

**Summer Scholarship Research Project
2006-2007**

Final Report

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This report documents the development in my research over the summer period and during the scholarship awarded to me. This period has been of great value to the development of clarity and sophistication of a proposed thesis to investigate through Honours. The time and resources the scholarship allowed for has enabled me to further develop my understanding of the relationship between contemporary women and feminism. Additionally I have been able gain a broader base of knowledge as to how this relationship operates and how it has been addressed within feminism. My exploration of this subject has considered the relationship between women and feminism in academic, political and popular cultural contexts.

Over the course of the summer scholarship my research, as well as discussions and regular meetings with my supervisor, Dr Richard Howson, has led to development within my research area of interest. My inquiry has moved from an analysis of the relationship between contemporary women and feminism; to developing a greater understanding of the genealogy of the relationship between feminism and femininity. Through this research process I was able to gain an in depth understanding of feminism's attitudes to femininity: as initially an identity from which feminists were trying to distance themselves; to the diverse and alternative ways of viewing femininity in contemporary feminism. This development has been largely due to the influence of post-structuralism, queer theory and multiplicity within feminism itself.

The research undertaken has involved an extensive literature search of: library catalogues - Wollongong and Sydney University libraries; journal searches; and

online searches. My aim was to gain a broad base of knowledge and awareness of the existing literature on femininity; determining the various ways in which femininity has been utilised as a term and the diversity of meanings it encompasses. It was a desirable outcome of my research that I find and follow the discussions of femininity, within feminist literature, in order to understand the ways in which feminine and feminist identities have been constructed with or against one another.

Part of the task of my research over this period was drawing together and developing an understanding of the conceptual links and moments of departure between feminism and masculinities' theory surrounding femininities, with particular reference to ambivalent femininity. I began my research into this area by focussing on several specific strands from which to broaden my knowledge base, these included searches on: feminism and femininity; feminism and sexuality; and third-wave feminism and postfeminism. These searches returned a considerable mass of accumulated literature and much of my research time has been used to develop an extensive bibliography. This includes: 31 books/book chapters; 16 Journal articles; as well as numerous popular culture sites and websites with which I am now familiar. For the purposes of this report I have taken as example, a small selection of this literature in order to demonstrate the development of my research framework and the progression towards my honours thesis 2007.

Feminism and Femininity

Hollows (2000) was instrumental in developing a conceptual overview of the relationship between feminism and femininity, recontextualising meanings of

femininity today against meanings of femininity at the time of Friedman's (1963) *The Feminine Mystique*, and other subsequent texts as Greer's (1999) *The Female Eunuch*, and Millet's (1970) *Sexual Politics*. Hollows specifically identifies the need for femininities and likewise feminist identities to be studied within a historical context (Hollows 2000:1). In the early second wave feminist context femininity was assumed to refer to passivity, dependence, virtue and ignorance; counterparts to the masculine qualities of strength, action and leadership. Influenced by burgeoning theorising on gender roles and the social construction of gender feminism constructed an identity which opposed the feminine. Challenging women's "naturalised" feminine position, feminists sought to emancipate women from its stifling conditions. As a result feminist critiques of femininity are often motivated by the need to displace "bad" feminine identities with "good" feminist ones (Hollows 2000:9-10).

Hollows (2000) follows two prominent strands of feminism which subsequently developed:

The first, that which privileged and encouraged "masculine" like behaviour over "feminine". This she aligns with early feminists Friedman and Greer whose argument, she suggests, proposes if women were to behave in a more masculine way, equality between men and women may largely come about (Hollows 2000:9-10). This line of argument regards femininity as a falseness which covers the real 'femaleness' beneath (Hollows 2000:10). What is demonstrated here, and how this is useful for my research, is where the perceived division of feminism and femininity has its roots. Echoing in many other feminist ideologies are identities which distance themselves from participating in expressions of femininity and from "other" women who do

(Hollows 2000:14). Admirable qualities were assumed masculine and taken up as the feminist preferred model of behaviour and identity (Hollows 2000:14). Howson (2006:69) suggests that in trying to free women from the constraints of an enforced feminine identity, androgyny was only able to be narrowly conceived of through a move towards the masculine. Hollows (2000) also acknowledges this move within feminism claiming this line of thought ‘...reproduces a masculine value system which sees feminine qualities as inferior qualities...’ (Hollows 2000: 12).

Hollows (2000) describes a second development within feminism in relation to femininity. This strand of feminism recentred on the physical and sexual difference between women and men, reconsolidating the binary which other feminists had sought to destroy (Hollows 2000:14-15). Hollows sites Daly as an example of this strand of feminism, in that her argument focuses on the “nature” of women and men as necessarily in conflict. Additionally Daly also suggests conflict between women themselves within the identities of “natural” woman and the “façade” of femininity. Such essential notions of the truth of the “natural” female and male condition were developed upon in the arguments of later radical feminist such as Dworkin (Hollows 2000:14-16). These accounts further problematised heterosexual attraction and relations for the feminist identity (Hollows 2000:15-16).

The information gathered through reading Hollows (2000) provided grounding for my continued research, pointing to key theorists such as Greer, Daly, and Dworkin as reference points for further investigation into the history of femininity and feminism. Her critique of particular feminist attitudes towards femininity suggests that their

position negates any consideration of how women may transform traditional notions of femininity (Hollows 2000:12), it ‘...presents the character and experience of being feminine...as monolithic.’ (Hollows 2000:12). Hollows work provided the backdrop to understanding the development and significance of new approaches and attitudes toward femininity.

Recent feminist literature concerning femininity represents a relatively new shift in attitudes towards the subject. Many contemporary feminists have taken “matriarchal” feminists, such as Daly, to account for presenting femininity as a monolithic whole (Liladhar 2000:5). Liladhar (2000) for example, situates femininity as a diverse experience, which is neither monolithic nor singular. Liladhar suggests women take on and reconstruct their femininity, so while they may engage with femininity prescribed by traditional ideals they also reconstruct and operationalise a progressive femininity by resisting certain aspects of femininity imposed upon them (Liladhar 2000:5-6).

One concept of femininity which has evolved through popular culture analysis, is “feminine glamour’...a performance of femininity *with* strength’ (cited: Liladhar 2000:10). Such femininity engages with an overt form of feminine aesthetics to transcend the associated feminine qualities of passivity and insipidness (Liladhar 2000:10).

This idea of an exaggerated femininity and the use of extraverted femininity as a subversive political gesture has received a significant amount of attention within

recent feminist work. Albury, refers to 'homovestism' which she uses to articulate a subversive practice illuminating the "façade of femininity" by over executing it's signifiers; such as extreme make up and clothes (Albury 2002:85-91). Similarly Hinds and Stacey (2001) describe what they term 'high femininity' which encompasses femininity as a power; an exaggerated femininity which is brazen and bold. As opposed to the previous "iconic" feminist identity, which ditched femininity in favour of the masculine, high femininity realigns femininity as a possible expression of feminism (Hinds & Stacey 2001:154).

These discussions of femininity make a strong theoretical link to third-wave feminism, placing the literature within the discourses of "girl power" and the reclaiming of femininity and feminine sexuality. The correlating factor between these arguments and third-wave discussions is that they all make a return to femininity, not as traditional femininity but in a new way. This is an issue addressed by much of the third-wave literature including: Baumgardner, & Richards' (2004) *Feminism and Femininity*; Driscoll's (1999) *Girl Culture, Revenge, and Global Capitalism*; and Gillis and Munford's *Genealogies and Generations*. The reclaiming of 'girl' and utilisation of the term as a powerful force embraces femininity. It establishes a relationship between feminism and femininity which has previously been conceived of as problematic or incongruent with the feminist identity. Such prevalent arguments made within feminism offer new stand-points towards femininity from women who: are beneficiaries of feminism; have grown up with feminism; are feminists themselves; and who engage with a feminist argument by to embrace femininity.

This multiplicity towards femininity and the body in recent feminism has been significantly influenced by the work of post-structuralist feminist theorists including the French feminists and Judith Butler. This is an area of theory I have not yet thoroughly explored but I believe would prove relevant to my further research on femininity, particularly the work of Kristeva and Irigaray.

Feminism and Sexuality

My research on feminism and sexuality again drew conceptual links to third-wave feminism and also to the discourses of post-structuralism and queer theory. The reflexive feminist arguments on women and (hetero)sexuality were very much intertwined and concurrent with those regarding femininity. It is a point I noted for my thesis that any exploration of femininity would be benefited by including feminine sexuality within its definition. I have found several texts which explore this connection, these have been significant findings for articulating my focus area and in developing my awareness of theoretical approaches within feminism to include sex-positivist feminists.

Albury's (2002) *Yes Means Yes* draws heavily on this approach in her exploration of feminism, women and heterosexuality. Her work is particularly influential in both style and subject matter. To diverge from the main discussion for just a moment, her writing style is inspirational. It is accessible, well informed by theory, and the theory is smoothly integrated into her line of argument. She is so clearly at ease with her subject matter theoretically that she is even able to play with humour and irony, which only serve to further strengthen her argument. Underlying her thesis is a challenge to

the notion of having to find a “true” feminism and an emphasis on the importance of developing an inclusive feminism which can be accessed by and support all women.

In *Pornograph*’ Albury (2005) again address a similar topic but with specific attention this time to the debate surrounding pornography in Australia. Through this chapter Albury recounts the debate within Australian feminism both past and present towards pornography. This includes drawing together arguments regarding heterosexuality more broadly, such as those made by radical, anti-pornography feminist Dworkin, Jeffreys and McKinnon. Within this chapter Albury also introduces the sex-positive movement within feminism and their response to the anti-porn critique.

The above chapter by Albury is from Hawkes & Scott’s 2005 *Perspectives in Human Sexuality*. This book gives an overview of the social theorising regarding sex and sexuality both on a broader western scale and also addresses particulars from an Australian perspective. The book covers a range of issues to do with sexuality from a socio-cultural level including: exploring cultural norms on sexuality at various stages of life; the sex industry and the ongoing debate within feminism in Australia; and the varying attitudes within the movement regarding pornography. It proves to be a valuable resource as an overview of cultural understandings of sexuality, specifically within an Australian context.

In *Straight Sex: The Politics of Pleasure*, Segal (1994) executes an extensive inquiry into the place for women in heterosexual sexuality. Through this book Segal gives an overview of the changes in attitudes through the 1960’s - 1970’s and the development of feminism within this period. She then details the divergence in “sex positivist” and

the “radical” feminists. The book primarily focuses on investigating women’s place within heterosexuality and if their pleasure and participation in such relationships can be done without increasing men’s power. Segal explores this subject through drawing upon the influence of queer theory and sex research to revisit cultural ideas regarding heterosexuality. She concludes by assessing what impact these theoretical perspectives, along with the development of feminism, might have in developing new discourses and new cultural attitudes regarding women’s place in heterosexuality; and the possibility of transgressing and subverting gender norms.

The relevance of *Straight Sex* to my research on femininity and feminine sexuality led me to seek out more of Segal’s work such as *New Sexual Agendas*, edited and contributed to by Segal (1997). This volume gives an overview of responses regarding the developments in sexual politics from lead theorists in the field: covering changes which span political, psychological, medical and social discourses. The contributors address the development of discourses which have emerged in social theory dealing with areas of sexuality and gender pointing to clashes and antagonisms within the theory and associated movements. Of particular interest to my research are: Segal (1997), *Feminist Sexual Politics and the Heterosexual Predicament*; Vanwesenbeeck (1997), *The context of Women’s Power(lessness) in Heterosexual Interactions*; and Merck (1997), *Death Camp: Feminism vs. Queer Theory*.

A New Area to Explore

During my research on femininity I came across an article by Hinds and Stacey (2001) *Imaging Feminism, Imaging Femininity*. Which explores the relationship

between femininity and violence in its differing forms: the culturally associated violence of femininity as internalised violence; the symbolic violence of feminism as violating the gender order; and the dual violence of the outwardly violent woman, who on one hand transgresses the gender order through participating in the masculine act of violence, but on the other hand aligns with the gender order in popular perception, which draws links between female violence and feminine/hysterical.

This connection struck me as interesting and something I would like to use as case study to explore my theoretical analysis of femininity. However, it took several weeks of thought to determine how I could use it and why it had struck me as so significant. Finally, after much thought, I was able to come somewhat in answering both of these questions. I was interested in the subject of women and violence as I wanted to know more about what this said about femininity. I was interested in it as an example which explored a particular instance in which women may participate in a masculine act which was simultaneously also feminised culturally.

The possible connections I may draw between concepts of ambivalent femininities and this particular article are at this point less than consolidated, however, considering this connection got me thinking about ways in which to approach my investigation of femininity through case studies. One idea emerged; to consider the ways in which femininities participate in the hegemonic masculine principles as outlined by Howson (2006:74-76) – i.e. aggression, breadwinning and heterosexuality - and the way in which ambivalent femininities are constructed through this process.

Conclusion

This broad bibliography of diverse and reflexive discussions operating within feminism has offered a theoretical grounding from which to begin to thread together a discussion of femininity as relational; not just between men and women but also between differing groups of women. This has been a significant milestone within my research over the summer period. Another such significant development, which greatly expanded the way I had been looking at this subject thus far, was inspired by the journal article by Hinds & Stacey (2001), dealing with the subject of women and violence.

I refer to these two developments as the primary mile posts, as it is from these two central points that my research over the scholarship period articulates into my proposed honours thesis. At this point my proposal for honours involves two central sections: firstly an exploration of the concept of ambivalent femininity within masculinities theory, including its relationship to third-wave and postfeminism. The second, an exploration of the ways in which ambivalence is operationalised, by investigating how it is constructed against the principles of hegemonic masculinity: aggression, breadwinning and homosexuality. I plan to analyse three particular cultural practices/texts from popular culture and new media in order to construct a case-study on each principle; investigating the ways in which ambivalence both complies with and resists the hegemonic gender order.

The period of research which has been allowed through the summer scholarship has been of incredible worth towards gathering research material and a conceptual position for my honours thesis. It has enabled me the time and focus to develop a

more sophisticated line of inquiry than I was contemplating even only three months ago. Using this understanding of the femininities and the cultural relational positioning of this group, I would like to develop upon my honours thesis at PHD level. My thesis would expand upon the research carried out during my honours year and explore the politics of femininity. It is with great enthusiasm that I continue into honours this year. I look forward to this year being a productive stepping stone to continued research and in particular towards PHD candidature in 2008.

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