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Abstract

In this article theories of gender hegemony are utilized to assess how changing norms impact upon the binary construction of gender. Transformed gender ideals have materialized in the figure of the 'empowered' and autonomous yet reassuringly feminine woman. Despite the assimilation of key attributes associated with masculinity this particular expression of idealized femininity does not necessarily rework dominant perceptions of gender difference and their organization into a relation of hierarchical complementarity. Through the review of key empirical studies which have examined identity work undertaken by young women and young men as they negotiate idealized gender norms, this article examines how hegemonic relations are reproduced alongside the production of plural femininities and masculinities. This analysis is discussed in relation to changes associated with a move from a private to a public gender regime, a perceived feminization of the public sphere, and the complication of contradictory gender ideals.

Keywords

femininities, gender binary, gender difference, gender hegemony, gender norms, gender regime, hegemonic masculinity, masculinities

When the concept 'gender' entered the vocabulary of western feminism a significant strategy for challenging and transforming unequal social relations was inaugurated. As an analytic tool, gender has been deployed to great effect in dismantling perceived essential differences between men and women; differences conventionally used to explain and legitimate observed disparities in women's access to social resources and rewards. Since its introduction into the lexicon of feminist thought the concept of gender has been developed into more encompassing formulations such that the concept of sex, once bracketed off, has also been read through the lens of social constructionism, further challenging

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'commonsense' understandings of gender difference (Connell, 1987; Lorber, 1994; Martin, 2004; Risman, 2004). Gender has 'become the central analytic concept' utilized by feminist scholars working across a range of disciplinary practices (Hawkesworth, 1997: 650) in what has been called 'a growth industry in the academy' (Risman, 2004: 429). From the strategies of value reversal espoused by cultural feminism to the deconstructive methods of queer theory, the structure of gender as a *binary relation* has been fundamental to feminist critique.

Transformations occurring within the contemporary gender regime raise questions about the dynamics that, as conventionally understood, structure this binary. This article examines how shifts in idealized gender constructions (in particular, changing norms associated with one side of the binary) affect the social construction of gender as a relation of complementary difference. To explore these patterns I review research that focuses on the ideational constructions defining forms of contemporary femininity and the relationship that emerging 'new femininities' have to idealized constructions of masculinity. This body of research indicates that the gender binary which traditionally established gender hierarchy has become more multi-dimensional and complex. Critical engagement with shifting configurations of gender relationality contributes to the project pursued by feminist social constructionists such as Lorber (1994) and Martin (2004), who argue that if the 'commonsense' view of women and men as fundamentally and naturally different, despite contrary evidence of commonalities, is to be challenged then the gender ideology which structures people's perceptions and expectations must be undone. The analysis links some of the key features associated with a reconstructed form of 'successful' femininity to contemporary gender ideology in order to understand whether these new femininities challenge commonsense understandings of gender as hierarchical difference.

The Structure of Difference

In western contexts morphological variations apparent in human bodies become meaningful through the imposition of a binary construct which sorts these variations into only two socially and legally recognized gender statuses – 'man' and 'woman'. Despite the diverse talents, sexual preferences, identities, personalities, varied interests and ways of interacting exhibited by individuals, difference collapses into a binary relation of difference.

In the social construction of gender, it does not matter what men and women actually do; it does not even matter if they do exactly the same thing. The social institution of gender insists only that what they do is *perceived* as different. (Lorber, 1994: 26)

The social production of difference is not neutral for as long as women and men see themselves as different kinds of people women will not expect to occupy a similar position within social structures and 'therein lies the power of gender' (Risman, 2004: 432).

Feminist social constructionist theories use a multi-layered model of the social to analyse how gender operates as a 'constitutive feature and organizing principle of

collectivities, social institutions, historical processes, and social practices' (Glenn, 2000: 5). These integrative approaches (Connell, 2002; Ferree et al., 1999; Lorber, 1994; Risman, 2004) draw attention to how gender operates throughout the social structure, from the level of individual gendered selves to the cultural norms and expectations that shape interaction, to the organization of various institutional domains. Gender is embedded simultaneously within all these layers in complex and dynamic ways (Risman, 2004). As 'an organizing principle' gender incorporates both cultural meanings and material relations; therefore, the study of gender requires analysis of its constitution through the simultaneous 'deployment of gendered rhetoric, symbols, and images and through allocation of resources and power along gender lines' (Glenn, 2000: 5).

Various research traditions may focus to a greater or lesser extent on one 'piece' of the overall puzzle but gender is intertwined in representational, interactional and social structural processes (Brickell, 2006; Glenn, 2000). A theory of gender structure must pay attention both 'to how structure shapes individual choice and social interaction and how human agency creates, sustains, and modifies current structure' (Risman, 2004: 433). We may, for instance, empirically investigate how gendered selves and gendered interactions interrelate without accepting 'simplistic unidirectional arguments presumed to be either about identities or cultural ideology' (2004: 434). The analysis in this article takes into account the three key dimensions associated with an integrative social constructionist perspective. This includes the production of gendered selves, the cultural expectations regarding the performance of 'proper' gender identities which shape everyday interactions and the structure of institutional domains that form the backdrop for changes to gender identities and norms. Following the integrative multi-layered model, the structure of the gender binary as defined by idealized gender characteristics is central to the discussion because this is one of the key mechanisms which organizes component layers of the social structure.

Some critics object that placing too much emphasis on the constructed nature of femininity and processes that produce femininity as an object of inquiry disconnects critical attention from a meaningful, definable referent (Komter, 1991: 47). However, representational practices are recursively grounded in the concrete social interactions of everyday life. Idealizations associated with gender categories are utilized in the orientation of social action; therefore, femininities as lived by social actors materialize in the everyday practice of gender at the level of interaction. The interactional dimension of social structure is where cultural expectations attach to the categories of femininity/masculinity and then are applied to, and expressed by, sexed bodies (Risman, 2004: 436). Multi-dimensional social constructionist theories of gender integrate the fundamentally *social* interconnections between bodies categorized by sex, the production of gendered selves, the cultural organization of everyday social interactions, and the configuration of institutional domains (Knaak, 2004; Lorber, 1994; Martin, 2004; Risman, 2004).

Analyses of western femininity¹ take place against the backdrop of significant structural reconfigurations to gender relations within institutions such as the family, education, employment and the state. Transformations have appeared as the system of patriarchy which governed gender relations through the confinement of women to, and exploitation within the domestic sphere, has been replaced by a public gender regime² in which women participate in the public arena but are segregated and subordinated within

various structures such as employment (Walby, 1997: 6). This shift in patriarchal relations means ‘women today will decide on the balance of commitment to education and employment on the one hand and caring and dependence on the other under quite different patterns of gendered opportunities than women of previous age cohorts’ with younger women in particular building their ‘lives around the opportunities and limits of a public gender regime’ (1997: 11).³

Because gender regimes are complex, multi-faceted structures when ‘the form of gender relations changes at any or all of these levels, so do the conceptions as to what constitutes women and men and the perceptions of what might constitute their cultural, political, and economic preferences and projects’ (Walby, 2009: 260). The complexity characterizing gender restructuring defies evaluation as either wholly progressive or regressive. Instead, considerable attention has been given to assessing the significance of reworked cultural understandings of femininity (Budgeon, 2003; Genz, 2009; McRobbie, 2009).

The Social Construction of ‘New Femininities’⁴

Second-wave feminism challenged gender inequality by ‘de-naturalizing’ and resituating the feminine within social relations of power, thereby revealing mechanisms through which socially devalued characteristics came to define the substance of the feminine. Practices which produced conventional femininity such as beautification, fashion and domesticity and their association with passivity, submissiveness and superficiality made femininity an object of feminist suspicion and denunciation. With the advent of ‘girl power’ in the 1990s, femininity returned to mainstream culture in a distinctive hybrid form embodying a celebration of many of the traditional accoutrements of femininity while combining these with a newfound confidence and sense of agentic potential (Riordan, 2001). A high powered, confident, and glamorous femininity representing the ‘modernization’ of gender has emerged as part of a cultural process in which women are invited to formulate their self-understandings around the twin poles of traditional feminine pleasures on the one hand, and embracing self-entitlement, self-reliance and individual freedom on the other (Budgeon, 2001; Gonick, 2006; Harris, 2004; McRobbie, 2009; Ringrose, 2007).

Rather than being eliminated, as hoped for by some second-wave critics, traditional feminine qualities have been resignified in a process which complicates their once routine association with gender subordination. Where traditional femininity was once blamed for undermining women’s access to empowerment its role is now less certain and contested within gender theory. It has been suggested that women’s socio-economic progress has advanced to the extent that traditional femininity no longer poses a threat to gender equality or women’s ability to assert their autonomy (Snyder-Hall, 2010). Some commentators have even proposed that traditional femininity has been deconstructed to the extent it may now be *consciously* and playfully performed to destabilize gender hierarchy. Others, however, maintain ‘we cannot assume that women (and men) are now blessed with a sufficient amount of “knowingness” to allow for the reinvention of femininity that is significantly different from its pre-feminist, patriarchal counterpoint’ (Genz, 2009: 11).

Research on the development of different forms of femininity has documented the complex remaking of femininity at the turn of the 21st century. This contemporary 'landscape' of gender relations has been described as a contradictory field in which discourses of female empowerment currently circulate 'alongside the reinvigoration of inequalities and the emergence of new forms and modalities of power' (Gill and Scharff, 2011: 1). Within European and Anglo-American contexts it is evident that particular ideals such as assertiveness, confidence, and self-determination are revising the positioning of femininity within the structure of the traditional gender binary. Changing perceptions of gender are reflected in an acute level of public interest in the lives of young women who have become 'a topic of fascination, enthusiasm, concern, anxiety and titillation ... the meanings which converge around the figure of the girl or young women, are more weighted towards capacity, success, attainment, enjoyment, entitlement, social mobility and participation' (McRobbie, 2009: 57). Given the complexity of this reconstitution it is not entirely clear whether alterations to one side of the binary, in this case, transformations to the symbolic dimensions associated with idealized femininity, reflect and/or affect potential redistributions of gendered power and the reorganization of key social practices.

The growing interest in analysing new femininities mirrors what has been a proliferation of literature devoted to the critical study of masculinities and the role played by power in producing and legitimating masculine privilege (Chapman and Rutherford, 1988; Connell, 1995; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Kimmel, 1987; MacInnes, 1998). The focused study of masculinity, however, has not been matched by a similar interest in questioning the 'tightly policed, set of practices, dispositions and performances' which bring femininity into being nor has there been a sustained attempt to investigate 'hegemonic femininity' equal to efforts applied to the theorization and empirical study of hegemonic masculinity (Gill and Scharff, 2011: 2). In her research on 'postfemininities' Genz (2009: 2) notes that, since entering a new millennium, the feasibility of conceiving femininity as a homogenous category which neatly fits into gendered dichotomies like subject/object, active/passive and perpetrator/victim has diminished but this does not imply that the processes organizing gender difference are no longer in operation. Interrogating power dynamics associated with these complications involves examining the positioning of femininities in relation to hegemonic masculinity and the workings of internal processes within the category of femininity which devalue and marginalize specific kinds of femininities while assigning privileged status to others. Despite a proliferation of femininities, a privileged construction taking the form of a white, western heterosexual femininity continues to circulate – a form Genz (2009: 5) argues has maintained its heteronormative hegemony albeit in contentious and contradictory manifestations.

In summary, gender research has become more attuned to a multiplicity of femininities emerging out of particular socio-historical arrangements. The practice of femininity is situated within the social structure at the site of everyday interactions organized by cultural expectations which construct gender as a dichotomous relation. This active space, in which expectations are both experienced by and applied by social actors, mediates between identity work undertaken at the level of the individual and the rules and norms which constitute various institutional domains (Risman, 2004: 437). Recent

evidence of social change across the multi-levelled gender order has prompted questions about the extent to which gender binarism as traditionally constituted as a relation of complementary asymmetry may be troubled by a new femininity constituted by both conventional feminine *and* masculine attributes. By applying established theories of gender hegemony to the contemporary *idealization* of ‘empowered’ femininity the aim in the remainder of this article is to assess its role in sustaining or challenging hegemonic gender relations; to examine relations between different types of femininity; and in light of the social re-evaluation of some feminine characteristics, to assess some of the ways processes of feminization impact upon hegemonic masculinity.

Gender, Power and Hegemony

Connell’s (1987, 1995) social theory of gender has emerged as one of the most influential strategies for conceptualizing the asymmetrical ordering of masculinity and femininity. With an interest in theorizing how gender difference is maintained, Connell highlights the operation of power in governing the boundaries which symbolically delineate masculinity and femininity. This dynamic is captured by the term ‘hegemonic masculinity’, defined as ‘the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women’ (Connell, 1995: 77). Explicit attention is given to processes that allow a particular group to acquire and sustain dominance not simply through the use of force but through ‘cultural consent, discursive centrality, institutionalization, and the marginalization and delegitimation of alternatives’ (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005: 846). Hegemonic masculinity is upheld by its dynamic relation with subordinated masculinities, most notably homosexual masculinity, because ‘in patriarchal ideology’ that which is subordinated is ‘the repository of whatever is symbolically expelled from hegemonic masculinity’ and ‘easily assimilated to femininity’ (Connell, 1995: 78).

Connell argues ‘there is no femininity that is hegemonic in the sense that the dominant form of masculinity is hegemonic among men’ because ‘all forms of femininity in this society are constructed in the context of the overall subordination of women to men’ (1987: 186–7). Compliance ‘is central to the pattern of femininity which is given most cultural and ideological support’; a form referred to as emphasized femininity ‘oriented to accommodating the interests and desires of men’ (1987: 183). Because femininity is always subordinate ‘no pressure is set up to negate or subordinate other forms of femininity in the way hegemonic masculinity must negate other masculinities’ and no specific formulation of femininity possesses sufficient social power to exercise dominance among women in the manner hegemonic masculinity sustains hierarchical relationships between men (1987: 187).

Empirical research reveals that the interplay between different masculinities and between femininity and masculinity is more multi-faceted than first conceptualized by Connell (Wedgwood, 2009: 335). Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) address this critique by emphasizing that the social relations surrounding hegemonic masculinity do not rely on a single pattern of power and by acknowledging that their original theory should be reformulated in view of ongoing developments in gender theory. In particular,

increased attention ought to be granted to how gender hierarchies are created and sustained by the *relational* dynamics of gender and to the effect of ‘new configurations of women’s identity and practice, especially younger women – which are increasingly acknowledged by younger men’ (2005: 848). They conclude that the practices which constitute femininities and the historical connections between these patterns and those establishing different forms of masculinity should be given greater prominence when analysing gender hegemony.

The contemporary social construction of new femininities represents one such historical transformation to gender ideals which impacts on the workings of gender hegemony. The model as originally constructed by Connell requires further development if changing norms associated with femininity are to be adequately addressed. Schippers (2007: 85) endorses this point, arguing that ‘femininity is still decidedly under-theorized’ and ‘a compelling and empirically useful conceptualization of hegemonic femininity and multiple, hierarchical femininities as central to male dominant gender relations has not yet been developed’ (emphasis in original).

Building on Connell’s framework, Schippers’ (2007) model of hegemonic gender relations more thoroughly theorizes the fundamental role femininities play in sustaining gender *relationality*. Relationality depends upon idealized gender constructions as these convey ‘the qualities members of each category should and are assumed to possess’ while articulating the positioning of femininity and masculinity in a relation that is both complementary and hierarchical (2007: 90). The ‘implicit relationship between genders becomes a taken-for-granted feature of interpersonal relationships, culture and social structure. That is, gender difference is institutionalized ... but, importantly, so is gender relationality’ (2007: 91).

The prominence given to *idealized* constructions in this model contrasts with Connell who ‘rejects a conception of masculinity as signification, discourse, or narrative *only*, by emphasizing the centrality of the body and practice’ (Martin, 1998: 472). Connell’s emphasis on practice obscures the significant role played by symbolic and cultural ideals in reproducing the hierarchical structure of gender binaries. By defining gender as practice Connell appears to suggest ‘masculinity becomes “what men and boys do”, and femininity the Other of that. This would not be such a problem if we actually had a clear picture of what men and boys *do* do, but we do not ...’ (Paechter, 2006: 254). Identifying an action as gendered requires that we ‘know the substance of societal gender norms and/or ideologies to which people orient practice to ascertain whether it is (a form of) masculinity’ (Martin, 1998: 471).

By utilizing Butler’s theory of the heterosexual matrix, Schippers shows how the construction of gender difference is naturalized by the normative definition of appropriate sexual desire as the desire for difference. This ‘does the hegemonic work of fusing masculinity and femininity together as complementary opposites’ (2007: 90). To sustain hegemonic relations, masculinity and femininity must also be fixed as *hierarchical* and here Schippers argues that heterosexuality is normatively constituted as a naturalized relation of male *active* dominance and female *passive* receptivity. By establishing this specific structure of relationality it becomes apparent that not all expressions of femininity align with this normative definition, and, therefore, it becomes possible to assess their role in sustaining hegemonic gender relations. Contra

Connell, 'hegemonic femininity' is conceivable as the expression of feminine characteristics which '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' (2007: 94). When assessing different forms of femininity, such as new femininities, this model directs our 'efforts to identify multiple and hierarchical configurations of masculinities and femininities' and their positioning 'not so much in their difference from and inferiority to hegemonic masculinity as Connell suggests, but instead against the *idealized relationship* between masculinity and femininity' (2007: 94).

Refusals to complement hegemonic masculinity include exhibiting sexual desire for other women, promiscuous behaviour, sexual inaccessibility or overtly aggressive behaviour (Schippers, 2007: 95). Although these characteristics often have associations with masculinity they are not perceived as an enactment of masculinity when performed by a woman. Instead, they are 'necessarily and compulsively constructed as feminine' and, as specifically *feminine* characteristics which are not consistent with the performance of hegemonic femininity, they are regulated through social stigmatization (2007: 96). Expressions of femininity which violate the authorized practice of hegemonic gender relationality circulate as 'pariah femininities' alongside hegemonic femininity. This reworking of Connell's model, therefore, accounts for the production of multiple femininities. It also aids in analysing dynamics which order multiple masculinities. Connell theorized the hierarchical ordering of different kinds of *masculinities* in relation to a form that enjoyed overall dominance, but Schippers argues that because gender hegemony is legitimated and maintained by preserving a hierarchical relationship *between masculinity and femininity* 'there are no masculine characteristics that are stigmatized as contaminating or subordinate ... what were identified by Connell as subordinate masculinities, are in this model, simply hegemonic femininity enacted by men' hence their devaluation is due to their interpretation as *feminization* (2007: 96). In summary, this model provides a framework which aids in advancing our understanding of how a range of femininities and masculinities are implicated in sustaining or challenging hegemonic gender relations.

New Femininities: The Dynamics of Gender Hegemony

This model facilitates analysis of the effect newly 'empowered' expressions of idealized femininity have on gender hierarchy. In the following discussion I outline three of these dynamics and assess their impact on the production of gender as a relation of asymmetrical complementarity in order to further our understanding of the positioning of new femininities within hegemonic gender relations. The first enquiry centres on the idealized content of empowered femininities and the ideological role performed by this version of femininity in obscuring hierarchically organized gender difference. Second, I examine the role differentiated femininities play in securing a privileged form of hegemonic femininity and third, I consider the impact of feminization on hegemonic masculinity within the context of social change and a revaluing of particular feminine characteristics. If feminization is the primary force which orders masculinities then a social repositioning of the feminine will impact on that process.

Idealized Content and Relationality

In her investigation of ‘successful’ femininity, Ringrose (2007: 485) notes that this femininity, which features repeatedly in educational achievement discourses in the UK, is constituted by qualities associated with traditional femininity *and* masculinity. Gonick (2004: 191) also argues that femininity has been reconstructed to ‘ideally integrate and embody both conventionally feminine and masculine aspirations’. Following the logic of Schippers’ (2007) model, femininity cannot *legitimately* incorporate masculinity and, therefore, these new femininities should invite censure for upsetting the hierarchical complementarity sustaining hegemonic relations. Yet a range of empirical findings indicates that such femininities are not the result of a whole-scale reorganization of traditional gender complementarity nor have they in turn initiated a collapse of gender hierarchy (Baker, 2008; Budgeon, 2011; Gonick, 2006; Harris, 2004; Nielsen, 2004).

That new femininities are able to assimilate masculine attributes without upsetting hegemonic masculinity can be explained by the ideological function these femininities serve. As symbols of cultural development, social progress and the triumph of mainstreamed equality strategies they are viewed as ‘progressive but also *consummately and reassuringly feminine*’ (McRobbie, 2009: 57, emphasis added). Modernization is not about women becoming masculine but about becoming *individuals* as constituted by discourses associated with modern individualism in which masculine attributes are conflated with individuality (Budgeon, 2003, 2011). The contemporary social value accruing to these new femininities is partly due to the possibility that young women may pursue the idealized subject of late modernity; that is, they may reasonably assume the position of an individual and not primarily as a member of a disadvantaged group. This construction of new femininity performs a significant role in promoting and naturalizing a liberal ‘de-gendered’ social realm in which the dynamics that maintain gender relationality and hegemony are obscured.

The impact of this dynamic is evident in empirical studies which focus on the identity work undertaken by young women as they juggle contradictory subject positions associated with this version of modernized femininity. Despite recounting experiences of gender inequality, young women often reject gendered social relations as a valid framework for understanding their access to life choices or to account for the outcomes of choices made. For example, in one Australian study, a gender neutral discourse that privileged ‘unique’ personal qualities was deployed by young women to aid in the interpretation of their lives (Baker, 2008). This facilitated the description of gendered power differentials as a problem largely associated with past generations and residual inequalities as part of a temporary stage in ongoing social progress. Similarly, Rich (2005: 496) argues that the narrative relied on by young British women in her study ‘was heavily informed by a position of individualism which ostensibly opened up “new choices” in their life paths, but simultaneously influenced the ways in which they could recognize and resist gendered inequalities in their lives’. The successful performance of femininity increasingly takes place against a backdrop of meritocratic systems promising to reward worthy individuals, but in a stratified social system such promises produce contradictions. These must be navigated in the absence of readily available socially legitimate discourses apart from the principles associated with liberal individualism (Budgeon, 2011). Denying the

relevance of gender in favour of complying with the values associated with the rights of the 'free individual' does not fundamentally undermine or interrogate the social construction of masculinity, offer critical tools for reconstructing gender difference, or challenge a hierarchical gender complementarity.

Bracketing off the question of gender difference can also complicate the ways in which young men negotiate gender identity in environments where gender neutrality is established as the dominant discourse. Such difficulties are illustrated in Volman and Ten Dam's (1998: 542) study of Dutch educational settings – a site fully permeated by the official national discourse of gender equality. Here, discourses explicitly legitimizing gender inequality were no longer part of young people's experience and, indeed, these ways of making sense of gender were actively rejected as 'old fashioned'. It was understood that, historically, gender difference had been constructed as a hierarchical relation and they took responsibility for ensuring they were not complicit with this particular construction of gender. However, in contrast to the official discourse of equality, gender differentiation appeared as a significant element of their everyday interactions. These students struggled to make sense of those differences without appearing to endorse inequality. When confronted with gender difference they tried 'to avoid any impression of unfairness and discrimination. Many students appeared unable to make a distinction between identifying differences and sanctioning them' (1998: 542). To manage the 'risk' of speaking of gender as difference, thereby implying the endorsement of hierarchy, the young men in this study tended to construct the gender-specific behaviours and preferences which they had witnessed as the product of individual choice.

The authors argue that identity work performed in this context is significantly gendered as a result of the influence of discourses of gender emancipation in the 1990s which focused on the constraining values traditionally associated with femininity. For the most part, new identities are considered desirable for girls who are more actively encouraged to emulate and embrace the 'choices' now viewed as synonymous with newly empowered and individualized femininities. Young men, on the other hand, are not similarly incited to remake their masculine identities, to become more 'feminine' or incorporate more 'womanly' attributes such as empathy and vulnerability because masculinity per se is not being made visible or problematized. Falling short of demands for men to proactively reconstruct their own relationship to hegemonic masculinity, gender neutrality simply implies they should not actively discriminate against women. It may be concluded that new femininities are associated with a heightened emphasis on individual responsibility, the ideological de-gendering of social relations and a position within the gender binary consistent with the workings of a hegemonic form of femininity.

The Ordering of Plural Femininity

The privilege of particular femininities is sustained not only at the expense of other possible articulations but in a relation of interdependence with those femininities which visibly mark the boundary of socially 'acceptable' femininity. The multiple forms of femininity evidently being enacted in relation to new femininities are ordered hierarchically by applying a measure of individuation repeatedly constructed as a personal failure to overcome 'pathetic', dependent traditional femininity and assert personal choice.

Through a dynamic which resembles the stigmatization and subordination of particular masculinities the ordering of diverse femininities depends upon the extent to which they are *feminized*. ‘Pariah femininities’ are those perceived as expressing traditional femininity in excessively accentuated ways.

In Nielsen’s (2004) Norwegian study of cross-generational femininities the youngest of the three generations interviewed idealized an ‘autonomous’ femininity constructed in opposition to a ‘vulnerable’, passive, dependent and conformist femininity often assigned to more ‘traditional’ older generations. Being too ‘other directed’ was disparaged for fear that women who cared about others allowed themselves to be positioned as an object for others’ desire instead of ‘being true to oneself’. The young British women in Rich’s (2005: 502) study also displayed obvious disdain towards women they perceived as weak and ‘only having themselves to blame’ for not seizing the opportunities believed to now be available to all women if they worked hard enough. Many believed that an over-investment in some forms of idealized femininity – those passively relying on male judgement of appearance or heterosexual physical attraction for their legitimacy – resulted in a forfeit of autonomy. These studies suggest qualities once essential to the maintenance of hegemonic masculinity, conceptualized by Connell (1987) as ‘emphasized femininity’, are being displaced to some extent by a hybridized femininity whose legitimacy relies upon casting out *overly* obvious feminized qualities.

Feminized qualities, however, cannot be *fully* refused. This also impacts on the social ordering of multiple femininities. As Baker (2008), for example, has argued in the Australian context, despite the language of choice and opportunity permeating the social landscape of young women’s lives there are very *specific* choices which, if made, would compromise the intelligibility of new femininities as positive, pleasurable and progressive. These diverse choices are rendered unacceptable because in one way or another they involve rejecting the complementary and hierarchical relationship of masculinity and femininity. To enact this rejection is to invite being positioned as a pariah femininity in the terms predicted by Schippers (2007). Just as one might be judged for being *too* feminine (girly) and, therefore, not an autonomous individual, one must also avoid outwardly and directly threatening the security of masculine privilege by critiquing or rejecting specific feminine qualities. Despite constructing self-narratives defined by values consistent with feminism, such as assertiveness and self-determination, these characteristics can be ‘taken too far’ and acquire negative connotations (Rich, 2005: 504). The identity required of many young women is performed within heteronormative structures which reinforce and reproduce the privilege of white, western heterosexual femininity – an expression of femininity positioned in opposition to feminism which is caricatured as ‘man hating’ or lesbianism (Genz, 2009).⁵ The possibility of claiming an identity empowered by the critical capacities furnished by feminism was habitually rejected by young women in these studies. The figure of the ‘feminist’ exemplified a pariah femininity embodied in a figure imagined as aggressive and demanding; qualities which threaten heterosexual norms of attraction and the loss of approval by men and therefore undermine hierarchical gender complementarity. Furthermore, within this symbolic economy positive identification with feminism was also perceived as aligning oneself with a ‘victim’ identified group who refused to recognize and embrace social progress.

These studies illustrate that for many young women identity work requires treading:

... an extremely thin line between not being victims, exercising agency and choice, and remaining 'feminine'... trying to distance their identities from feminist labels, whilst at the same time attempting to maintain a 'system of equality' and the ability to exercise individual rights. (Rich, 2005: 505)

McRobbie (2009: 57) observes that 'the abandonment of critique of patriarchy is a requirement of the new sexual contract, the terms of which are established in key institutional sites dedicated to the production of the category of young women'. It may be concluded that, while the models developed by Connell and Schippers recognize that masculinity acquires its legitimacy via a rejection of femininity, it is evident that new 'empowered' femininities are also threatened by aspects of feminization, thereby preserving the historical devaluation of femininity underpinning gender inequality. Dynamics that constitute this process also delegitimize critical counter discourses associated with alternative femininities and their potential to undermine hegemonic relations by assigning them a pariah status.

The Feminization of Masculinity

The final dynamic to consider involves the ordering of different forms of masculinity into structures of varying relative privilege. The wider context within which these processes occur has been described as a feminized public sphere governed by an ideology that promotes hybrid subjectivities such as those associated with new femininities (Burman, 2009; Morini, 2007; Swan, 2008). It is interesting to examine in more depth what happens to the performance of masculinity within this social context. Substantial effort has been devoted to the study of how the realization of socially endorsed masculinity is impacted upon by processes of feminization within educational settings. In Britain, for example, in the mid-1990s young women began to outperform their male counterparts at secondary schooling in almost all but the most traditionally male subjects (Burman, 2005: 352; Harris, 2004; Renold and Allan, 2006; Ringrose, 2007). The 'successful girls' discourse associated with these new levels of attainment is often constructed within a gendered binary frame where it is claimed that girls' advantage is being realized at the expense of 'failing' young men and boys. Boys' under-performance is partly attributed to the objectively low presence of males in the teaching profession characterizing primary and lower secondary levels. In addition to this statistical understanding, feminization is applied in more qualitative and evaluative terms to reference shifting school cultures often perceived to have been reorganized around traditionally feminine qualities, attributes and proficiencies (Skelton, 2011: 6). Furthermore, feminization is also linked to backlash discourses blaming feminism for going 'too far' in advancing young women's interests.

The extent of debates concerned with assessing the causes of feminization go beyond the scope of this article but for the purposes of examining the feminization of masculinity much work has been devoted to understanding how 'feminized' cultures of schooling may compromise boys' vulnerable grasp on hegemonic masculinity – a form of

masculinity reliant on the denigration of alternative masculinities outwardly expressing a ‘feminine’, ‘docile’ and subordinated orientation to the school system (Burman, 2005: 353; Epstein et al., 1998; Phoenix, 2003). ‘Anti-swot’ cultures amongst boys are generated by a pervasive fear of failing to achieve masculinity which then undermine boys’ ability make themselves into idealized subjects prepared to adopt attitudes, practices and dispositions that many girls appear to have mastered (Phoenix, 2003). Values associated with femininity, notably emotionality, have also penetrated workplace cultures, marking the ascendancy of ‘soft capitalism’ with its associated need for emotional and aesthetic labour (Swan, 2008). The reconfiguration of workplaces and employment around these forms of labour appears to privilege a ‘feminized’ subjectivity which, if performed by men, would compromise the bounded, self-sufficient and independent self associated with white, middle-class, heterosexual, western masculinity. Feminization in these instances is met with a backlash discourse in which femininity is positioned as a source of contagion.

Feminization, however, is a complex social process which not only consolidates hegemonic masculinity by creating and then delegitimizing alternative masculinities. In some sites the adequacy of traditionally idealized masculinity is being put into question (Burman, 2005; Gonick, 2006; Morini, 2007; Ringrose, 2007). ‘Cognitive capitalism’ (Morini, 2007) is constituted by the feminization of labour along a quantitative and a qualitative dimension. The former encompasses objective transformations in gendered workforce participation resulting from a range of factors including the restructuring of state regimes, de-industrialization, declines in traditionally male forms of employment, service sector growth, increases in jobs traditionally performed by women and ‘an expansion in the number of jobs involving terms and conditions often associated with women’s work (including low pay, insecurity and deskilling)’ (Adkins, 2002: 59). These transformations demand a qualitative re-orientation towards persons away from commodities and the exploitation of ‘aesthetic labour’ performed through skills and competencies traditionally coded as ‘feminine’ such as ‘capacities for relationships, emotional aspects, linguistic aspects, propensity for care’ (Morini, 2007: 42).

Within this socio-economic context, the traditional complementarity between passive ‘connected’ femininity and active ‘autonomous’ masculinity has been interpreted as disadvantageous to the well-being of young men and in turn has prompted a visible questioning of forms of masculinity that preserve asymmetrical complementarity. Gonick (2004: 190–1) observes that the impact of neoliberalism ‘has shifted the conditions of possibility of modern subjectivity, demanding that the ideal person embrace both emotional openness or flexibility and ambitions for autonomy’. Negotiating the tension presented by the autonomy/connection binary results in the production of masculinities which are differentiated by the extent to which formerly feminized qualities may be positively embodied.

Anxieties about the limits of masculinity surface in concrete instances of programmes and policies designed to address perceived harms associated with traditional masculinity and to facilitate a successful response to dealing with the demands of a feminized public sphere. For example, the *Australian Inquiry into the Education of Boys* (2000) aimed to strategically improve socialization skills in the early and middle years of schooling so that boys were better able to respond effectively to demands for greater emotional

literacy (cited in McLeod, 2002: 213). However, McLeod notes that in these programmes the association of emotional competence with the feminine was disavowed. Instead, these skills were presented as key features of a well-rounded but de-gendered identity thus resolving anxieties associated with feminization, allowing idealized masculinity to be reworked while managing the 'contagion' of femininity (2002: 213).

In other research it becomes apparent that feminization can complicate the replication of hegemonic masculinity and result in a hybridized masculinity that simultaneously amalgamates feminine and masculine attributes. Phoenix's (2003) study of 11 to 14-year olds illustrates how the struggles boys undertake to present themselves as properly masculine can conflict with expectations circulating in the neoliberal knowledge society. These negotiations contrast with those required of young women. The 'successful girls' discourse celebrates young women as exemplars of flexible self-invention; a feat that is harder for many boys to achieve given the bounded nature of hegemonic masculinity. The boys in Phoenix's study, however, did not simply revert to an uncritical acceptance of hegemonic masculinity. Instead, they developed numerous sophisticated strategies, cut through by class and race, to manage their identities and social relations in ways that allowed them to succeed in their schoolwork without undermining their standing amongst peers.

Conclusion

Conceptualizations of idealized femininity have been effected by a series of social changes associated with the move from a private to public gender regime and the perceived 'feminization' of the public sphere. These changes often appear to favour women by offering a new 'empowered' feminine ideal; however, the discursive field within which gender ideals circulate is constituted by oppositional forces which position an imagined 'new girl' who is assertive, dynamic and free from the confines of passive femininity against the image of the vulnerable, voiceless and fragile girl who is too concerned with pleasing others to realize her own self esteem (Gonick, 2006). The study of new femininities indicates that such hybridizations of femininity are complicating the coherence of gender categories as theorized by both Connell (1987, 1995) and Schippers (2007). These femininities play a significant role in reproducing gender complementarity.

Connell's analysis of hegemonic gender relations has lent significant insights into how the legitimacy of gendered social arrangements is secured but has paid insufficient attention to the role of femininity in this dynamic. Connell has recently called for greater refinement in theorizing and tracing the workings of femininity within gender hegemony. With the aid of a reworked model the analysis undertaken here has aimed to address that gap and to offer insights into how changing feminine ideals, which appear as progressive, are implicated in the regulation of gender relations and the delimitation of alternative formulations of both femininity and masculinity that would dismantle binary relationality, promote greater degrees of social change and open possibilities for alternative social arrangements.

This discussion has highlighted how 'characteristics and practices defined as womanly and manly are constituted through the proliferation of a network of cross-cutting,

sometimes contradictory discourses' (Schippers, 2007: 93). Despite the prominence of official equality discourses and meritocratic promises, the visibility and experience of continued gender difference complicates the ways in which gender ideals organize social relations. In many empirical studies gender evidently remains a fundamentally binary structure which facilitates the management of those contradictions in a manner that preserves gender hierarchy, maintains complementarity (albeit in multi-faceted ways), organizes understandings of gender difference and orients social action. Hegemonic masculinity is not inflexible or inevitable but caution must be exercised against overstating the extent to which the 'empowerment' attaching to new femininities grants its practitioners access to social power that could rework gender hierarchy. The analysis offered here does not reject the suggestion that changing gender ideals represent real social change. Rather, the aim has been to examine how these ideals are also implicated in the repetition of hegemonic logic, particularly in sites where individuals undertake identity work and in so doing consent to dominant constructions of gender relations. Further empirical research analysing links between the idealized content of binary gender categories, their materialization in social action and their entrenchment in social institutions would aid in developing understandings of change and continuity in the current gender order.

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Notes

1. In the remainder of this article the term 'western' will define a primarily European and Anglo-American context. Gender theories and empirical studies reviewed here have been predominantly concerned with these contexts. The analysis offered does not presume to generalize beyond this context.
2. Gender regime is a 'multi-level macro level concept' defined as 'a system of gender relations which is analytically separate from other regimes of inequality' (Walby, 2009: 259–60).
3. Class, sexuality, 'race', ethnicity, and disability have also been identified as significant sources of intersectionality which inform feminist theory (Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1983; Brah and Phoenix, 2004; Collins, 1990). Throughout this article it is implicit that gender is cross cut by these sources of difference. When analysing gender as a multi-layered structure these other social divisions affect the likelihood of young women being able to successfully perform idealized femininity and attain social recognition of their identities. Skeggs' (1997) study of the intersection of class and gender skilfully shows how young working-class women, for example, struggled to achieve a socially validated form of femininity.
4. Within the literature this term designates an emerging form of femininity that embodies new gendered ideals made available by transforming gender regimes. Throughout this article the term 'new femininities' refers to the historical emergence of a type of hybrid femininity characterized by traditional masculine and feminine traits.

5. The ability to enact normative heterosexuality underpins the successful achievement of this form of femininity, thereby excluding women who articulate alternative sexual identifications. The power of heterosexuality to define acceptable performances of femininity is exemplified in the study by Holland et al. (1998). As Jackson (2006) argues, heterosexuality depends upon and guarantees gender division therefore its operation is central to the dynamics of gender binarism discussed here.

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