

Women's Perspectives on their Experiences of Femininity

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Abstract

This qualitative research focuses on young women's self-reported experiences of femininity in contemporary Western culture. Inevitably, it is the intersectionality of their gender, race, ethnicity, and social class that explains the variations in how they experience femininity as well as varying social contexts. Findings indicate that while the women do not feel overly oppressed by their gender, they do identify significant sources of frustration over features of it including: that femininity is enforced by parents' comments about lady-like behaviors and appropriate dress, that teachers enforce rules about dress codes for girls and boy versus girl activities and that peers often police gender by conflating it with sexual orientation, i.e. a girl who dresses like a boy must be a lesbian.

While the women admitted to using their attractiveness on occasion to get free drinks from males or to avoid getting a speeding ticket, they voiced mostly negative views about how the media perpetuates the notion that women must conform to narrow standards of female beauty. Other complaints include women's responsibility for keeping the domestic sphere clean and attractive and the sexual double standard, i.e. men are expected to have multiple sexual partners but a woman who does so is looked down upon. Apart from these complaints, the women mostly emphasize their agency in the ability to accept and reject aspects of femininity and female gender roles, depending on their own choosing. Most significantly, they clearly view gender from an essentialist perspective rather than as a socially constructed standard of being.

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Introduction

Even before birth, gender plays a significant role in determining how we will live our lives. In the West, unborn babies are now commonly thrown into this categorization process the minute that parents-to-be find out the sex of the fetus. In Western culture, gender is accomplished when a person appropriately fits along the gender continuum. A male is categorized as a boy or a man if he can easily be identified as masculine. A female is categorized as a girl or a woman if she can easily be identified on the opposite end of the continuum as feminine. Nelson (2006) refers to this division as “sex dimorphism.” This process of categorization assumes that people can be defined as belonging to one category or another. Nurseries are often painted pink for a girl or blue for a boy. While parents may buy tiny dresses for their baby girl, they are unlikely to do so for a baby boy. Moreover, it is acceptable to dress a girl in blue, but uncommon to dress a boy in pink. “The sex category/gender relationship links the institutional and interactional levels; a coupling that legitimates social arrangements based on sex category and reproduces their asymmetry in face-to-face interaction” (West and Zimmerman, 2009:55). Although these practices may have little effect on the baby at the time, it is the start of a never ending struggle for many men and women who do not easily fit into these categories.

Sex and gender expectations last a lifetime and are negotiated within various contexts and social settings. Men and women are expected to look and behave certain ways depending on the associated gender roles they accept. Whenever people have to decide who is to do what within a social setting, it is not uncommonly determined by the associated obligations of a man or woman (West and Zimmerman, 2009). A woman is expected to be feminine and to take on roles appropriate for a woman, while a man is expected to be masculine and to accept his assigned

duties. But how might these expectations benefit men and women in certain circumstances while burdening them in others? This research project investigates how young women perceive femininity as an embodied set of expectations and practices and how it affects their lives. It explores how femininity positively and/or negatively impacts women's experiences, relationships, and how young women see themselves in relation to the expectations society has of them as women.

To begin to answer these questions, the relevant scholarly literature on the subject of sex and gender is presented to provide a context for exploring these issues. Following this, a description of the qualitative research project developed to address the research questions is presented. The research project was designed to obtain the self-reported opinions and experiences of young women in order to determine how their accounts complement and/or challenge the scholarly literature on the subject of femininity. Analysis of data follows, with interpretation of findings undertaken from a feminist perspective. The primary objective of the research project is to contribute to an understanding of how femininity plays a role in shaping young girls into young women and to discover the self-reported rewards and challenges they face in the process.

Literature Review

What follows is a description of a broad area of literature that theorizes gender as it is understood within the Western context, with a special emphasis on femininity. The term femininity is defined and it is made clear who is expected to be feminine, how femininity is

socially constructed, performed, and perpetuated. Scholarly literature pertaining to the negative effects that femininity and masculinity have on women is also provided.

What is Gender and Where does it Come From?

Gender, in the most simplistic terms, is the categorization of a female as a “feminine woman” and a male as a “masculine man.” Gender should not be confused with a person’s sex. One’s sex, without complicating things, is most often female or male. One’s gender, then, concerns the behaviours we commonly associate with women and men respectively. What is the difference? A person’s sex is ascribed to them at birth by determining whether they have a penis or vagina. Depending on the genitalia of the baby, gender is assigned. A male, or person with a penis, is considered to be a boy and a female, or person with a vagina, is considered to be a girl. Judith Butler also coined the term “heterosexual matrix” to explain the once popular assumption that males would grow up to become men who are sexually attracted to women and females would grow up to become women who are sexually attracted to men (1990). Root, Wittner, and Blakely add, “There is no gender or sexuality-just bodies-before they are socially constructed” (2009:3). The difference between sex and gender is that sex is a biological designation and gender is a social construction that stems from that. In agreement with Root et al. (2009) and Butler (1990), Judith Lorber (1994) suggests that men and women are mostly biologically alike and that social and cultural selection processes develop individuals into what we consider as men or women. Therefore, gender, as Root et al. (2009) put it, is a social status, legal designation, and personal identity. We use the term woman and man when referring to gender.

It is from that point on that individuals are socialized in a particular manner depending on their sex and gender. “Gender divisions and their accompanying norms, and expectations are part of major social institutions” (Root et al., 2009:19). Although people are capable of making their own decisions about who they want to be, and how they want to look and act, they do so within a society that makes what is expected of them, as a man or woman, easily known (Root et al., 2009). The choices they do make are still within the limits of the society in which they live. Within Western society, there are plenty of dominating images portraying the “right” way to be a woman or a man.

According to Sandra Bem (1993), the gender expectations or assumptions commonly portrayed within society filter the way we see things. She describes three “lenses” that shape the way we understand gender: the lens of androcentrism, gender polarization, and essentialism. The lens of androcentrism describes how everything designated male appears to be the neutral norm. For example, women, in contrast to men, are considered deviant, less than human, and the “other” or alien. The second lens, gender polarization, places men and women on opposite sides of a gender continuum. Men are expected to behave in certain ways and women are expected to behave in ways opposite to men. Everything is either male or female. For example, the color pink is to be worn by women, but not men. The third lens, essentialism, is the assumption that gender is natural because it is biologically fixed and therefore does not change among individuals or over time. These lenses train us to categorize people based on certain expectations of gender roles and are equally used by others in monitoring our own gender membership.

This system of classifying humans into two distinct categories of gender based on their reproductive organs is not natural. As C. Wright Mills explains, “Laws, ideas, technology, social

institutions and ways of doing things did not drop from the sky or emerge as a fact of nature, but were invented and implemented by humans and are constantly being reinvented and re-created” (Mills, 1959:11). Gender is just an abstract idea that is socially constructed and enforced by all of society’s institutions. Applying Mills’ (1959) ideas about the social world, gender is constantly changing, being reinvented, and recreated. However, one aspect of gender that has remained constant is male dominance over women. It is important to remember, then, that male dominance is socially constructed and not natural. At the same time though, Root et al. (2009) notes that it is not likely that people can successfully destroy these constraints as long as the existing androcentric system is in place.

Doing Gender

As mentioned earlier, gender is not a natural part of being human, but is a social construction of expectations for men and women. When people accept their societal expectations as a man or women, they begin performing their gender or doing gender. “Gender refers to the performance itself, the ways people accomplish being a man or a woman, a boy or a girl” (Root et al., 2009:58). More specifically, doing gender is the act of appropriately behaving in certain contexts and for specific audiences. Another part of doing gender involves managing one’s emotions, desires, and actions. West and Zimmerman (2009) contend that “The “doing” of gender is undertaken by women and men whose competence as members of society is hostage to its production” (44). A person can be considered to be socially incompetent or fraudulent when they do not act in a gender-appropriate way. By doing gender, differences between men and woman are constructed through social interaction (West and Zimmerman, 2009). The results of

differentiating men and women are gender stereotypes: “widely held beliefs about defining characteristics of masculinity and femininity” (Nelson, 2006:13). These stereotypes focus on personality traits, attitudes, beliefs, overt behavior, behavior preferences, and physical appearances.

Femininity is the name of the gender expectations, perceptions, and evaluations attached to being a woman. Robert Connell (1987) coined the term “emphasized femininity” to describe the overt images of womanhood that society puts forth. Many of these images portray the “ideal” woman as young, thin, conventionally beautiful, heterosexual and often nurturant according to Root et al. (2009). Connell (1987) adds to this list of expected and socially encouraged qualities for women: dependence, sexual receptivity, motherhood, and subordination to men.

In contrast, masculinity is the term used to describe gender expectations, perceptions, and evaluations for men. Connell (1987) first introduced the idea of “hegemonic masculinity.” Hegemonic masculinity is the idealized and controlling influence on men. It is referred to as “the culturally exalted form of masculinity that is linked to institutional power” (Root et al., 2009:5). Hegemonic masculinity includes the subordination of women, authority, aggression, and technical competence. Masculinity in Western society is usually associated with being tough, violent, and uncompromising. In our culture, the most powerful men are usually white, heterosexual, have been educated in elite schools and have professional, managerial, or political careers.

Where and How is Gender Taught?

Nelson (2006) identifies the four major agencies of socialization as family, school, peer groups, and media. Within all four institutions, people are taught the appropriate characteristics, attitudes, values, and actions of their gender group. Family is considered to be the primary agent of socialization. It is the first institution a child interacts with and it is characterized by the earliest and most intimate relationships. Therefore, it has the first and greatest influence on a child. “Parents’ gender-role belief systems may affect their inferences about a child’s nature and capabilities, their expectations about the child’s future roles and occupations” (Nelson, 2006:106). It is within the family structure that one begins to develop his or her gender identity and to acquire what are considered by the family to be acceptable ways of performing masculinity or femininity.

Although school is an impersonal and secondary agent of socialization, it is the institution wherein children spend most of their time and learn to socially interact with peers and authority figures outside the family. Nelson (2006), Root et al. (2009), and Sadker and Sadker (1994) understand that “gender is an important part of the lessons we learn in school, although they may be unintentional and largely “hidden agendas” in the school curriculum” (Root et al., 2009:107). Shelly Correll (2001) believes that one’s feelings of competence or incompetence during early schooling experiences may have a powerful impact on children’s choices in the future. Many studies have shown that teachers treat boys and girls differently in the classroom, often by segregating them by gender. Teachers are shown to respond to boys more frequently and to wait less time for girls who were called upon to respond. Teachers also typically comment more often

on girls' appearances and clothing, which may be a significant source of the self-consciousness many girls later experience (Sadker and Sadker, 1994).

Peer groups differ from family and school as agents of socialization because, unlike those institutions, as children get older they mostly choose with whom they spend their leisure time. Peer relationships play an important role in the development of children's self-concept and their perceptions of appropriate behavior for males and females in society (Nelson, 2006:108). Nelson goes on to say that peer groups possess the power to have significant, long-term influences upon their members.

The proliferation of forms of mass media over the last several decades has resulted in the expansion of its influence as a secondary source of socialization for Western children. Newspapers, magazines, books, movies, radio, TV, and the Internet all play a substantial role in portraying appropriate gender behavior for men and women. More than ever, "the media educates, entertains, offer role models, and presents guidelines for behavior" (Nelson, 2006:108).

How is Femininity Perpetuated?

For girls, the influence of the socialization agents introduced above, includes the idea that femininity is closely associated with the acquisition and maintenance of female physical beauty. Although a number of women have recently broken through many legal and material hindrances associated with gender inequality, there exist now arguably even more restrictive standards for female beauty than in the past. To explain this, Naomi Wolfe (1991) suggests that there is an inverse relationship between female liberation and female beauty standards. That is, "more women have more money, and power, and scope, and legal recognition than we have ever had

before; but in terms of how we feel about ourselves physically, we may actually be worse off than our liberated grandmothers” (10).

Just like the gold standard, “beauty” is a currency system that is determined by politics in Western society and serves as the last, best belief system that keeps male dominance active (Wolfe, 1991). “This quality called beauty objectively and universally exists. Women must want to embody it and men must want to possess women who embody it” (Wolfe, 1991:12). Saltzberg and Chrisler (1995) add that since the beauty ideals are nearly impossible to achieve, failure and disappointment are inevitable. Therefore, the beauty myth is not about women at all. Rather, it is about men’s institutions and institutional power. It is the secret that is “poisoning our freedom”. It is dark vein of self-hatred, physical obsessions, terror of aging, and dread of lost control (Wolfe, 1991). Ultimately, the beauty myth is a tool used by men more to prescribe behavior than appearance. The main goal of the beauty myth is to create competition among women so that they will be divided from one another (Wolfe, 2991). Although women know that the transformation from female to feminine is artificial, there is an ongoing effort to fit society’s ever changing mold of “beauty.” The result is the oppression and disempowerment of women (Saltzberg and Chrisler, 1995).

It is no coincidence that the most likely victims of rape are young women and girls. Michael Kimmel (2004) suggests that rape is an outcome of gender inequality and that gender is the outcome of inequality. “Power differences between men and women produce gender domination and subordination, leading to the men’s sexual entitlement and rape” (Root et al., 2009:228). Intimate partner violence is part of this systematic pattern of gender dominance and

control. Gender legitimizes these socially constructed inequalities by naturalizing them so women seem naturally submissive and men seem naturally dominant.

Problem Statement and Feminist Theory

There is now a significant scholarly literature on the subject of sex and gender in Western culture. From the previous discussion, the concepts of hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity are especially relevant to this research project. Further, the aforementioned literature traces the ideological purpose of gender and its origin, and how it is performed, taught, and perpetuated. What remains to be explored is how women themselves report that societal standards of femininity have positively and/or negatively impacted their lives. To shape this inquiry, some discussion of feminist theory is warranted.

As a conceptual-theoretical perspective, most feminist theorists reject the idea that masculinity and femininity are natural or neutral behaviours. Instead, they agree with sociologists who argue that gender constructions are the result of prevailing cultural values concerning gender roles and relations (Miller, Schreck, and Tewksbury, 2011). Feminists view the dominant social order and rules of interaction as manifestations of male dominance. For example, the Western cultural traditions of chivalry and paternalism that inform idealized male behavior clearly function as mechanisms of male dominance. Chivalry is the traditional model of romanticized gender relations where a woman is placed on a pedestal and needs to be protected. Paternalism is a condescending term that devalues women “by perpetuating a view of them as feeble and childlike” (Miller et al., 2011:207). These seemingly benign and idealized

male behaviours are just two of the ways in which gender inequality is perpetuated within Western culture.

Feminist theory illustrates how most features of society serve to perpetuate forms of gender inequality by race, ethnicity and social class. Virtually everything is gendered: social life, social order, and social institutions. Male superiority and dominance are present in politics, economics, and social life (Miller et al., 2011).

While there are many forms of feminist theorizing including Liberal Feminism, Radical Feminism, and Marxist Feminism, the feminist perspective that informs this research is an eclectic mix of concepts that are especially relevant to the project. Arguably the most important dimension of this work concerns the voices of the young women interviewed for this project. They are living and experiencing society's gendered institutions and traditions first-hand. Beyond the centrality of their words, this project adopts the significance of intersectionality. Although many women share similar experiences, one must consider the ways in which gender, race, ethnicity and social class intersect in forming one's perceptions of life events.

Research Method

A qualitative research design was adopted for this project because it facilitates the telling of a story from the perspective of the woman herself. No two women are born and raised in the exact same circumstances and arguably each woman is not equally influenced by the same factors. With a qualitative approach, I was able to meet with women face-to-face and in private so that they could explain in their own words how femininity applies to their lives, what they accept, reject, and challenge about it. "More than three decades of feminist activism and

research has developed the idea that researchers cannot and should not claim to be neutral outside observers and that knowledge is best produced collaboratively among scholars and others, including the people being observed” (Root et al., 3).

Participants were recruited by distributing invitations and hanging posters on the bulletin boards of the Saint Mary’s University campus (see Appendix 1). The posters explained the purpose of the study and provided contact information. The participants telephoned, sent a text message, or emailed to set up a meeting. A total of eight women were interviewed until data saturation was achieved. All participants were interviewed in a private room or area on campus for the purposes of convenience and confidentiality. Each interviewee signed a consent form (see Appendix 2) and gave their permission to have the interview audio recorded. Each interview began with a definition of femininity followed by a series of open-ended questions (see Appendix 3) ranging from questions concerning their upbringing to their relationships as a woman. Once each interview was complete, I thanked the interviewee and again assured her of anonymity and confidentiality. All aspects of this research project were approved by the Saint Mary’s University Research Ethics Board (REB). See Appendix 4 for the certificate of approval.

Research Findings

Demographics

The eight women who participated in this study ranged in both age and ethnicity. All were university students majoring in various disciplines including psychology, criminology, chemistry and more. Their ages ranged from nineteen to twenty-five years and several self-identified as Caucasian while others reported coming from French-Canadian and Middle-Eastern

backgrounds. All of the women self-identified as heterosexual as that was a requirement indicated on the recruitment poster.

Gendered Family Dynamics

All of the women interviewed were from families with at least one other sibling. The birth order position of the women varied from being the youngest, the middle-child, to the oldest among their brothers and/or sisters. For the most part, all but one woman described being treated equally to their siblings by their parents while growing up. When asked, “Were brothers and sisters treated in a similar way by your parents?” all participants replied by saying they believe so, and any differences in treatment were not due to gender, but rather to differences in age among brothers and/or sisters. One woman said, “He [my brother] was always older so I don’t know if it had to do with gender or not, but he was able to watch certain things [on television] that I was not allowed to watch or do certain things like put up Christmas lights or any of that stuff that I wasn’t allowed to do.” Another woman said, “It’s hard to say because my brothers were all so much older than me, so I didn’t really get to see a whole lot of you know, how they disciplined my brothers.” Even among three other female siblings, one woman explained how she felt her parents treated their children equally and that any variation in treatment could be attributed to age differences among the sisters. “For the most part, my sisters and I are treated fairly. I don’t think they see it that way because they always compare what I get to do with what they get to do. They don’t realize there is a four year difference between us,” she said.

Additionally, one woman expressed that she believed her parents treated their children equally and neither gender nor age contributed to any differences in how they interacted as a

family. When this participant was asked the question, she immediately responded in defense, “We were both able to do sport and whatever sports we felt like. Also, my father had high esteem for both of us education-wise and it didn’t matter what you wanted to do because he just thought that his children should be engineers, so it didn’t really matter that I am a girl.” Responses to later questions in the interview do, however, reveal that some variation in treatment by parents due to gender did occur during all the participants’ upbringing that may not have seemed obvious to the them at first.

The one woman who did indicate an obvious difference in treatment to her younger sister while growing up, described how her sister was favored by her parents because she was “less of a diva” than she was, was “into hockey and she was rough and humble,” and in comparison to herself, “she was really low maintenance.” She described her sister as “a hockey player. That’s my opposite. She is masculine. She’s also a lesbian.” She believed her father was the one “who pushed the more masculine stuff on her because he wanted a boy.” On the other hand, this woman described herself as “a brat with the things I wanted, things I said, places I went, doing things I wasn’t supposed to do, just being completely defiant. We were polar opposites and she was always the more athletic one.” This woman finished her response by reassuring that the treatment by her parents is “way more equal” now.

Messages from Parents

Although all interviewees claimed that their parents never blatantly said, “You must behave this way because you are a girl,” there were definitely messages of concerning femininity

that they received while growing up. Such messages included everything from politeness and manners to dressing in a feminine fashion, behaving a certain way, and doing certain things.

One woman described being raised as the youngest girl of three brothers and can recall some times when her parents would say, “Respect yourself” to her. She explained, “Like, if I was going to a party or going to a boy’s house and they knew, my dad would always be like “respect yourself.” They would never really say that to my brothers, so I think that was something they would try to push on me being a girl.” When I asked her what she thinks they meant by saying that, she said, “Just, you know, don’t be a whore.” Somewhat similarly, a different woman mentioned how her parents would remind her and her sisters not to reveal too much of themselves to people. They would say, “Don’t give too much of yourself away.” When I asked her what she thought they were implying by that statement, she said, “Everything from revealing clothing to giving away too much information about yourself.”

Another message received by one of the participants by her parents had to do with capabilities as a woman. She emphasized how her parents constantly reminded her that she was allowed and able to do whatever she wanted in life. She said, “They told me that I can do whatever I want, even if I’m a girl.”

A common theme that arose among participants was the idea of being or not being “lady-like.” This is an especially good example of how these women received messages about the proper way to behave as a woman indirectly by their parents. Usually when this topic arose during an interview, it was in relation to bodily functions such as burping, spitting, and farting. The women recalled times when one or both of their parents witnessed a behavior that they deemed inappropriate for their daughter as a young woman and commented by saying “that’s not

lady-like.” These participants told me about those incidents and explained what they did or did not do to sway that reaction from their parents. One woman describes, “They never really tried to teach me, like, when you go to these places, you should act this way or dress this way because you’re a girl. My mom would always make little jokes because I was never that much of a “lady.” I was always gross and I could be at the table and I would burp or something and she would say “oh you’re so lady-like”. Another woman recalls when her parents would explain to her that “spitting and burping isn’t lady-like” and how her mom would teach her the “proper” way to sit. “If I was wearing a skirt or dress, I used to sit with my legs open all the time and my mom used to close my legs and tell me to stop sitting like a boy.” Another woman gave an example of how *she* received messages of what is not lady-like from her father. She explained, “When I would say “snot,” he would get right pissed off and say that “snot” isn’t a word that girls use. It’s not lady-like. Don’t talk like that. It’s not lady-like,” he would say.

One woman explained how her father always said, “Never start a fight, but always finish it” while her mother insisted that she should “use your words, not your fists.” She interpreted this as their way of relaying the message that it is not lady-like to be aggressive or to physically fight with anyone, but more feminine to try to reason with people by talking.

Interestingly, for one woman, the first thing that came to mind for her when asked about what kinds of messages about being a girl she received from parents was how important it was to clean and be clean. “Like, my mom’s a clean freak. She is a clean freak! I think the first thing I learned was how to vacuum. She would go on about how a woman is supposed to be so clean all the time.”

Learning How to Dress

An overly popular sub-theme that arose within the discussion of the types of messages the women received from their parents while growing up was the influence the parents had on the style of clothes the women wore. Although the interview question did not specify or direct the participant to speak about learning how to dress as a girl/woman, all the women brought this topic up in their responses. The responses varied among the participants in regard to the degree to which their parents had a say in how they dressed themselves. The most extreme response came from a woman who described the huge influence her mom had on her to dress in a very feminine fashion. She said, “Mom was really into purses and well she made me wear heels since I was 13. She was always eager for me to wear heels and have a purse for some reason. She always said to me, “It looks nice! It’s a girl thing,” so my first purse was army print. She didn’t like that! She was glad I had a purse but she didn’t like the way it looked.” She added, “We always had to wear panty hose. I hated it. I just didn’t like the feeling. As soon as I got to be ten, I would just not wear them and tell mom I put them on and run to the van before she saw me.”

Almost all the women told me incidents of how their mothers forced or tried to encourage them to dress in a feminine fashion on at least one occasion. One woman said, “She tried to make me dress a certain way when I was really young, but once I could speak, she didn’t make me dress a certain way. Dresses were for picture day, but that was only in elementary. Once junior high came around, it didn’t matter.” Similarly, another woman described her mom’s influence on how she clothed herself. “I didn’t really like wearing dresses but my mom did make me wear them every now and then to like fancier events and stuff. It wasn’t like I would throw a tantrum.

I think it was more of just an uncomfortable feeling. You want to play but you can't because you're wearing a dress and your underwear will show," she said. Contrastingly, another participant described how she and her mother would enjoy shopping together and buying the most feminine outfits. She said, "My mom did take advantage of how I was the complete opposite of my tom-boy sister. She would have more fun buying me clothes because she didn't have to shop in the Sears department for boy's stuff and go into La Senza Girl and buy me little bras and things like that that she could never buy my sister."

Friendships Growing Up

When asked about friendships while growing up, each woman shared their closest friendships and fondest memories. Their friends and groups of friends varied in gender and size. They were, however, all within a few years of each other in age. Some women told me that their circle of friends was single gendered, all boys, or all girls. They also described the different activities they would do together and how those activities differed among friends that were boys versus those who were girls. The first woman I interviewed told me that her group of friends included girls and boys. In elementary school, she "hung out with girls. I spent most of my recess hanging out with girls, but outside school, I hung out with mostly boys. With the boys, we would run through the woods, build forts and throw rocks at cars. If I was with girls, we would go inside and play with our Barbies or maybe use makeup and do makeovers. Obviously, I wouldn't do that with a boy."

Another woman described a similar dynamic between her girl and boy friends. She explained that her friends were "mostly boys" in elementary school and all the kids would "play

sports, catch frogs, go biking, and sledding” together, but while she was with just her girl friends, they played with their dolls. Another common activity that came up in conversation while talking about young friendships is “playing house.” Whenever this activity was mentioned, it was only in the context of a group of young girls playing together. One woman describes, “I would always play the baby and Bianca always played the mom and Theresa would either play the dog or the cousin. Bianca would feed me crackers and peanut butter and she would get me a cup of water and we had one of those Fisher Price mini kitchen things that’s made out of plastic and had a little sink and fridge. As the mom, she would make me food and clean up.”

During adolescence, one participant said, “I mostly always had a large group of friends that were girls, but I did hang out with boys later on in high school and stuff. In school, we definitely talked about boys and gossiped about other girls and outside school I’d say my friends were usually people I played soccer with.”

Sports

Participants’ responses varied greatly in terms of which sports they were involved in while growing up. Some women were active in softball, lacrosse, soccer, table-tennis, and dodge ball, while others participated in organized swimming, gymnastics, cheerleading and ballroom dance. There were two responses that stuck out the most to me, however. These two participants summed up two extremes that are far from uncommon when acknowledging the reality of women in sports. The first response illustrates how some women who participate in sports still have the idea in their minds that sport is male domain. She described a particular memory of when she was playing lacrosse on an all-girls team in junior high.

“It always made me nervous when the boys were watching. I remember one time I was so nervous because my boyfriend was watching and he was the one who taught me how to play. The whole game, I was freaking out because I knew his eyes were on me and I was like ‘don’t mess up.’ I remember I caught the ball and ran so fast and I was so excited and then everyone was screaming at me that I was running the wrong way and then the other team got the ball. Even if he wasn’t there, I think I would have been nervous that the boys’ team was there just because it was sports. It’s just because it almost felt like it was their element and the boy’s team was so good they were known for being good and the girl’s team was just ok. I felt like them watching me was almost like ‘pfffft there’s Dalyce playing sports.’”

The other extreme response was from a participant concerning her reason for not being involved in organized sport. “I’m not very competitive. I mean, I don’t have a competitive bone in my body, so I was never really interested in sports. It’s not like I felt like I could never get into sports because I was a girl or anything. It was literally just because I’m not competitive at all.”

In sum, none of the participants failed to connect their gender to being involved or uninvolved in sports. The women involved in organized sport, compared their athleticism to that of men and the women that did not play sports attributed their lack of interest to their lack of competitiveness, as stereotypical of masculine men. Regardless of whether a woman was interested in sport or not, the most common response involved mentioning the myth that girls do not excel in sports like boys.

Questioning Gender

When the questions about whether a participants' gender was ever put into question by others or whether they questioned someone else's gender, a surprising number of detailed memories were brought up. The most common response involved somebody that the participant knew to be gay. Even as early as elementary school, one woman recalled a time when a male friend played more with the girls. "I have a friend, Shane, and he is a homosexual. When we were growing up, we would always play boys chase girls, and he was always on the girl's side and no one ever questioned it, but everyone definitely noticed he was a little different." Another woman explained why she, along with others, questioned a gay boy she knew growing up. "I questioned Brad's gender for a long time because he was gay and it was pretty obvious. He took on more feminine traits than masculine traits." One woman described how she always questioned even her own sister's gender and always assumed she was gay because of her masculine behaviors. "For starters, I was right about my sister. She recently came out of the closet as a lesbian. I always had an idea because she was a tom-boy. Obviously it is a bit of a biased opinion based on what society says a lesbian is like." The same woman even recalled a time when her own gender and sexuality was tested. She said, "I was hanging out with a group of girls and there was a comment made. I joked about getting with a girl and the person said, 'I always questioned you.' I was beside myself. I always wondered what about me made her think I was a lesbian and never forgot that."

One woman described how she was pointed out because she did not fit into the stereotypical feminine look and therefore felt her gender being questioned by others. "When I was in high school, I wore more like tom-boyish clothes like skater shoes and baggy pants and I was wearing shirts that weren't like woman figure flattering. I never wore make-up. I always

had my hair up and stuff, so I think maybe some people would say, 'that's not really girl's clothes,' but I would feel people kind of staring and whispering and stuff."

Not only were women being targeted by the gender police based on what they wore, but one woman describes feeling singled out in a group of guys because of her interests. "I was hanging out with my male friends, Chris and Leigh, and we were driving, smoking weed and I brought the Red Hot Chili Peppers for us to listen to. I remember they said something about girls liked it when you called them "bitches" or something and I took offense to it. Chris said that I wasn't a girl and I said, "Oh my God. What do you mean? Yes, I am." And he said, "Look at what you are doing right now. You're listening to Red Hot Chili Peppers, smoking a joint and hanging out with two guys. You're not really a girl. You're one of the boys." "It's funny because the music I listen to and the activities I'm doing makes me a boy or masculine."

Messages About Gender at School

As mentioned early on, the institution of school has a huge impact on the socialization of children and young adults. Their gender is always made visible and divided between girls and boys and women and men as early as primary class. One woman remembers the boy/girl dynamic within her first elementary school experiences. "In primary/grade one, we used to sit at tables so there were four people at a table. At first I was always more comfortable around the people I already knew, but as the year went on, the teachers would try to mix genders so there were two girls and two boys. They would also install the buddy system. You were usually hooked up with another girl when you walked to assemblies and sat down and obviously the girls would have to go to the girls' washroom and the boys would have to go to the boys' washroom."

The gender separation did not only pertain to the classroom, however. One woman explained the situation on the perimeter of the school. “People would usually play ball hockey or like kick around a ball, that was usually the guys and most of the girls weren’t. The girls would either swing or huddle in groups and gossip amongst each other.” As the children got older and a little more comfortable around the opposite gender, it wasn’t uncommon for teachers to get word of squabbles between the boys and girls. One participant describes a very early memory of such a case where gender stereotypes were reinforced for a big group of children. “We were in grade four and my friend Kim had a crush on Leigh and she told him she liked him and he said something really mean to her, so it turned into a boys versus girls thing. We were all mad at the boys because they were like laughing and saying, “good one.” Mrs. Morris caught wind of that somehow and brought us all into the hallway, pointed at the girls and said, “Little girls should only be worrying about Barbie dolls and you boys should only be worrying about trucks.” It is funny that she said that because it’s a stereotypical distinction between girls and dolls and boys and trucks.”

Although less obvious, these types of messages follow students well into even their high school years. One woman explained how dress codes played a role in delivering messages about what was acceptable for a woman and what was acceptable for a man to wear. “They tried to get us to wear uniforms once and then the parents were like, “This is not a private school. We’re not trying to make it a private school.” That was mostly caused because I guess some parents were feeling that girls were wearing really revealing clothes and their sons were not getting good enough grades because of them.” She went on to elaborate the rules that were enforced after the uniforms were rejected. “They had rules like you can’t see the navel, not too low-cut shirts, all

the rules, of course, were about girls. There was nothing about you can't see the guys' hairy chest. There was never a rule about guys. I remember there was one guy in my grade who would always wear this shirt with a bunch of naked girls on it. There was no rule about that, but the girls had to cover up."

Media

When the participants were asked if they believe the media influenced their gender as a woman, every participant agreed and elaborated by saying they think that media influences everyone in one aspect or another. Also, all the women eagerly responded in regards to how the media influences their ideas of feminine beauty. "I see very beautiful women and I always feel like I will never look like that because I do have a few extra pounds and I don't feel very pretty compared to those women and stuff." One woman said immediately, "There's that one commercial and it's the one with Emma Stone and she says, "I have a secret. I'm wearing make-up but you can't tell," and it's just one of those things. Women are supposed to wear makeup but you're not supposed to be able to tell. Alright, so I have to wear makeup because I'm a girl but I'm also supposed to look like I'm not wearing make-up, so I find that interesting."

A different commercial was remembered by another participant during this discussion. "There was a whole Barbie commercial that was for girls and there was always the Hot Wheels commercial right after it and that was for boys." Another woman said, "I was always confident in the way I looked, but I knew that I was not as pretty as all those people. They all had really nice stomachs and like nice legs and they wore shorts and the pig tails. I'm actually thinking of

Baby Spice right now.” The Spice Girls were not the only celebrities mentioned. Britney Spears was brought to mind among almost every participant during this discussion. One woman went so far as to say, “I listened to Britney Spears and liked how she danced or dressed and she was really feminine and girly and the clothes they wore were skinny and sexy and showed off their bodies. I’d think to myself, that is how a woman is supposed to look, how I should look.”

Femininity as Beneficial

Most women responded to the question, “How is your femininity beneficial to you at times?” by saying something related to going out and drinking. Some described being allowed by bouncers to skip the line-up to the night club and others described getting free drinks from men once inside. “I was out with my friends going to a club and there was a huge line up at the club and everyone was pissed so we decided not to go in. As we were walking by, one of the bouncers whistled or made some kind of cat call towards us. We turned around and said hi. After two minutes of talking, he got us into the club without having to wait in the lineup or even pay the cover charge.” Similarly, another woman recalled getting pulled over by the police and using her femininity to her benefit. “You can flirt your way out of a ticket. I’ve totally done it before. It works!”

More importantly, one participant explained how her status as a woman is what granted her current employment. “Well, last summer, I started working for a company that actually only hires women because it is a company that encourages women. They only want women on their staff because they’re feminist and they feel that if they are going to hire someone, they are going

to hire a woman because they know that she'll be able to do the job. Even if there were two candidates, a guy and a girl, and the guy is more qualified than the girl, they want to give the opportunity to the girl to do well and to have this experience. I'm not saying that that's right. I'm just saying that it was beneficial for me at the time because I am a woman and I got the job.”

Femininity as a Disadvantage

In contrast to the mentioned benefits of being feminine, participants described some disadvantages to embodying the gender as well. One woman said, “Sometimes when I have to walk alone at night, I get scared. If I was a man, I wouldn't be scared because I wouldn't have to worry about getting assaulted or robbed or raped. I'm very petite, so what would I do if somebody attacked me? I really can't do anything.”

In an institutional setting, one woman summed up her experience within a male dominated faculty. “When I was in engineering, it was definitely a disadvantage that I was a woman. I felt like I didn't have the support from the school to stick around or anything when I was faced with some difficulty.”

Another woman openly expressed how she felt about the double standard for women in relation to sex. “The only thing I really thought of was I can't really sleep around without being looked down upon.” The sexual double standard came up again by another participant. She stated, “My view on the whole women can get with a whole bunch of guys and she's a whore and guys can get with a bunch of girls and he's a king, kind of annoys me a lot because it's tied to the idea that a girl is supposed to save herself and she's supposed to be desired but not give in, but eventually she gives in to a guy and she becomes less desirable and more like a whore.” One

woman described experiencing that exact fate. “With Justin, I find him overly attractive and he got with a lot of girls, but I fought and fought and fought for years to play hard to get or untouchable. Later, he said that was the most exciting thing. He said it was a challenge and I wasn’t easy and that was attractive.”

In terms of gender roles, one woman described the double standard that she experienced recently by her extended family. She recalled, “Mike’s dad thinks that I’m supposed to stay and hang out with Darlene and cook and watch the baby while the boys get to all go out and play golf. It’s a double standard because he thinks that guys do sports and girls do the other crap like cook, clean, and raise children. It’s stupid. As if I’m not capable of what men can do, but actually I’m better than them! *laughs” Similarly, one woman explains the dynamics at home between her parents. “I think that although my mom is very free and she can do whatever she wants and she chose the life she has, at the same time, my father kind of encouraged it at the same time. My father worked and my mom was a stay-at-home mom. Although I was brought up being taught that I can do whatever I want, I think at the same time I could have looked at it in a different way and seen that my mom worked for a couple years and she met someone and she married him and she was really lucky that he made a lot of money so she didn’t have to work.”

What Would you Change about Being a Woman?

As expected, many women described the expectations and standards of attractiveness and appearance for women to be too extreme. One participant said, “I think some of the expectations for females are just ridiculous. It just gets worse and worse in terms of appearance because that’s

all anyone cares about. Not being too fat but not being too skinny, having an ass and having boobs, but not having a gut or thick thighs, shiny long hair and keeping up with everything. Everything has to be perfect. I saw this documentary and they said something that really stuck with me. They said when you're female, you're one of two things. You're either fuckable or you're invisible."

Another participant said, "I don't like that we are looked at as the inferior gender, so I would change that and how some women see themselves like, "this is the best I can be, cleaning and cooking." It's not the position or self-image that women must conform to." Interestingly, a different participant said, "I would change men's perspective on women to think that they can do whatever they want or that women should kneel down and do whatever they want for them. I would also change religious beliefs on women that they should follow a certain way and stay inside while their men do whatever they want with no judgment passed."

Discussion

Interestingly, no woman interviewed considered femininity a social construction. In other words, when discussing their experiences with femininity, the idea of femininity as something separate from being anatomically a woman was not apparent to them. To talk about one's femininity, is to talk about one being a woman. Most participants consider the expressions of femininity that they comply with as traits that they naturally embody. Although they are aware of the influences around them on their femininity, women find it hard to see and talk about themselves as mostly products of their environment within Western culture.

It is only wishful thinking that we, as a society, have come a long way in the gender socialization of young children. Rather, the fact remains that before a baby is even born, gender is already being constructed around the sex of the baby depicted in the ultra-sound image. Natasha Walter in Living Dolls. The Return of Sexism, describes, “I believed that adult women were now free to choose to embrace aspects of femininity that second-wave feminists had once seen as coercive. But then I realized that, almost without noticing, the walls have closed in. My daughter is growing up in a world predicated on medieval values, with every girl a princess and every boy a fighter, every girl with fairy designs on her lunch box, and every boy with a superhero on his (2010:130).” As revealed from my interviews, these “medieval values” permeate all aspects of a woman’s life starting with family, friends, school, and well into their experiences in relationships, goals, and career choices.

As illustrated in the section of Messages on Gender from School, all participants described various memories of learning how to comply with their respective gender at school by their peers and teachers. As early as elementary school, young girls were being taught the differences between boys and girls through the activities they were encouraged to take part in and the organization of the classroom. Although some efforts are made by teachers to mix genders in a few settings, the majority of what is being practiced is more consistently dividing girls from boys. “A few parents, a few teachers, made individual efforts to help children to resist the conditioning around them, but while boys and girls were still surrounded by such differing expectations from books, films, friends, toys, advertisements, schools and so on, it is hardly surprising that their efforts often foundered (Walter, 2010:144).

Perhaps the most profound yet unsurprising finding from this study is the anger, confusion, frustration, and resentment towards the pressures women feel to look like society's ideal woman. One way or another, every woman I interviewed expressed how they believed that society's expectations for them to look like a Barbie doll was unrealistic and unattainable. As Naomi Wolf so eloquently puts it, "The beauty myth tells a story: The quality called "beauty" objectively and universally exists. Women must want to embody it and men must want to possess women who embody it. This embodiment is an imperative for women and not for men; it is necessary and natural because it is biological, sexual, and evolutionary: Strong men battle for beautiful women, and beauty must correlate with their fertility, and since this system is based on sexual selection, it is inevitable and changeless (1991:12).

Wolf goes on to argue that that way of thinking about beauty is false and "beauty" is actually used as a form of currency (like gold) in Western society. It is based on a physical standard that women use to compete for the resources that men have already called their own. For example, when all the women discussed getting passed long line ups at clubs and scoring free drinks from men, they may not be consciously aware that they are in competition with other women for those "privileges," but they are, in fact, using their beauty as a form of currency. Whether they all think so or not, this can be considered a form of sexual objectification. "A person is sexually objectified when her sexual parts or sexual functions are separated out from the rest of her personality and reduced to the status of mere instruments or else regarded as if they were capable of representing her (Bartky, 1990:26). Foremost, although the women in this study did express feeling pressure from media to look a certain way and made attempts to fight

it, the reality of this pressure is illustrated in the ever growing industries that revolve around appearances: “The \$33-billion-a-year diet industry, the \$20-billion cosmetics industry, the \$300-million cosmetic surgery industry, and the \$7-billion pornography industry (Wolf, 1991:17).” Fearfully, as women subject themselves to extreme measures of attaining society’s current image of beauty, they are never able to fully embody this ideal. The beauty standards for women are always changing and it seems as though the closer women get to reach such standards, the more extreme those standards get. “Pressures for a woman to keep her looks are far more imperative than they are for most men. From all parts of the media, the professionally cared-for face of the celebrity beams at us incessantly as the face we must measure against our own (Brownmiller, 1984:165).

Another popular topic among the interviewees was the existence of the sexual double standard placed on women. The women did not hesitate to show their feelings on this subject matter and expressed their concern candidly. “One of the primary goals of second-wave woman’s movement of the 1970s was to enable women to feel free to enjoy sex without being held back by traditional social expectations (Walter, 2010:84).” The women’s responses showed their willingness to openly talk about sex (which was once considered a step forward for women), but the way they spoke about it only proved that the dominant practices and beliefs about sex are still old fashioned and oppressive for women.

Limitations and Conclusions

Although participants were asked also about their best and worst romantic relationships, the majority of the responses were not overly significant for this research project. When I asked the women to tell me a little about their best romantic relationship and the qualities they look for in a partner, all the women stated that the mutual desire for equality between partners in a relationship is the most important trait they seek. When I asked them to tell me a little about their worst romantic relationship, all but one woman were very brief in their responses and they basically described their worst partners as being simply young, immature, and not ready for a real relationship.

The one woman who did elaborate on her worst relationship revealed a past relationship that is traumatic, but unfortunately much too common in Western society. She told me about an abusive ex-boyfriend that she was in a 6 month relationship with in high school. She described how he would verbally and physically abuse her and how he tried to control everything she did. He would tell her how to dress, how to wear her hair and make-up, he decided who she could talk to, and where she was allowed to go. She told me that the abuse started with verbal abuse like calling her a bitch, and a whore, and then he would get jealous if she paid attention to somebody else and would lash out at her for that. Eventually he hit her and threatened her not to leave him. Eventually, however, she worked up enough courage to break up with him. Having to deal with her fair share of harassment and difficulty, eventually they broke ties completely. A few years later, her ex-boyfriend's identity was published in the newspapers for the horrible crime he committed. He had moved out west for work, got a new girlfriend and seemed to have a new life. Unfortunately, old habits die hard, and in this case, they got worse. He was charged

with the first-degree murder of his live-in girlfriend. Apparently, he murdered his girlfriend with a shovel in front of her young child. Although this is an extreme case of spousal violence, domestic disputes that erupt into physical abuse are more common than people think.

According to Statistics Canada, “In 2010, there were over 102,500 victims of intimate partner violence, including spousal and dating violence. This translates into a rate of 363 per 100,000 population aged 15 years and older and was almost 2.5 times higher than the rate recorded for family violence against a child, parent or other family member (150 victims per 100,000) (Sinha, 2012:5).” This statistic is shocking to most because the issue of domestic violence and violence against women is still not openly discussed enough, and that is why I was somewhat surprised when only one out of eight women interviewed mentioned any kind of abuse. The likelihood that other participants have experienced some kind of abuse from a boy or man is significant, but the reluctance is likely the reason why no other woman talked about it.

The general message received from the responses of the eight women interviewed is that we, as a society, still have a long way to go to reach gender equality. It is evident that from the beginning of life, girls and boys are still being raised differently. As illustrated in the interviews, every woman complies with and also rejects various aspects of femininity, making no two women the same. Some purposely reject aspects of femininity because they feel it empowers them, and others conform to aspects of femininity because they believe it empowers them. Unfortunately, however, there are more aspects of femininity that put women at a disadvantage in comparison to men. These gender roles guide women along a path of passivity and oppression while men are guided towards a life of aggression and domination. Although some progress has been made on a limited scale, bigger and more radical changes and improvements need to be

made within institutions such as schools, churches, and governing bodies in order to make a significant difference for women in Western culture.

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REB File # 13-068

Research on Femininity



Hello,

I am a student at Saint Mary's University looking for women 18 years and older to participate in an interview based research project. For my honours thesis, I am exploring the ways women experience femininity. I would love to hear the ways in which femininity affected your life positively and/or negatively.

- We will meet on campus when most convenient for you;
- It is totally confidential;
- You can withdraw at any time;

Please contact me if you are interested in taking part.

It would be greatly appreciated!

Phone: 293 3810

Email: Joannetoulany@gmail.com

Joanne Toulany
293 3810
Joannetoulany@gmail.com

APPENDIX #2

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Women's perspectives on the affects of femininity. REB File #

Joanne Toulany
Sociology/Criminology Department
Saint Mary's University, 923 Robie Street, Halifax, NS B3H 3C3
(902) 293 3810; joannetoulany@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

I am a fourth year Honours Student in the Department of Sociology & Criminology at Saint Mary's University. As part of my honours thesis, I am conducting research under the supervision of Dr. McNevin.

I am exploring the self-reported ways women experience femininity, especially the ways in which femininity affected your life positively and/or negatively. You are invited to engage in a casual conversation with me about your experiences as a woman. I would love to hear from you.

PURPOSE OF THIS RESEARCH

The main area of focus for this study concerns women and their perceptions of femininity. I hope to understand how femininity, as a collection of socially prescribed behaviours for women, plays a role in shaping young girls into young women and how it may present to them opportunities and/or challenges during the maturation process. Ultimately, this study aims to examine how women perceive their practices of femininity as expressions of empowerment and/or dis-empowerment depending on the social context.

WHO IS ELIGIBLE TO TAKE PART? (OR WHO IS BEING INVITED TO PARTICIPATE?)

I am looking for heterosexual women 18 years and older to participate in an interview based research project.

WHAT DOES PARTICIPATING MEAN? (OR WHAT WILL I HAVE TO DO?)

If you wish to participate, all you need to do is meet with me and answer some questions about yourself. We will meet in a private room on campus so that it is confidential and convenient for you. The interview can last anywhere from thirty minutes to two hours long depending on your openness to share your experiences with me. You are welcome to end the interview and leave at any time.

WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF THIS RESEARCH?

As women attempt to navigate careers and relationships in the contemporary world, it is important to educate ourselves and others on both costs and benefits of the current practices associated with femininity. There may be important lessons to be learned from the experiences of other women and this can only be accomplished by being open to speaking about them.

WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL RISKS FOR PARTICIPANTS?

I cannot anticipate any potential risks for participants in this study. However, each participants will be given contact information of the counsellors available on and off campus just in case she feels the need to speak to a professional.

(Version # and date)

HOW CAN I WITHDRAW FROM THIS STUDY?

If you wish to withdraw from this study after we have set up a meeting time and place, I would appreciate it if you inform me by telephone or by email. However, contacting me is not necessary.

If you wish to withdraw from the study during the interview, all you have to do is say so. I will stop asking questions immediately and you can leave right away. I will assure you that any data collected will either be destroyed upon request or used with your permission.

WHAT WILL BE DONE WITH MY INFORMATION? (OR WHO WILL HAVE ACCESS TO IT?)

After reading and signing the consent form, you will be interviewed in a private and quiet room on campus so that it is convenient for both of us and confidential for you. With your permission, the interview will be audio-taped and the tape assigned a sequential number. In the event that you do not wish to be audio-taped, notes will be taken in response to the questions asked and a sequential number will be assigned to the text. The open-ended questions range from experiences of learning about femininity as a girl to the best and worst features of romantic relationships as a woman. I will make sure to separate the consent forms from the interview transcripts, again, to protect their identities. Signed consent forms and transcribed interviews will be stored separately from each other in locked drawers. When the interviews are finished, I will thank them for their participation and assure them that their identities will be protected. Once my thesis is complete, I will destroy all the physical data/interview notes by burning them in my wood-stove. As for the audio recordings and computer files, I will fully erase those from the memory storage.

HOW CAN I GET MORE INFORMATION? (OR HOW CAN I FIND OUT MORE ABOUT THIS STUDY?)

Do you wish to receive a summary of the findings?

Yes _____
email

No

You may contact me at anytime after the study to obtain a copy of the final written project.

My Contact Information:

Joanne Toualny
Phone: 293 3810
Joannetoulany@gmail.com

My Supervisor's Contact Information:

Dr. Audrey McNevin
Office: McNally South 403
Phone: 420-5883
audrey.macnevin@smu.ca

Certification:

This research has been reviewed and approved by the Saint Mary's University Research Ethics Board. If you have any questions or concerns about ethical matters, you may contact the Chair of the Saint Mary's University Research Ethics Board at ethics@smu.ca or 420-5728.

Signature of Agreement:

I understand what this study is about and appreciate the risks and benefits. I have had adequate time to think about this and have had the opportunity to ask questions. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I can end my participation at any time.

I agree to have the interview audio-recorded

I agree to have my responses to the interview questions recorded on paper

P a r t i c i p a n t **S i g n a t u r e :** **D a t e :** -

Please keep one copy of this form for your own records.

APPENDIX #3

Interview Questions

Begin by offering a definition of femininity –

Femininity is the label for a set of gender practices associated with being society's ideal woman. Feminine traits include dressing a certain way (like in dresses), and acting a certain way (like being nurturing). Femininity is placed along a gender continuum with masculinity on the opposite side. Therefore, most feminine traits are the opposite of masculine traits. To be the ideal woman, means to adopt as many feminine traits as possible and accept that masculine characteristics are left for the men to perform.

1. In what year were you born?
2. Are you a student? If yes, at what school? In what programme and year of study? If you are not a student, what is your occupation and current employment status?
3. With which ethnicity or ethnicities do you identify? For example, Irish, Greek, English, Jamaican, Lebanese, etc.
4. Do you consider yourself to be religious? If so, with which religion(s) do you identify? Were these beliefs passed down to you by your parents? If you are not religious, why not?
5. Do you have any siblings? If yes, tell me about them. Example: their ages, sexes, and hobbies. Were male and female children in your family treated the same way by your parents? If yes, how so? If no, what were the differences in the ways they were treated?
6. What sorts of messages about being a girl do you remember hearing from your parents when you were young?
7. How and by whom were you taught about the *right* way to behave as a girl?
8. Tell me about your friendships as a young girl inside and outside of school. Were your friendships mixed gender? If not, why not? If yes, what activities did you do together?
9. Where you involved in organized sport? If yes, what sport(s)? Tell me about those experiences.

10. Do you remember any times when your gender role was questioned or you questioned someone's behavior? For example, can you recall a time when somebody said to you, "that's not very lady-like?"
11. How was gender enforced for you at school?
12. What other institutions taught you aspects of how to be a girl?
13. Did media influence your behavior as a girl or woman? How or why not?
14. How would you describe yourself as a woman in comparison to society's expectations?
15. Are there any parts of femininity that you purposely rejected? If yes, which parts and why? If not, why not?
16. Tell me about your best romantic relationship(s).
17. Tell me about your worst romantic relationship(s).
18. If you have never been involved in a romantic relationship, why not?
19. What qualities do you look for in a romantic partner?
20. What do you think a partner expects of you as a female in a romantic relationship?
21. Would you want to fulfill those expectations? If yes, why? If no, why not?
22. Do you believe that a double standard exists for men and women? If yes, have you experienced a form of this double standard? Tell me about it and how does/did it make you feel? If no, why not? For example, some people believe that men are encouraged to have multiple sex partners while the same is frowned upon for women.
23. Are there any gender role expectations with which you never comply? If yes, what are they? Why do you not comply with them? For example, dressing in a feminine fashion.
24. Please recall for me one incident when being a woman was beneficial to you.
25. Please recall for me one incident when being a woman was a disadvantage for you.
26. Do you feel that you have missed out on any opportunities in life because you are a woman? If yes, please tell me about these experiences. If not, why not?
27. What are your future goals in life?

28. Do you plan on getting married? If yes, what responsibilities do you expect to have? If you do not plan on getting married, why not?
29. Do you plan on having children? If yes, what parental responsibilities do you expect to have? If you do not plan on having children, why not?
30. Do any parental responsibilities apply equally to you and your partner?
31. Are there any parental responsibilities that will apply only to you? If yes, which responsibilities and why? If not, why not?
32. If you could change anything about being a woman, what would it be and why? If there is nothing you would change, why not?
33. Is there anything you would like to add to this research study about your experiences as a woman? If yes, please tell me about them.

Thank you so much for your time!



RESEARCH ETHICS BOARD

Department Office
 T 902.420.5728
 F 902.496.8772
 E ethics@smu.ca

Certificate of Ethical Acceptability for Research Involving Humans

This is to certify that the Research Ethics Board has examined the research proposal:

SMU REB File Number:	13-068
Title of Research Project:	Women's Perspectives on their Experiences of Feminity.
Faculty, Department:	Art, Sociology & Criminology
Faculty Supervisor:	Dr. Audrey MacNevin
Student Investigator:	Joanne Toulany

and concludes that in all respects the proposed project meets appropriate standards of ethical acceptability and is in accordance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct of Research Involving Humans (TCPS 2) and Saint Mary's University relevant policies.

Approval Period: May 7, 2013 – May 7, 2014*

Post-approval Reporting Requirements

ADVERSE EVENT
 Adverse Event Report: <http://www.smu.ca/academic/reb/forms.html>
 Adverse events must be immediately reported (no later than 1 business day).
 SMU REB Adverse Event Policy: <http://www.smu.ca/academic/reb/policies.html>

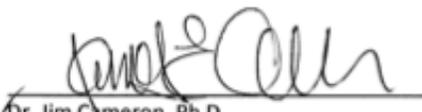
MODIFICATION
 FORM 2: <http://www.smu.ca/academic/reb/forms.html>
 Research ethics approval must be requested and obtained prior to implementing any changes or additions to the initial submission, consent form/script or supporting documents.

YEARLY RENEWAL*
 FORM 3: <http://www.smu.ca/academic/reb/forms.html>
 Research ethics approval is granted for **one year only**. If the research continues, researchers can request an extension one month before ethics approval expires.
 FORM 4: <http://www.smu.ca/academic/reb/forms.html>
 Research ethics approval for course projects is granted for **one year only**. If the course project is continuing, instructors can request an extension one month before ethics approval expires.

CLOSURE
 FORM 5: <http://www.smu.ca/academic/reb/forms.html>
 The completion of the research must be reported and the master file for the research project will be closed.

*Please note that if your research approval expires, no activity on the project is permitted until research ethics approval is renewed. Failure to hold a valid SMU REB Certificate of Ethical Acceptability or Continuation may result in the delay, suspension or loss of funding as required by the federal granting Councils.

On behalf of the Saint Mary's University Research Ethics Board, I wish you success in your research.



 Dr. Jim Cameron, Ph.D.
 Chair, Research Ethics Board, Saint Mary's University