

Femininities

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Abstract

Within the broad framework of heterosexuality, scripts of femininity operate as a way to organize gendered and sexual relationships between women and men. Girls and women learn to be feminine, and this socialization relates to interpersonal and institutional gender and sexual inequalities. The concept of hegemonic, or normative, femininity relates to masculinity constructs, as well as alternative forms of femininity marked by race, class, and sexual identity.

Scripts of Femininity

'Femininity' is a familiar term. Conversations about being feminine are common in everyday life and many people use the word 'feminine' to describe themselves and others. They may equate femininity with being a woman who embodies characteristics like being nurturing, sensitive, demure, or sweet. But femininity cannot be understood as a fixed set of essential traits that characterize all women. As a scholarly concept, femininity can carry diverse meanings with numerous interpretations. Within the context of heterosexual relationships, performances of femininity can employ different scripts. These scripts act as guidelines for individual behavior and social interaction. They are learned at an early age and reinforced throughout the life course.

When examined as a whole, individual expressions of femininity reveal distinct patterns. These themes become reinforced throughout different social institutions such as media, education, religion, sports, and the workforce. Studying these institutional or macrolevel forms makes it possible to see how ideas about femininity represent a much larger concept than simply wearing makeup and high heels while smiling coyly and sitting with one's legs crossed. Pulling back the conceptual lens reveals that femininity is a socializing ideology that defines and organizes material ways of life, particularly practices related to gender and sexual relationships. This ideological concept also casts some forms of femininity as hegemonic, or dominant, while marginalizing and subordinating other versions of femininity. These manifestations of femininity illustrate the varied ways femininities have been defined in Western cultures.

Learning to Be Feminine

Every child learns how to be a girl or a boy. The society in which a child is born contains plentiful information about how to express one's gender. These gender expectations are conveyed through numerous social institutions, such as media, law, and school. Gender socialization also occurs interpersonally, where family members, friends, and peers instruct children about appropriate gendered behavior. This process is known as the social construction of gender, and it gives meanings to words like girl/boy, woman/man, and feminine/masculine (Lorber, 1994).

When a young girl is taught how to act like a young lady, she is being taught the scripts of femininity. These messages reinforce what it means to be feminine, and, consequently, what it means to be a girl. In turn, boys receive a different set of messages about masculinity, which reference everything that a girl or woman is not. The social construction of gender relies on a binary gender system that positions men and masculinity as fundamentally different from women and femininity.

Each person then continues to 'do' gender throughout their lives, ensuring that they are signaling the right cues to be read as the gender they wish to present to others. Girls and women, then, do gender by demonstrating conventionally feminine characteristics (West and Zimmerman, 1987). Learning these femininity scripts is crucial for doing gender successfully. These scripts teach women and girls how to attract men's sexual attention. Consequently, the relationship between gender socialization and heterosexual relationships has been an important site for scholarly inquiry.

Theorizing Femininities

Scholars have illustrated how gender socialization and learning about femininity manifest in heterosexual relationships. They identify gender inequality as foundational in establishing relationships between women and men. Within most contemporary Western societies, hierarchical gender relationships shape much of social life. Male domination can be seen throughout social institutions like religion, science, and government. In this patriarchal context, women are subordinated to men. This gender stratification system also relies on conventional meanings of femininity, which include characteristics such as "physical vulnerability, an inability to use violence effectively, and compliance" (Schippers, 2007: p. 91). These defining features relegate femininity to a subordinate form compared to the more powerful construct of masculinity.

In some ways, gender scholarship has contributed to the continued subordination of femininity. Unlike the theoretical and empirical studies of masculinity, the concept of femininities has been undertheorized. Sociologist and feminist scholar R.W. Connell introduced the theoretical study of 'hegemonic masculinity' in 1987 (Connell, 1987), which sparked numerous theoretical and empirical studies that further illustrated, enriched, and solidified the concept as a paramount

feature of gender studies. Yet it took 20 more years before gender scholars dedicated similar analytical attention to the parallel concept of hegemonic femininity. Mimi Schippers first theorized about hegemonic femininity in her 2007 publication, 'Recovering the Feminine Other: Masculinity, Femininity, and Gender Hegemony'. In this work, Schippers describes hegemonic femininity as "the characteristics defined as womanly that establish and legitimate a hierarchical and complementary relationship to hegemonic masculinity and that, by doing so, guarantee the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (Schippers, 2007: p. 94). This theoretical definition implicates femininity and women in hierarchical gender systems where hegemonic masculinity is continually able to sustain men's dominance over women.

In these conceptualizations of hegemonic gender expressions, men are expected to be powerful, strong, independent, and emotionally detached. A core component of hegemonic masculinity is men's desire for, and possession of, their binary opposite: the feminine object as embodied through women (Connell, 1987). Femininity is organized as antithetical to masculinity, and so is unable to embody the same characteristics without becoming stigmatized. In order to maintain men's dominance, the characteristics of femininity must not threaten the patriarchal gender order. Men who exhibit any indicators of femininity are ridiculed and negatively labeled as weak and womanly. Their exclusion from the hegemonic ideal results in marginalization and ostracism.

As ideological constructs, hegemonic standards of masculinity and femininity inform individual men's dominance over individual women, as well as the stratified patriarchal gender order as a whole (Schippers, 2007). By establishing characteristics of masculinity and femininity as binary opposites, where women and femininity are subordinate to men and masculinity, hegemonic constructs of these gender expressions form the basis for heterosexual interactions. This binary gender system of difference serves as the foundation for heterosexual erotic power within Western societies, where desire is thought of as resulting from attractions to difference. This heterosexual matrix functions as a natural consequence of the complementary and hierarchical relationship between masculinity and femininity, the meanings of which are constructed through these concepts of difference (Butler, 1990).

In the heterosexual matrix, conventional femininity is heralded as necessary for all women. A core assumption of hegemonic femininity is that women need to embody specific physical characteristics in order to successfully attract men. Within hetero-patriarchy, compliance with gender norms becomes vital and heterosexuality is compulsory (Butler, 1990). Women who seek men's attention must work to ensure they present an aesthetically pleasing amalgamation of face, body, dress, and mannerism. They may give in to a 'beauty myth' where, in order to possess adequate cultural or body capital, women need to conform to conventional standards of attractiveness (Wolf, 2002). The beauty myth is fueled by a profit-motivated industry that markets endless supplies of products designed to 'improve' one's natural appearance (Wolf, 2002). Women's pursuit and consumption of beautification technologies, such as plastic surgery and dieting, reflect cultural ideals about attractiveness and the feminine body. By attempting to embody these standards of attractiveness, women compete with

each other for men's attention. These practices, with institutional support, reproduce a narrow version of heterosexual femininity as normative (Bordo, 1993).

Consequences of Upholding Femininity

Through institutionalized gender inequality, femininity becomes transformed as a material good expected from all women – but not without consequences. Women who do not conform to hegemonic femininity standards risk having their womanhood and sexuality questioned. Men, as well as other women, may view less feminine women as unattractive, lazy, apathetic, and lesbian (Wolf, 2002). Interpersonally, women who are less conventionally attractive are more lonely, less popular, and less sexually experienced than normatively attractive women. Compared to attractive women, unfeminine women are less likely to marry and less likely to marry men who belong to higher socioeconomic statuses (Sullivan, 2001). These stereotypes affect women's ability to connect with other women and men.

In addition to less rewarding personal relationships, less feminine women can also expect to experience significant losses in other central areas of life. In the workforce, women who are conventionally attractive are more often hired, promoted, and paid higher salaries than women who are perceived as unattractive (Sullivan, 2001). Within sports, women athletes often must display masculine traits such as competitiveness, aggression, and dominance to excel in their games. Yet they face pressures to submit to a contrary sexualized discourse within sports that demands players embody femininity and heterosexuality (Mean and Kassing, 2008). The unforgiving arena of politics holds little compassion for women candidates, as exemplified in criticisms directed at Hillary Clinton for being too aggressive and unattractive and dismissals of Sarah Palin for being too sexy and dim-witted. Based on negative media representations, both of these high-profile politicians failed at straddling the precarious line of being assertive but not too masculine, and attractive, but not too feminine, when running for political office (Farmer, 2009). These institutional barriers inform the hetero-patriarchy that structures the gender stratification system.

Women often internalize these macrolevel messages. They may focus on maintaining an attractive outward appearance to garner approval from men and other women and to succeed in their careers. Yet a commitment to upholding normative standards of femininity can compromise women's physical and psychological well-being. Failure to comply with normative femininity can result in lower self-confidence, disordered eating, anxiety, and depression (Wolf, 2002). Thus, the dialectical relationships between cultural ideals of femininity and the practices women pursue to achieve them represent a systematic form of social control (Bordo, 1993). This social control of gender carries over into women's sexual relationships.

Femininity and Sexuality

Ideas about femininity, womanhood, and heterosexuality inform a person's sexual scripts. The concept of 'sexual scripts'

was first introduced in 1973 by John H. Gagnon and William Simon. These sociologists developed a theory of sexual interaction in response to biological explanations for sexual behavior that they deemed inaccurate (Simon and Gagnon, 2003). Gagnon and Simon believed that people negotiated sex and sexuality based on cultural messages, interactional cues, and internalized understandings, not biological urges or innate desire. They argued that social scripts shaped a person's sexual attitudes, behaviors, and identities (Gagnon, 1973; Gagnon and Simon, 1973; Simon, 1973; Simon and Gagnon, 2003). As gender and sexuality are intertwined, sexual scripts closely relate to constructions of femininity. Heterosexual women interpret norms about femininity and gender to negotiate their intimate relationships with men.

Gender inequality pervades much of social life and society's institutions, so it is inevitable that these dynamics will affect romantic and sexual relationships between women and men. Hegemonic femininity contributes to hetero-patriarchal imaginings of sexuality that render women submissive to men's desires. Just as women receive lessons about gender at a very young age, so too do they absorb how these femininity scripts relate to heterosexuality. Baby girls are often described as 'flirting' with boys and men who pay them attention, and girls learn early on that their (heterosexual) wedding day will be the best days of their lives. Research shows that adolescent girls consume media that emphasize looks and finding a boyfriend. Magazines marketed to teen girls showcase editorials and advertisements that advise readers how to be feminine and beautiful. Even though contemporary magazines pepper these messages with empowering rhetoric more so now than in past decades, the ends are the same: girls must be pretty and conventionally feminine to capture and retain men's desire (Gengler, 2011).

Research on young women's gender and sexual identities suggests that girls heed these media messages. Girls' body projects cater to the whims of male pleasure. Typically, girls need to give in to compulsory heterosexuality in order to forge successful gender and sexual identities. They police their own and other girls' bodies, desires, and behaviors to conform to hegemonic standards of hetero-femininity (Renold, 2000). Yet young women must be careful to avoid being seen as too sexually available, lest they be negatively labeled as sluts or whores. While teenage boys are often encouraged to actively desire sex, young women are expected to walk a fine line between being seen as sexually appealing but not acting in sexually promiscuous ways. This sexual double standard makes it difficult for young women to assert sexual agency and denies them gender equality in their intimate relationships (Tanenbaum, 2000).

Attempts to challenge the sexual double standard are not always effective. Girls who resist the idea that they should focus on appeasing male desire are only successful when they are able to demonstrate their heterosexuality (Renold, 2000). Similarly, teens who try to assert a postfeminist version of 'girl power' often can only do so in ways that bolster class-privileged, white, and heteronormative femininity (Allan, 2009). Thus, girls may mobilize sexual subjectivities through promoting neoliberal femininities (Charles, 2010). However, other research suggests that young women may challenge normative heterosexual scripts that require submission to men's desires. With a critical

consciousness, young women may be able to assert agency through initiating sex, setting the terms of virginity loss, and openly communicating and acting upon their sexual desires (Stewart, 1999).

In adulthood, limited scripts of femininity often remain the same for heterosexual women. These women may sacrifice their own sexual desires and pleasures if they internalize messages that reinforce the sexual double standard (Crawford and Popp, 2003). Yet some adult women do try to project a sexual autonomy for themselves and their partners. Some women proudly claim a conventionally feminine appearance while also advocating feminist principles. They argue that women do not need to discard the trappings of femininity in order to challenge gender oppression (Stoller, 1999). Although these individual philosophies may be personally empowering, research suggests that they are insufficient to challenge the hetero-patriarchal gender order. For example, one ethnographic study on women's attendance at a strip club that featured male dancers found that the club's workers fostered heterosexist behaviors that diminished women's sexual autonomy. Although some women found the erotic space of the club to be a rare site for exhibiting their own sexual aggression, many did not (Pilcher, 2011). These disparate experiences illustrate that gender inequality in heterosexual contexts persists.

Feminine Sexual Bodies

Patriarchal constructs of binary gender also affect how people think about sexual bodies. Heterosexual sex is often framed as the penile-vaginal coital act that culminates with male ejaculation. This action positions women's sexual bodies as soft, passive, and compliant. Men use their harder, stronger bodies to penetrate women. They are thought of as acting on their more aggressive desires that must be fulfilled through orgasmic climax (Johnson, 1997). Women's vaginas are portrayed as receptacles to men's penises, instead of framing them as actively taking in hardness and ejecting flaccidity. One example of this paradigm can be seen in female genital cosmetic surgery. This procedure promotes reconstructing the vulva to accommodate men sexually. Yet it is often paradoxically marketed as sexually liberating for women (Braun, 2005). Such procedures increasingly medicalize women's sexual bodies, with health-care professionals prescribing a range of treatments based on assumptions about women's desire. Treatments include off-label uses for drugs like Viagra, which are usually prescribed to men who seek relief from erectile dysfunction (Hartley, 2006). These surgical and medical interventions treat women's sexual bodies as passive objects of men's desires. They do little to understand the depth of women's sexuality or encourage whole-body approaches to sex that transcend penile-vaginal intercourse.

Rethinking Normative Hetero-Femininity: Race, Class, and Sexual Identity

In scholarship on femininities and heterosexuality, the influences of race, class, and sexual identity minorities are often mentioned, but not sufficiently developed. In response, some

scholars have chosen to articulate categorically specific theories and studies of non-hegemonic femininities that enrich current scholarship. These insights provide more nuanced understandings of marginalized communities.

Hierarchies of Race and Class

Hegemonic femininity reflects not only gender stratification, but hierarchies based on race, class, and sexual identity as well. Like hegemonic masculinity, the most privileged feminine gender expression is embodied by women who are also white, middle- to upper-middle class, and heterosexual. Alternative forms of feminine expression become constructed as inferior when they are believed to be more representative among women of color and women of lower socioeconomic statuses. Women in these communities may encounter negative sanctions for disrupting white expressions of femininity (Schippers, 2007). The conventional meanings of femininity as passive, dependent, and materialistic have been critiqued as representing white, middle-class women's values (Collins, 2000).

One alternative theoretical construction of femininity has been proposed by feminist theorist Patricia Hill Collins. In her groundbreaking work, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*, Collins theorizes Black femininity. She illustrates how controlling images of Black women in media reflect racist stereotypes about Blackness. These images are also class-differentiated. Working-class Black women are portrayed in media as aggressive, domineering, and hypersexual, while middle-class portrayals evoke images of Black women as appropriately ambitious yet simultaneously subservient to white male authority. Middle-class Black women are also represented as more respectable sexually. These controlling images help justify racism and sexism against Black women. They promote a sexual politics of respectability that helps perpetuate gender inequality and partner violence in relationships between Black women and men (Collins, 2005).

Collins's ideas are supported in research that shows the effects of media messages on African-American preadolescents, especially within hip hop music and video media. For example, popular representations of Black women in these media influence youth to equate women's sexual desire with men's expectations (Stephens and Few, 2007). These images compromise a more autonomous sexuality among Black women. Yet some argue that it is possible for Black women to invoke these representations within Black culture to resist or challenge oppressive ideologies, as the forum of hip hop often mobilizes ideas of self-promotion (Collins, 2005).

Another alternative construction of femininities focuses on Asian American femininities. Research with Asian Americans reveals how women in this heterogeneous race group can internalize messages about the authority of normative white femininity, constructing Asian femininities as subordinated to the dominant version. In one study with Korean and Vietnamese Americans, these women used race as the primary basis for explaining what femininity meant to them. In white normative contexts, they felt pressure to submit to stereotypes about Asian American women as submissive and docile even though doing so disgusted them. In other situations, they felt compelled to distance themselves from stereotypes about Asian femininity in order to be taken seriously by dominant groups.

Both behaviors subjugated Asian femininities to normative white standards of femininity, reifying the latter as hegemonic and personally ideal (Pyke and Johnson, 2003).

Overall, theoretical and empirical alternatives to hegemonic femininity have become more culturally available. They complicate normative representations of hetero-femininity. However, the increased visibility of different femininities does not always represent a positive shift in portrayals. Instead, representations within media often perpetuate race and class hierarchies. For example, one study on advertisements within the pages of teen girls' fashion magazines showed how the magazine equated beauty with whiteness, hypersexuality with Blackness, and technological skills with East Asians (Sengupta, 2006). These images reflected stereotypes about race and gender. In addition, media representations are not just abstract images; they can produce genuine effects in everyday life. One study on Latina women and media showed how Latina girls negotiated sexual agency within the complex realities of racism, patriarchy, poverty, and heterosexual privilege. In this study, some Latino families used media as a forum to initiate dialog about sexuality with daughters (Garcia, 2012). These race-based constructions of femininity offer a more complex understanding of hegemonic femininity.

Queering Femininities

Women who are not heterosexual have also proposed alternative femininity scripts that are useful to examine. In addition to expanding understandings of marginalized sexual communities, these scripts of femininity offer alternative visions of gender that include possibilities for heterosexual women who seek to challenge hetero-patriarchy.

Like femininity among heterosexual women, meanings of femininities vary among sexual minorities. For women who describe their sexual identities as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer (LGBQ), femininity can take on different meanings. Some feminine women who are sexual minorities embrace normative standards of femininity and internalize misogynist messages. Although these women may appear to meet hegemonic femininity standards, their sexual identities complicate the expectations of women who look conventionally feminine. Other LGBQ women, however, use their femininity in ways that try to reject both heteronormativity and heterosexism (Palder, 2008). Women who identify as 'femme' often seek to use feminine characteristics, or embody a hyperfemininity, as a source of power (e.g., Newman, 1995; Rose and Camilleri, 2002; Volcano and Dahl, 2008). Femme women invoke purposeful feminine expressions and assertive queer sexualities to challenge hetero-patriarchal male gazes. They resist viewing the trappings of femininity as inherently oppressive and argue that people of all genders can use femininity as a source of gender and sexual empowerment.

With a similar logic, popular writer, activist, and biologist Julia Serano asserts that femininity can and should be a source of empowerment for people, regardless of gender or sexuality. Writing as a transsexual woman, Serano proposes "putting the feminine back into feminism" (2007: p. 319). Serano denounces the hatred of femininity espoused within popular culture and by some feminist groups. She argues for a heterogeneous understanding of femininity that is decoupled from

femaleness. Her ideas 'queer' femininity by envisioning this form of gender expression and embodiment as potentially liberating for everyone.

Conclusions

Scholarship on femininity has contributed a wealth of knowledge to broader studies of gender and sexuality. As an ideological concept, hegemonic femininity theorizes the gender expressions and experiences of girls and women as learned. Institutions and individuals teach the scripts of femininity, and this education occurs throughout life as girls and women are socialized into conventional expressions of gender which treat them as distinct from, and subordinate to, the gender expressions of boys and men. The social construction of gender then reinforces binary classifications of gender which replicate gender inequalities. As a dominant form, hegemonic femininity also subordinates alternative versions of femininity, especially those marked by differences in race, class, and sexual identity.

These gender constructions are intimately connected to women's sexual relationships with men. The binary gender system serves as foundational for the hetero-patriarchal erotic matrix, where men continue to hold power over women. In this context, women compromise their own sexual agency to attract, please, and retain men. This dynamic creates a sexual double standard where women get punished for exhibiting a more active and desiring sexuality. Yet some scholarship suggests that women and girls do exact agency in negotiating sexuality, albeit with limited success. In addition, critiques from the margins of race, class, and sexual identity complicate understanding femininity as a monolithic, homogeneous form applicable to all women at all times. Future directions in the scripts of femininities will continue to complicate the interconnected relationship between gender and sexuality.

See also: Adolescent Sexual Risk; Beauty and the Labor Market; Erotic Capital; Feminisms and Acculturation around the Globe; Feminist Political Theory and Political Science; Gender and Women's Studies, Applied Research On; Gender: Gendering of Categories; Heterosexuality; Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans-sexual Butch-Femme Subcultures; Masculinity, Scripts of; Parallel Relationships; Queer Theory and Intersectionality; Sexuality Over the Life Course; Sexuality, Theories of; Social Constructivism; Social Stratification; Teens, Gender, and Self-Presentation in Social Media; Transgender, Transexual, and Gender Variant Individuals.

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