

The Construction of Femininity in Societies

Gender identity is shaped by culture. While all parts of life contribute, the major cultural institutions are shared by most people. How do major cultural institutions construct women's identity?

This essay is aimed at studying the construction of notions of femininity and masculinities in the Australian society, more specifically how major cultural institutions, which are shared by most people, construct women's identity. To explore the extent which major cultural institutions construct gender identity is a much contested issue. Subsequently an exploration of a number of theoretical perspectives is required. Post-structuralism will be used because it has contributed substantially to feminist debate through its discourse relating to the cultural construction of the 'gendered' body. Furthermore post-structuralism also considers the pervasive role of the social institutions such as the media in the defining of femininities. In addition, this essay will deal with Marxist theory. Psychoanalytical explanations of gender acquisition, of great importance in other countries, has not been much developed in Australia.

The first part of this essay will briefly mention biological explanation, secondly, it will deal with the debate within the cultural in which psychoanalytical, Marxist and post-structuralist theories will be used. Thirdly, this paper will focus on how major cultural institutions, with special reference to the media, shape gender identity and its influence in women's self-perception.

While the term culture is open to numerous interpretations, for the purpose of this essay culture will be regarded as a set of belief which are integrally related to the social structure and to power relations which are important in reproducing gender-based inequalities which characterise the social structure in the Australian society (Gilbert and Taylor, 1991: 6). "Culture is deeply inscribed in the differential distribution of power within a society...culture is a struggle for meanings as society is a struggle for power" (Fiske in Gilbert and Taylor, 1991: 7).

Cultural studies is an interdisciplinary area which conjugate sociology, feminist theory, literary theory and media studies. The analyses of culture's meanings and pleasures and the place of those meanings within the social system constitutes its theme of study. (Brown, 1990:

13-4). Culture includes all what people do and believe, is "the practice of everyday living" (Brown, 1990: 13-4). It refers to lyrics of songs, soap operas, graffities, magazines's texts and it also refers to what is known by High Culture–High Literature, High Arts. However, according to the British cultural studies movement the new definition of culture does not discriminate between low and high, since high culture was constructed as an excluding category in which neither women nor other groups whose members were not part of an elite were not represented and did not have access (Brown 1990: 13; Cranny-Francis, 1994: 5).

People are socialised into their culture. People born sexed different and they learn to be women and men through a socialization process in their culture. This means that they are going to learn how to live under those label of men and women. This complex process is studied by social science since its main aim is to study the social aspect of a phenomenon and it seems to define itself as opposed to the idea of 'biological determination' of human behaviours (van Sommers, 1986: 70). The socialization process is regarded as a determinant by social scientists, however analysed from different perspectives. Biological explanations have attempted to extrapolate the corporeal differences to subsequent different patterns of behaviours and attitudes.

The major critics to this approach focus on the use of those genital differences as 'determinants' of those patterns of behaviours and attitudes and furthermore to extend this fact to qualified a group of people as inferior, dominable or abnormal, if those people do not follow the pattern expected. This is the traditional justification from 'nature'. Social scientist critiques about biological determinants stresses on the way those biological facts have been used to legitimate repression in the name of the 'natural law' (van Sommers, 1986: 71). "Most people recognise that the development of the offspring within the body of that parent who provides the ovum is a circumstance that has had great impact upon the differences of male and female." (van Sommers, 1986: 74). The limit of the 'maternal instinct' is not clearly drawn furthermore those malleable boundaries were used as a means of oppression or justification. Some authors see obvious differentiation between sexes such as bodily proportions (van Sommers, 1986: 74). Arguably, cross-cultural studies have shown that this is by no means a basis for a femininity-masculinity differentiation. According to this standpoint the force that cultural institutions exert on society vanish since the natural influence is stronger.

The debate within culture is approached from different angles in order to understand the different aspect of the representation of gender in society and the way the notions of it are transmitted.

Psychoanalytical theories were strongly influenced by biological determinism since this was the basis of Freud theory. In placing the process of acquisition of gender in the unconscious during the early years, psychoanalytical theorists circumscribe the process mainly to the relationship with the mother.

Grosz argues that "psychoanalysis exerts an appeal for women which can also be seen as a lure or trap, especially for those who want to challenge the social function and values attributed to women and femininity in our culture (actively affirmed in psychoanalytic theory)" (Grosz, 1990: 6). In this sense psychoanalysis means not a way changing the label as a whole but a mean through which an individual woman can work out aspects of it which has been imposed and form part of an uncomfortable structure. A women can learn how to negotiate those attribute ascribed to her sex.

Grieve affirms that "in technical sense in the social science, social conditioning implies a passive subject 'shaped up' and is only one of the ways in which socialization occurs, and minor one at that. More important is the individual's response, constrained as it may be, to knowledge acquired about gender and to the models encountered and observed." (Grieve, 1986: 123-4). In developmental psychology theories the child participates in its own socialization, this means that the child is not a passive object, however, the child knowledge of his or her gender determines the behavioural pattern to follow (Grieve, 1986: 130).

Both author's studies lack of the analysis of the influence that major social institution exert on the development the notions of femininities and masculinities and the adherence to them in latter stages of life. The critic in Grieve case focus on the distance from the feminist central issue. Grosz discussion about the importance of deepening Lacan's work to understand subjectivities neglects the influence of society's cultural agents not in the formation of the incounscious but in the future transformation of it. For example the effects of subliminal messages from the media.

Resistance may be initiated in the unconscious, that is at an endogenous level and not at an exogenous or social level. However, as social scientists recognise changes have to be produced in the culture as a whole. Psychoanalytical theories would be useful to explain the construction of the subjective notions of femininities and masculinities, furthermore, to explain why culture affects people in a different way. Two people socialised in the same place, by the same institutions, respond differently, the individual differences are out of the debate. On the other hand, there is a lack of acknowledgement to the pervasive influence of major social institutions not during childhood but in latter maturation since every attitude is explained from the constitution of the unconscious.

Freudian and Lacanian theories have generated a polarised controversy within feminism specifically because of his phallic-ego-centric explanations (Grosz, 1990: 141). A central critic to this approach argues that the questioning of patriarchy tends to disappear from the debate. Grieve presents the relationship between feminism and psychology as an irresolute dichotomy since the male domination is not clearly in the debate (1986: 123), it "accepted the gender script on the cultural agenda." (Grieve, 1986: 124). This divorce between feminism and psychoanalysis leaves a gap where personal differences that will influence the acceptance or the rejection of the social mandates are not explained. The content of labels such as masculine or feminine has changed over the time as it has the theorization of it. However, the fact that people respond differently to those cultural 'mandates' is only explained as a product of different socialization processes.

Other theories approach the phenomenon of construction and acquisition of gender from a more eclectic perspective. The socialization process for the acquisition of gender identity is assumed. However this does not mean just a simple learning process sited in the major socialization agents, it responds to a broader structure, an hegemonic ideology which shapes individual. The focus of the analysis on the discourse entails an examination of text through which culture expresses itself. That hegemonic oppression, in feminist theory is represented by patriarchy, a man rule system by which women are subjugated. However the Marxist component of the analysis is extremely important to understand the economic order that acts as a basis.

A materialistic approach is presented by Bonney and Wilson, who while acknowledging patriarchy as a powerful force argue that it is not particular to capitalist society, however, under this industrial capitalist system it is shaped by the interconnection of class and the separation of the site of consumption with the site of production (1983: 186). This unit of production takes the form of waged labour, the member of the unit of consumption whose labour is waged is the husband. The wife is excluded from the public life and circumscribed to the domestic cloister. This sexual division of labour required the construction of different subjectivities stressing the distinction between masculinities and femininities. The former is associated with the sphere of production the latter with the sphere of re-production that is family, emotions (Bonney and Wilson, 1983: 186). The resistant was present since the 1960s when women's movements became an increasing social force in Western societies and dichotomic subjective between independence and submissiveness, career and motherhood, feminism and the traditional notion of femininity became obvious (Bonney and Wilson, 1983: 187).

Bonney and Wilson analyse thoroughly the interconnection amongst advertisement, patriarchy and and the money which found both, according to their perspective. They analyse how the person can identify with the advertisement or with the text, doing a semiotic study to explore how the signifier connects the object and the subject. The uses example from the media, for instance they study the connotation of the images in photographs used to advertised. However, there is not much exploration about the different perception of the mandates of those advertisement, or those images, neither the effects that they produce on women as individuals.

Some of these approaches do not leave place for individual decision since subjectivities are explained in the same terms, as a product of socialization. Gender identity, according to this, consists of a filled label exogenously bestowed on men and women.

Brook recognises that the work a woman has to perform in order to achieve that femininity is not identical nor, she argues, all women are 'equally equipped' to perform the task (1994: 52). However, there are dominant forms to which people have to adhere, she defines femininity as a "kind of a club where you have to play the game or be outcast" (1994: 72). This means that society bears a paradigm which has been constructed by that culture, as far as people are situated from that paradigmatic representation of what they have to be, they will be

consider as other. This other is not the dualistic opposition explained by Simone de Beauvoir in the *Second sex*, it means outsider (Brook, 1994: 55), somebody who breaks the rules.

By drawing on Marxist cultural studies Brook analyses popular culture texts as the major interacting tool to produce meanings (1994: 56, 65). Here the author explore the intersection between race and femininity by taking the examples of Morgan's biography, *My place*, and Martin's article, *the Aussie mums*, in which whiteness is an attribute of Australian Femininity (Brook, 1994: 58-59). From Morgan's example she uses the importance of how the strongest lessons of femininity are learnt during childhood. However in this example this author does not show how the resistance worked. Although pointing out at the beginning of her article the individuals differences, it is assumed in this passages that Coruma (Morgan's mother) an Aboriginal woman who was taken away and brought up in a white environment learnt the message literally and perceived herself as white without resisting it (Brook, 1994: 59). In reference to Martin's article Brook points out that whiteness does not only mean 'white' since other 'white' women are excluded, for example, non-Anglo Europeans (1994: 58).

During the nineteenth century some non-Aboriginal women were sent to mental hospital when they resist the notions of femininity the society had imposed. In this part of the analysis what Brook shows is that the idea of feminine manner was consider normal in its largest sens since it was considered a synonymous with sanity (1994: 62).

Later in her analysis Brook discusses how women's magazines constructs the image of femininity. However she does not pay attention to the economic influence of the advertising industry on which magazines as well as the whole media rest. The example given by Brook about the American magazines aimed to black women is arguably not a significative comparison with the Australian situation since Aboriginal women and Aborigines in general do not represent here an attractive target of consumption. Neither discusses she the fact that women's magazines are perhaps the only medium which accompanied the changes of some aspects of the content of femininity (Brook, 1994: 67-8). This last issue is addressed by Bonney and Wilson in their quotation of the Australian Magazine Publishers' Association in appealing advertiser said that "there is only one medium that has changed as much as women. Magazines..." (1983: 154).

The meaning of sexual differences has been noticed by advertisement makers. They have appropriated them to promote commodities consumption, "various of the signifiers of opposition to the dominant patriarchal ideology, linking them to a brand name and seeking to embrace the oppositional current within an overriding consumerist consensus." (Bonney and Wilson, 1983: 187). "There is a massive involvement on the part of advertising in maximising the significance of sexual differences, in overlaying a biological difference with cultural differences." (Bonney and Wilson, 1983: 187).

Bonney and Wilson refer more to a historical and economic analysis to understand the construction of the feminine ideal by women's magazines. The ambiguous message is understood in terms of the economic influence of advertiser. They say: "Cleo and Cosmopolitan, articles about sexuality, for example, cannot contradict the claims made by advertisers of cosmetics and perfumes for the sexual role of their products" (Bonney and Wilson, 1983: 252). Although making the broadest analysis of the construction of femininity by the media, it is not discussed here that the category of 'independent' means dependency in other sens, since a woman is considered economically independent and therefore not dependant on a man, however she is not independant of the pressure exerted by new cultural patterns to be followed.

Gender is more related to meaning than to sex (Brook, 1994: 52) and those meaning are parts of a feedback process between the social order and the individual using agents as vehicles. Culture interacts with its member through agents. School has been traditionally considered a major agent of gender reproduction. It is the training site per excellence and people tend to spend great part of their time there during the most fertile learning years. Gilbert and Taylor explain that "while schooling is a site for the reproduction of gender relations, it is also a site for intervention and change." (1991: 5) by a deconstruction and a reconstruction of the texts.

Gilbert and Taylor present the argument of popular cultural texts are crucial in the cultural construction of femininity and in the construction of conscious and unconscious desire. The notions of "femininities are imperfectible held", they are not homogeneous (Gilbert and Taylor, 1991: 2). There are spaces for opposition and resistances which are of great value for a feminist practice. "Cultural texts are 'made', in a patriarchal consumer culture."(Gilbert and

Taylor, 1991: 2). Gilbert and Taylor situate cultural texts in a network of meanings which forms the social world and which is also a site of struggle over the meanings (1991: 8). Within this framework there is a tension between the domination which defines, in this case femininity and the resistances to those imposed definitions (Hall in Gilbert and Taylor, 1991: 8).

Cultural processes are related to the social structure and power relations and reproduce inequalities of gender relations (Gilbert and Taylor, 1991: 6). The links between everyday social practice—which means the structure of that society—and personal lives are essential for the reproduction of gender relations. This social structure consist of a "patriarchal gender order" which is an articulation of patriarchy—central concept to the theorising of women oppression— and division of labour, power relations between men and women and sexuality Gilbert and Taylor, 1991: 9). Here, although the focus of the analysis in Gilbert and Taylor's work is set on the discourse, there is remarkable mention of the effects of the economic dimension.

When femininity is associated with women's work, for instance bearing children, religions frequently draw explanations such as: it is 'natural' for women to take care of the children, the family and the home. "The place constructed for women within patriarchal ideology is complex and contradictory, though the 'ideal of motherhood is a Christian ideological way of welding contradictory strands into a coherent unit." (Bonney and Wilson, 1983: 186). The authors show this contradiction using images such a woman as lacking of the toughness needed to work outside the house and at the same time carrying children (Bonney and Wilson, 1983: 186) or fragile and able to give birth. Drawing on Marxist analysis of religions some authors document the way in which Western society mould and fashion ideas about femininity and male dominance (Robertson, 1992: 41; Curthoys, 1988: 129).

Although school and religions are acknowledged as crucial agent through which culture is reproduced, for reason of space framing, it is not the intention of this paper to deepen in the analysis of how they shape the social structure. Neither is an in-depth analysis of medicine as a strong vehicle for brain-washing since the message comes from a 'scientific' institution. During the nineteenth century the medical profession joined the church and scientified its assumed authority over the women's bodies. In the perfecting of this process of appropriation of this

authority, the women's bodies was drawn up in order to be a well defined target of the medical gaze (Robertson, 1992: 40-1).

In this terms, media can be considered the less 'scientific' agent, it does not have the halo of superiority that wraps religions as something divine or school as respectful educational institution or medicine which is considered 'high knowledge'. However is the more pervasive one. Jakobowicz et al explain the relationship between media and audience as symbiotic, there is an interrelation through which 'the audiences seek security in media rituals, the media seek audiences that they can secure, a symbiosis in which social values are offered confirmation and reinforcement.' (1994: 48).

Since popular culture is part of everyday life, its texts are crucial in the resolution of meanings therefore the images through which femininity is represented on them have direct influence in the construction of it. This, in terms of media representation, signifies that sexuality is constructed upon a consumerist ideal (Gilbert and Taylor, 1991: 12).

The definition of popular culture as 'marketing category'—"body of material which is marketed as entertainment, as fun, as being 'of the people' rather than 'for (the good of) people'" (Morris cited in Cranny-Francis, 1994: 6)— explains the relationship through which the political economy of any society constructs social subjects, since the category is used to construct the audience within that culture (Cranny-Francis, 1994: 7).

"Since advertising is about the marketing of commodities, it cannot take up those strands of oppositional causes which reject the dominant ideology of satisfaction through the acquisition of commodities" (Bonney and Wilson, 1983: 189). Bonney and Wilson point out the resistance carried out by the Women's Movement since the late 1960s in the development of 'consciousness raising' and the attempt to create an alternative to the 'ideal' imposed by the patriarchal society (1983: 187).

There has been a progressive element in advertising in the sense that now there is a place for 'independent women' (Bonney and Wilson, 1983: 187). This group of women is attractive for advertisers because of their disposable income. Although the housewife is at the sight of some advertiser, a feasible consumers, her, as a selling target is bounded to packaged

food, and toys for children, nowadays, electrical appliances do not have them as exclusively consumers. Whereas, 'independent women', gay people and retired people are categories whose members have a broader spectrum of consumption (Bonney and Wilson, 1983: 189). In order to capture this audience, it is obvious that the focus on the 'ideal' has to shift from that family life to the image of a person whose qualities of independence, self-reliance, rebelliousness are in general against that patriarchal idea of womanhood, femininity and masculinity (Bonney and Wilson, 1983: 189). Moreover the ageist component that shows 'youthfulness' as synonymous with achievement and not as a stage of development has to be removed.

In relation to advertisers Bonney and Wilson suggest that a "counter-hegemonic strategy for artists, then is to reverse this process, taking signifiers from advertising, reconstructing them and relocating them within a perspective which renders commodity consumption problematic." (1983: 195).

Going further in the analysis of the construction of femininity in a patriarchal consumerist society, Gilbert and Taylor point out why an important component in the construction of femininity is the body which is taken as a project. Berger argues that the surveyor of a woman is a male, turning herself into "an object of vision: a sight" (Berger in Gilbert and Taylor, 1991: 13).

There seems to be an interlock of a medicalised woman's body and media representation of women. Collins and Probert in studying cultural stereotyping of breast shapes have concluded that what means to be attractive has been moulded in the Australian society by values transmitted mainly through advertising and the mass media (1982: 36). It is also been noticed by authors like Robertson and Koval that the so-called eating disorders are extremely influenced by images presented by the media and other cultural agents.

Culture institutions are considered as determinant of the general notions of femininity and masculinity by most scholars. Marxist theory, Post-structuralist theory and Psychoanalytical theories explain how culture moulds these notions from different angles. However all of them lack an explanation of some aspects. How people is affected differently is not explained by any of these theories or in an attempt to do so the explanation is given in

the same terms. While Marxist theorists base the approach in economics, there has been a shift of some theorists who situate the analysis within a broader spectrum which includes discourse analysis. However the tendency, in this sens, has been to give economic answer to gender questions. The individual differences are hardly addressed and although it is point out the differences in the notions, because individual differences are not much taken into account, this notions look uniformed.

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