, involves submission to housework and husband. But in the 1970s, this began to change.

The 1970s saw a resurgence of women's rights activism. Throughout the decade the women's liberation movement (now more usually called 'second wave feminism') held national conferences at cities across the UK, arguing for reproductive rights, equal pay, and the recognition and valuing of domestic labour, among other issues. The United Nations declared 1975 to be International Women's Year, and it was also the year of the UK Sex Discrimination Act, which made some kinds of sex discrimination in employment illegal. This was the aftermath of influential and popularly successful American books arguing about what it meant to be a woman, such as Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), cataloguing problems with the fulfilment of American housewives, and Helen Gurley Brown's *Sex and the Single Girl* (1962) advocating sexual freedom for women in life before marriage, and her relaunch of *Cosmopolitan* magazine in 1965 in the US, which reached the UK in 1972 (Quinn, 2012), and which is likely to have overlapped in readership with *Honey*.

At the same time there were changes in marriage and childbirth rates, and in contraception. In 1974, the year of Coote's article about motherhood, the average age of a single woman marrying a single man was just under 22, around its lowest point in the century, and just starting to rise. The total fertility rate dropped below two children per woman for the first time since 1942, and continued to fall for the next few years; it has not yet gone back up over two (Office for National Statistics, 2015). The contraceptive pill had been available in the UK since 1961, but only to unmarried women since 1967 (National Health Service, 2015), and through the sixties and seventies there was public debate about its wider availability. Although the pill wasn't the first female-controlled contraception available (diaphragms and cervical caps had been in use since the nineteenth century), the pill's ease of use and convenience led to its widespread adoption, and meant that these young women were the first generation for whom sexual relationships need not automatically lead to motherhood. This increased sexual freedom led to opportunities for greater personal freedom, too; even university access eased for girls once they were no longer seen as a constant pregnancy risk (Dyhouse, 2013, p. 168).

It was, then, potentially both an exciting and an unsettling time to be becoming a woman. Many aspects of womanhood which had previously been taken for granted became increasingly open to debate, and allowed girls to envisage new forms of womanhood which might not have been

available to previous generations. The tension between working within and without the home, and its associated questions of motherhood and career, is played out in detail in *Honey's* 1974 debate about why women feel they should have children, and the reader voices seen in the response letters offer a much deeper view of the overall debate than the initiating article alone would have done.

***Honey* magazine**

Honey was founded in 1960, at the top end of the teen magazine age range, being read by independent young women as well as their still-dependent younger sisters; an early tagline proclaimed it as 'For the teens and twenties'. It was aspirational, middle class, and forward-thinking by comparison with its contemporaries. In terms of the type and quantity of advertisements, it looks rather more like the glossy women's magazines than the rest of the teen market. The content discussed here comes from issues bearing the tagline 'Young, gay and get-ahead'. Articles tended towards serious rather than frivolous, and most assumed readers would think critically about the issues they were facing. It frequently included articles offering a mouthpiece to readers on a variety of topics about their lives, and a lively letters page, called 'Chatterbox' with reader responses to articles.

Like most, the magazine altered in focus during its life. Cynthia White describes its initial run as 'intended as a magazine of general guidance for young women, as it might be put over by a "big sister"', aiming to fill a perceived gap in the advertising spread, which was not yet tapping the increasing disposable income of teenage girls; however, '[t]his approach did not find favour with readers, and after a difficult start, *Honey* eventually achieved rapport by appealing to them on their own level' (1970, p. 172). This shift from a didactic to a more (superficially, at least) egalitarian approach led White to describe the incarnation of *Honey* which was contemporary with her writing as 'a display vehicle for the latest and best in the world of fashion and beauty', but her description misses some of the more critical and challenging content which typified the magazine, of which the motherhood debate is just one example.

Janice Winship, writing around the time that *Honey* was merged into *19* magazine in 1986, does acknowledge the wider content of *Honey*, which she uses as a cautionary tale for 'editors who

tread any vaguely political path' by relating what happened to editor Carol Sarler who between 1980 and 1983 had tried 'to introduce feminist arguments and ideas and, generally, a "more thinking" editorial style alongside *Honey's* usual fashion and beauty spreads' and had lost her job as a result, albeit ostensibly as a result of falling circulation (1987, p. 20). The feminist content might have been responsible for the falling circulation: perhaps readers were not ready for it, or were unprepared to be challenged alongside their fashion content; or the falling circulation might be attributable to other causes, and to have merely been the excuse to dispose of an editor who was too political for the magazine's owners.

Whether White's characterisation of *Honey* — glossy and fashion-focused — or Winship's — using fashion as a cover for more serious content — is the more accurate on the whole, the issues of the magazine I explore here did encourage readers to engage with the ideas presented, to critique their application to their own lives, and to argue back when they felt unrepresented, and Anna Coote's article on motherhood, and the responses it spawned, is a perfect example.

The motherhood debate

It was into a period of change and uncertainty that Anna Coote wrote for *Honey* asking 'Why do women feel they should have children?' The article is introduced as:

ANNA COOTE takes a stand against the social conditioning and possibly irrational impulses that tell us we must want children. (*Honey*, December 1974, p. 72)

So even before the reader has begun on Coote's own words, she is primed by the phrase 'possibly irrational impulses' to approach the article in a certain way, influenced by her own feelings on whether she has, or wants to have, children to respond either with defiance at this characterisation of her own motivations, or with relief at seeing a reflection of her feelings about these motivations in others. The magazine is clearly positioning the article as a challenge, and including 'possibly' does very little to soften that. Thus, from the beginning, readers are implicitly encouraged to argue back, to explore this new area of possibility along with Coote and the magazine.

Coote acknowledges early in the article that the freedom she calls for, to make a *choice* about whether to have children, is a recent development:

Not long ago, there was no question of choice. You abstained or you didn't. If you didn't, you were lucky or unlucky, depending on your point of view. A baby arrived as a happy event, an answer to a prayer, an unfortunate accident or a downright disgrace. It didn't arrive to order. (*Honey*, December 1974, p. 72)

She presents an image of sexually active women playing a game of chance with their reproductive systems, a game which the young woman of the 1970s might, for the first time, be able to opt out of, though the world around them might not yet have caught up with this change.

In the image accompanying the article, all the shops are the mother and baby store Mothercare, all the pedestrians have children, and there are more pictures of children superimposed at the back of the scene; the headline on the newspaper board on the right is 'Film star has baby'. This is Coote's view of a world which assumes and expects that she will have babies, that normalizes and glorifies motherhood, and which she finds difficult to reconcile with her equivocal view on the subject.



The image is small on the page, and the article is relatively long: two dense pages of small text in four columns, and must have been expected to cause some controversy: the idea that young women could both be sexually active *and* choose not to have children was still a fairly new one, and with the appearance of second wave feminism prompting new questions about what it meant to be a woman, the magazine must have expected vehement responses from both sides.

The February and March editions of *Honey* each carried three reader letters in response to Coote's article, in the magazine's 'Chatterbox' letters column (which paid readers £1.25² for every letter they published). The letters all seem to be responding to a version of the article which is rather more black-and-white than the reality, seeming oblivious to Coote's equivocation. The writers of two of the letters position themselves as agreeing with her that women should not have children, or should at least think more carefully about it before doing so. Of the other four, three write with some defensiveness about their own choices, although two of those also agree with some of Coote's argument. One letter is roundly dismissive and critical.

Implicit in the letters which agree with Coote is relief from the readers at seeing themselves reflected in the article. They finally feel themselves included within the discourse of womanhood which otherwise tends to glorify motherhood, and to judge them because they do not wish to be mothers, even in the 1970s against the backdrop of the increasing influence of the women's liberation movement.

Trixie Cooper begins her letter with 'A sincere thank you' to Coote for the article, and writes that she has 'no inclination towards motherhood, but [is] made constantly aware of the fact that [she's] "different"'. She has 'read several pieces on women's place in society', from which she draws the conclusion that women's urge to have children is partly an attempt to gain whatever power they can in a male-dominated society, as well as 'a wish to avoid being "different"'. Like Coote, she implies a negative judgement of women who choose to have children; while she sees that they judge her for being 'different', she judges them in return for conforming. She is in fact more certain in her decision to be childfree than Coote, and ends her letter with a

² Equivalent to £12.38 in 2017 (Bank of England, 2018)

recommendation to readers who are 'wavering on a child-bearing decision' to read Ellen Peck's book *The Baby Trap*³, as she did, with the expectation that, like her, they will then decide against reproducing. (*Honey*, February 1975, p. 4)

M Cook, the writer of the other letter agreeing with Coote, also writes of her hopes for more critical thought among her peers: she hopes Coote's article 'causes people to sit and think about the subject in question constructively'. Like Coote and Cooper, she assumes that most people who have reached a different decision from hers have done so uncritically. She has taken Coote's suggestion that those who like children should 'make friends with other people's' one step further, and works as a nursery nurse, which, she says, means she has 'experienced every conceivable emotion connected with the care and upbringing of the human infant'. She admits a 'fondness for children', but looks forward to a future of 'money and freedom', and although she admits being too selfish to dedicate herself to a child of her own, she also claims that 'The desire to see oneself reproduced is entirely selfish': an interesting accidental statement of the double standard applied to this, as to so many of women's choices: both having children and *not* having them is selfish (*Honey*, February 1975, p. 4).

The first published letter disagreeing with Coote, from E Cohen, offers a reason women want children: 'the creation of a child between two people who love each other is the most wonderful expression and extension of that relationship'. She takes Coote to task specifically for her implication that 'the majority of mothers only have children because they feel it is what they should do', and portrays a world of wider options for women which has freed them from child-bearing as a default, leaving some able to freely make the choice to have children:

Gone are the days when women merely saw jobs as the stepping-stone between school and motherhood. With greater opportunities and better education for women today there are still those of us who want children for what they stand for,

³ A polemic encouraging women not to have children, explaining all the ways they are indoctrinated to want children, and extolling the virtues of life without them (Peck, 1971).

and not as the result of some disease from which we are waiting to be cured (*Honey*, February 1975, p. 4).

Cohen writes from the position of defending her own choice, having felt Coote's article as an attack on it; her phrasing, 'there are still those of us' suggests that the 'greater opportunities' may also feel like an attack, or that they are passing her by.

Also in disagreement with Anna Coote is J Matthias, writing the most negative of the published responses. She calls Coote's article 'yet another de-humanized "liberated" article', and expresses surprise that anyone with a strong ego would not want to reproduce themselves, or 'to see beyond the child to the ultimate unique person'. She groups Coote's article with others she has read, and perhaps reads into it arguments from those other articles, but which do not appear in this one; she seems not to have noticed Coote's 'perhaps, after all, I *would* like to have one or two', and having opened with a criticism of Coote's perceived equation of children with 'any other consumer goods', she ends with an odd description of a child as a permanent possession:

[A child] will be at least as interesting and stimulating as all her valued but temporary lovers and friends and the only one she can begin to claim as her own.
(*Honey*, March 1975, p. 4)

Finally, we see two letters which mirror some of Coote's own ambivalence about children.

A Evans, who is seven months pregnant, agrees 'to some extent... that women are still conditioned by society to have children', and expects that 'there will be times when [she] will be bored', but offers 'the culmination of a good relationship... and self-indulgence' as reasons for wanting a child (*Honey*, March 1975, p. 4).

The final published reader response, from Yvonne Luke, grants some of Coote's claims, for example 'it certainly is true that many — perhaps even most — women are pressurized into motherhood and end up somewhat disappointed', but advances herself as an exception: '[t]here are no pressures whatever being brought on me', and accuses Coote of foolishness for denying the 'maternal urge', or that there might be 'some positive rewards' to having children (*Honey*, March 1975, p. 4).

These readers are all keen to state that, whether they agree or disagree with Coote's article in general, they personally have thought clearly about whether to have children, and have reached their decision, in whichever direction, with properly articulated, if not always entirely logical, reasons. However, several of them agree that *other* women do not think so carefully about their decisions, having children for reasons of social pressure, selfishness, or for no reason at all; readers of *Honey*, they imply, think clearly about their decisions, and those who write letters to the magazine especially so. No reader letters are published from anyone admitting to having (or wanting to have) children just because it is the done thing, and the only representation of these women is Coote's initial one:

I recently asked about 30 young women why they wanted to have children. Time and again, I watched mothers and would-be mothers shrug their shoulders and frown perplexedly as if they had never considered the question before. "I've always assumed I would, that's all." "What else is life for?" "Doesn't everyone want to?" When pressed, they became more elaborately vague. "It must have some advantages, otherwise people wouldn't keep doing it." "I just see it as a bit of my life. You know, you go to school for a bit, you work for a bit, you have babies for a bit, and you work for a bit." (*Honey*, December 1974, p. 72)

The '30 young women', of course, do not speak except through the words Coote has chosen to represent them. The impression is perhaps that such uncritical mothers and mothers-to-be are not wise enough to read *Honey*, but are instead offered as a cautionary tale for its readers, who may think of themselves as rather more sophisticated.

Many of *Honey's* readers will not yet be in a position to be making decisions about child-bearing, but most are likely to be looking ahead to the time when those decisions will need to be made, and considering the kind of woman they want to become, wrestling with the fact that even in the 1970s, with the defining boundaries of womanhood starting to change, many women still needed to choose whether to focus on family or career. This debate, then, will have been part of the background information feeding into their developing thoughts on the subject. It is, therefore, not merely of interest to those readers who wrote responses to Coote, or those whose responses

were published, but will have showcased various different lines of reasoning around the motherhood question, and prompted readers to assess their own position in comparison to Coote's, and to those readers writing responses to her.

Honey is fairly unusual in not publishing responses to its reader letters, so although it is Anna Coote, writing for the magazine, who opens the debate, it is the readers whose letters are published who get the last word. In particular, the March letters are all broadly in opposition to Coote, and the last, from Yvonne Luke, although not the most vehement in disagreement, begins by calling the article 'over pessimistic' and concludes by claiming 'It's not all dirty nappies!' (*Honey*, March 1975, p. 4). The lasting impression of the debate, then, is that Coote fired a deliberately controversial opening barrage, which received some early support from Trixie Cooper and M Cook, but was then gradually brought down by other readers, who disagreed mostly with Coote's assertion that women don't have good reasons to want children (albeit while largely agreeing with her that there are also good reasons not to want children).

Thus *Honey* carefully balances both sides of the question, all while helping to problematize the issue as a whole simply by entering into the debate at all. In this it is setting itself on the tipping point of new possibilities which were only just starting to open up for its readers. Although one of the main purposes of magazines for teenagers and young women is always to educate readers to grow into the kind of adult women that the society of the time expects, in the 1970s with these societal expectations in flux, this position became more complicated. *Honey* engages with the moment of transition by showcasing a variety of different ways that women might approach this central decision about the shape of their adult lives, and encouraging their readers to consider these new possibilities. The controversial nature of the topic, and its great relevance to readers' lives meant the magazine is likely to have received enough letters to have a choice about which to print, so choosing these letters in particular helps the magazine to mitigate the anti-establishment position of the initial article, presenting the illusion that the magazine is a more balanced voice, taking no sides in the debate, and thus minimising the risk of alienating those who disagree.

As these reader letters demonstrate, *Honey* readers fall into many positions on the spectrum from wanting to not-wanting children: the magazine may then have pleased the unconventional childfree among its readers by publishing the initial article, while placating the perhaps-more-conventional mothers and future-mothers with its choice of reader response letters disagreeing. Those readers who have, or want to have, children, who might have been angered by Coote's portrayal of them as unthinkingly conventional, will also have been soothed by the reader letters arguing their defence: although *other* women have children without thinking, *Honey* readers may reassure themselves that they have made a careful decision to do so.

This article and its responses, then, places *Honey* alongside its readers as they move towards womanhood, at a time when what that meant was rapidly changing. The magazine helps to guide their readers through the transitions of their lives, as teen magazines have always done, but through the showcasing of the new ways to be a woman, and the highlighting of readers' own voices in exploring them, the magazine is also hand-in-hand with its readers in exploring the transition in womanhood itself.

Implications for print studies

As I hope the above case study has shown, this method of looking at reader letters published in magazines can give a richer and more nuanced view of the messages that magazines are conveying to their audiences. An analysis which merely considered Coote's article, for example, would fail to notice the carefully weighting of sides of the argument which the article and its letter responses together show: the magazine will have expected responses, and will have exercised choice in the responses to publish. This is also the most visible face of the relationship between magazine and reader. Although published reader letters cannot be assumed to be typical of all reader reactions to magazine content, the tone and nature of the letters the magazine chooses to publish tells us about how the magazine conceived of its relationship to its readers, and how it demonstrated its expectations for that relationship to readers. Readers of *Honey* understand that the magazine will publish letters disagreeing with its content, they learn that the magazine encourages and values their critical insights into issues discussed within its pages.

This type of analysis therefore gives magazine scholars a new way of looking at the relationships between magazine and reader, and the way that those relationships are mutually constructed, in part, by the evidence of reader voices published within the magazines. The Coote article and its responses are a particularly striking example, but traces of the same process can be seen at work in every instance of reader voice visible within magazines. Although much of the literature examining girls' magazines presents them as a monolithic force of indoctrination, this was never entirely true: there are examples of similar debates throughout the history of girls' magazines. A noteworthy early example features a girl writing to the *Girl's Own Paper* in 1882 objecting to an article they had published on 'The disadvantages of higher education', which claimed the education of women made them unsuitable for their true purpose (*Girls' Own Paper*, 8 April 1882, p. 444). From more recent girls' magazines, we have evidence that magazine editors take seriously the letters and comments they receive from their readers:

At *Seventeen*, for example, all editors in the features department are given a daily synopsis of reader responses which have come in through snail mail, email, and the magazine's MySpace and Facebook pages. (Keller, 2011, p. 6)

It is time, therefore, that magazine scholars also take seriously these interactions in the text between magazine and reader, and what the analysis of them can tell us about the relationships between magazines, their readers, and the wider society within which they operate.

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