Negotiating Femininity:
An Exploratory Study of Young Women's Everyday Experiences

by

Claire L. Carter

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Department of **Graduate Studies**

The University of British Columbia  
Vancouver, Canada

Date **03.06.03**
Abstract

This thesis explores how young women negotiate femininity in their everyday lives. My research is based upon a theoretical analysis of current literature on femininity, and is informed by a group interview. The main areas of emphasis within the literature focus on the problematic of how women ‘do’ and explore the potential agency that women enact in the construction of their identities. My analysis of these ideas gave rise to three themes that depict the different, but often overlapping, theoretical positions on femininity. Firstly, that women are disciplined to be feminine, secondly, that women enact agency in the development of their identities, and thirdly, women negotiate their ever-changing identities in relation to social as well as individual pressures and circumstances. Through exploring and critiquing these themes I suggest that negotiation, as an approach, enables femininity to be theorized as a cultural discourse that shapes and disciplines women, as well as a conscious, negotiated embodiment. Furthermore, the findings from the group interview demonstrate the importance of bringing women’s lived experience into the centre of analyses of identity and agency, by providing insight into how femininity is negotiated.
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For Louise
Chapter One: Introduction

_Negotiating Femininity_ is situated in and has grown out of my own queries and experiences with femininity. While most theorists I have researched view femininity as a dominant socializing agent in women's lives, they disagree about how women engage with femininity, particularly about the possibility of women enacting agency. Femininity is problematic to discuss because while all women experience it, femininity affects every woman differently. Further, many feminists have an awkward relationship to femininity; they feel or have felt pressure to denounce or downplay their engagement with 'feminine' practices. This pressure is based on the myth that 'good' feminists can reject femininity, and thus engagements in 'feminine' practices are often described as an indulgence in 'guilty pleasures'. My own feelings of guilt, of being a bad feminist because I enjoyed practices traditionally associated with femininity, such as having my hair done, led me to this research. I began to ask myself why I enjoyed certain practices as well as why it felt like punishment, rather than empowerment, when I forced myself to stop doing some of them. Through my research, I have found that femininity is hard for many feminists to discuss or analyze because it gets to the core of who we are. As feminists, we want to work towards ending sexist oppression. However, coming to terms with the impossibility of 'getting outside culture' and realizing our role in the reproduction of femininity leaves many feeling defeatist. I feel theoretical explorations into how femininity is reconstituted as well as how it is lived and experienced are central not only to our understanding of the complexity of social dynamics, but more importantly to our ability to transform them.

Researching feminist literature, I felt there was a gap with respect to how women experience or engage with the social discourses of femininity. Until recently, the predominant feminist view of 'feminine' practices was that they were oppressive and sustained women's subordinate position. While feminists have begun to examine the pleasure women gain from femininity, as well as the agency they enact in the construction of their identities, for the most part this analysis has taken shape within a theoretical context. Therefore, through my thesis I want to address this gap by examining current theoretical discussions of identity, agency and women's experiences with femininity. My thesis identifies the important theoretical arguments and tensions around
femininity, as well as demonstrates the need to problematize these ideas through women's lived experiences.

My thesis is primarily based on an examination of current literature on femininity, with a group interview providing supplementary insight into these discussions. I am interested in how feminists theorize notions of femininity, in particular how they perceive women's ability to engage in the development of their identities.

My research questions are: How do feminist theorists conceptualize and problematize femininity? What cultural meanings does femininity hold, on a social or collective level, but also on an individual level? Do women exercise agency in the development of their identities? If so, how do theorists conceptualize this - what form does this agency take? These questions provide the foundation for my broader research problematic concerning how women negotiate between the cultural ideal of femininity and their own lived experiences?

The literature on femininity predominantly focuses on the construction and disciplining of women's bodies, and to a lesser degree, women's agency and negotiation within this process. These discussions address tensions within feminism concerning the potential for empowerment within the greater social context of women's subordination. As well, theoretical considerations of femininity have shifted from viewing it as solely oppressive, to exploring the pleasure women obtain from femininity and the agency they enact in their relationship with femininity. The majority of the literature analyses femininity within a theoretical context. However, the studies that include women's lived experiences argue that these voices are crucial to understanding how power dynamics are experienced, and thus, produced and sustained. My research objective has been to add to this latter body of knowledge by exploring the nature of women's 'feminine' engagements and embodiments.

It is important to note how I define femininity within my thesis. My definition borrows from Susan Bordo's\(^1\) work and pertains to the cultural or social ideal of femininity, rather than progressive or transgressive notions of potential feminine embodiments. Femininity outlines and dictates the rules and practices women must

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follow and embody in order to obtain the "appropriate surface presentation of the self" that Western culture valorizes. In order to approximate the cultural feminine ideal, women must discipline their bodies through diet and exercise and they must learn the skills necessary for the proper presentation of their bodies, such as wearing make up, styling their hair or waxing. Like Bordo, I suggest that notions of femininity are transferred through "bodily discourse: through images that tell us what clothes, body shape, facial expression, movements, and behavior are required". Thus, my conception of the cultural feminine ideal, as well as the rules and practices that more generally comprise femininity, which women must undertake in their attempts to emulate this ideal, is based on popular representations of women in fashion magazines, on television, in advertisements and other popular media. This ideal is mediated by power relations pertaining to race, age, class, ability and place, and thus women experience and negotiate femininity in multiple and different ways.

My research is informed by a feminist postmodern conception of power, providing a useful framework in which to examine women's agency and subjectivity with respect to femininity. Within this framework, femininity is not interpreted as something imposed upon women from a higher authority, but rather as specific practices and behaviours that women are socialized to embody and accept as 'normal' and 'natural', which has the resultant effect of ensuring femininity's influence and reproduction. This framework enables me to explore the power and influence of notions of femininity embedded in current social structures as well as inscribed within individual bodies.

_Negotiating Femininity_ includes five chapters, the opening one being this introduction. The second chapter involves a detailed account of my methodology, beginning with a discussion of how I read and analyzed theoretical works on femininity, followed by an examination of the qualitative research process I employed. The third chapter, my analytical review, is the first of two chapters on my research findings. My analysis of the literature is organized according to three key themes: disciplining of women's bodies, theorizing agency, and negotiating femininity. This analysis includes theoretical discussions of femininity as well as research that explore the everyday

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2 Ibid, pg.170.
3 Ibid
embodiments of femininity. The fourth chapter comprises the findings from my analysis of a group interview and explores how the main themes from the women's discussion supported, enhanced and challenged the theoretical debate on femininity. The concluding chapter provides a summary of my thesis and re-connects my fieldwork with feminist theory to suggest if and how negotiation should be discussed in future research on femininity. This conclusion also discusses the importance of including women's voices in the research process while addressing the limitations of this study.
Chapter Two: Methodology

My methodology combines a theoretical analysis of how women negotiate femininity with a group interview, to demonstrate the importance of women’s lived experiences for feminist theorizing. Feminist considerations of femininity primarily involve a theoretical analysis rather than an examination into how women actually experience femininity. My goal within my thesis is to bring the theoretical discussions of disciplining, agency, and negotiation of femininity into the context of women's day-to-day experiences. The major component of my research project is an analytical review of the current literature on femininity. A pilot study involving a group interview with four women provided insight into as well as challenged the major themes discussed in the literature. Through this research, I hope to demonstrate the importance of bridging the gap between theory and social reality. Before I delve into a discussion of the methodology particular to my research study, I want to first outline and discuss some of the broader feminist methodological and epistemological ideas that framed my work.

Feminist methodology does not involve a specific research technique, nor is it "distinguished by female researchers studying women"⁴, rather it is the "particular political positioning of theory, epistemology and ethics that enables the feminist researcher to question 'truths' and explore relations between knowledge and power"⁵. Feminist methodology typically involves the use of qualitative methods, such as one-to-one interviews, focus groups, and ethnographies, although many feminists utilize quantitative methods. Feminist methodology has developed "in opposition to a particular positivist methodological position that assumed quantitative data could best represent reality, and was also intended to counter the absence of knowledge of women's lives"⁶. Central to a feminist methodological approach is the respect and valuation of research participants' voices and experiences, as well as the examination of power dynamics between researcher(s) and participant(s). As a result, "(f)eminist social research

⁵ Ibid, pg.17.
⁶ Ibid.
has...often been equated with a woman-to-woman, sensitive style of qualitative interview, observation or life history, or one that involves research participants in the production of knowledge".\(^7\) Within feminist methodology the notion of a feminist standpoint has developed, which can be loosely described as research that locates "knowledge or inquiry in women's standpoint or in women's experience".\(^8\) Feminists have different interpretations of what a 'feminist standpoint' position means and involves. For example, Nancy Hartsock argues that the notion of a feminist standpoint stems from women's societal positioning in relation to men; "women are better positioned than men, through their experiences of gender subordination, to see the world of gender relations as socially and inequitably constructed".\(^9\) Consequently, she "characterizes a feminist standpoint as a vantage point on male supremacy" and further states that this 'vantage point' "is privileged in the sense that it is both grounded in women's lives, and serves as an epistemological device".\(^10\) On the other hand, Dorothy Smith argues for a women's standpoint rather than a feminist standpoint that is situated in women's day-to-day experiences and thus "returns us to the actualities of our lives as we live them".\(^11\) Smith, while not granting women any 'epistemological' privilege, argues that their everyday experiences are a useful entry point from which to move into an examination of broader, societal dynamics, and thus views women's standpoint as "productive of knowledge of power relations".\(^12\)

It has been argued that feminist standpoint contains an "urge for generalizable, universal knowledge", that at a minimum "should be universal for the group 'women'".\(^13\) However, this argument begs the question of whether women "exist as a sufficiently coherent social subject".\(^14\) Christine Di Stefano suggests, "if the differences between women - differences secured on the basis of race, class, sexuality, culture, and ethnicity - are sufficient to override feminine commonalities of experience and interest, then a

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\(^7\) Ibid, pg.155.  
\(^8\) Ibid, pg.64.  
\(^9\) Ibid, pg.68.  
\(^10\) Ibid  
\(^11\) Ibid, pg.72.  
\(^12\) Ibid  
\(^14\) Ibid
feminist standpoint...is a potentially oppressive and totalizing fiction". 15 Similarly, Ramazanoglu and Holland state, "efforts to claim a feminist standpoint raise questions about what it means to have multiple feminist subjects, and what follows from claiming that the knowing self is not an individual". 16 Both of these critiques link up with postmodern and poststructural theorizing about identity in which "general claims about 'male' and 'female' reality are eschewed in favor of 'complexly constructed conceptions...treating gender as one relevant strand among other, attending also to class, race, ethnicity, age, and sexual orientation". 17 Further, postmodernist feminists argue "conceptions of gender that are not constructed in this way are totalizing, that is they create a false unity out of heterogeneous elements, relegating the submerged elements to marginality". 18 Susan Bordo, in response to these critiques, argues that the other extreme of the deconstruction of gender is also problematic for feminists because one is left with "an epistemological perspective free of the locatedness and limitations of embodied existence". 19 Hence, there needs to be a middle ground from which to recognize the diversity of identities and social characteristics among women as well as the reality of women's experiences within our gendered culture, which will build on and strengthen feminist critique of power dynamics.

The above epistemological and methodological discussions of 'women's' experience and the call for the deconstruction of the categories of 'woman' and 'gender' grounded my own research interests of women's day to day experiences of femininity. I found in my research on femininity that while a great deal had been written about its cultural role and influence on women's lives, very little of that work actually included women's experiences and voices. I hoped, through my research, to fill in this gap within feminist work on femininity while still recognizing, and incorporating, the diversity and multiplicity of women's experiences. In situating my research within feminist methodological and epistemological traditions, I found Beverly Skeggs' use and analysis of 'women's experience' insightful and relevant to my study. Skeggs utilizes the concept

15 Ibid
16 Ibid, pg.75.
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid, pg.136.
'experience' as a way to understand "how women occupy the category 'women', a category which is classed and raced and produced through power relations". She argues that experience is "important as a practice of making sense, both symbolically and narratively as a struggle over material conditions and over meaning". Further, Skeggs stipulates that experience is not "a way of revealing or locating true and authentic 'woman'", but instead should be viewed as "productive of a knowing subject in which their identities are continually in production rather than being occupied as fixed". Skeggs' approach is useful for exploring femininity because it offers a strategy for the constructive 'voicing' of 'women's' experiences, within the context that these experiences are diverse, fluid and ever changing.

Taking these methodological and epistemological considerations into account, I want to move into a discussion of my research methodology. My thesis predominantly involved an analytical review of current literature on femininity, with a group interview offering insight and reflection on some of the theoretical questions and areas of emphasis. I begin my discussion on methodology by detailing how I read and analyzed the literature on femininity, and then elaborate, in some depth, on the qualitative research process.

The initial motive behind my research was to problematize 'femininity' in order to obtain a greater understanding of the cultural and societal meanings it holds. This motive involved, for the most part, examining and critiquing how feminists theorize women's engagements and negotiations with femininity. Femininity, Beverly Skeggs articulates, is "the process through which women are gendered and become specific sorts of women". Thus, as a cultural discourse, femininity structures women's existence and establishes the boundaries of 'appropriate' behaviour. A central part of my analysis, then, is to explore and unpack the meanings associated with the term 'femininity', which involved reading, and in turn understanding, how different theorists conceptualized as well as challenged femininity. Early on in my literature research, it became evident that there were particular points of tension among feminist and postmodernist theorists concerning the degree, or possibility, of agency enacted by women in their engagements or performances.

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21 Ibid, pg.28.
22 Skeggs, B. Formations of Class and Gender, pg.98.
of femininity. These tensions, which I describe in more detail in a moment, influenced how I read subsequent literature and effectively became the framework for my analysis.

Theoretical discussions of women's engagements with or embodiment of femininity involve debates over whether women are 'feminine' as a result of their socialization or through individual conscious choice, as well as many positions between these two. Feminists influenced by Foucault's work and social constructionism argue that "human beings...are constructed through discourse", and thus women engage with femininity because it is the predominant cultural discourse that informs and dictates who they should be and how they should behave. Other feminists, however, have argued that social constructionism does not provide the whole picture. They reject the claim that women have no agency or role within the development and performance of their identities. This is one of the main tensions within feminist theory on femininity; how does one recognize the cultural influence of femininity on women while at the same time granting women a sense of self or identity. Stemming from these discussions are critiques of how femininity has been theorized. More specifically, some feminists challenge the notion that femininity is always and only oppressive for women while others have argued that work on femininity has been too abstract and needs to take into account actual women's experiences. Thus, feminists have debated the nature of subjectivity and the role they perceive women as having with respect to the development of their identities. They have criticized the manner in which femininity has been analyzed and interpreted.

The literature on femininity highlights the problematic of how to conceptualize women's engagements with femininity and has been approached by theorists in different ways. I have placed the main areas of emphasis into three interconnected themes; the disciplining of women's bodies, theorizing the potential agency women enact in the construction of their identities, and contemplating how women negotiate femininity. Disciplining encompasses theories that suggest women are 'disciplined' to become 'feminine' through their subjection to social and cultural discourses of femininity. Also within theories on disciplining are attempts to problematize notions of identity and autonomy, alongside the acknowledgement of the "impossibility of 'getting outside'"

23 Burr, V. An Introduction to Social Constructionism, pg. 89.
Agency involves critiques of social constructionism, and, more specifically, of theories which postulate women's engagements with femininity as solely the result of socialization. These critiques attempt to grant women a degree of agency with respect to their identities, and correspondingly to recognize the potential pleasure women gain from 'being' feminine. Agency, as an area emphasis, also addresses the importance of including women's experiences within analyses of femininity. Thus, agency incorporates three different but related critiques of previous approaches and theories of femininity. Firstly, by challenging the notion that women have no agency or role in their embodiments of femininity. Secondly, by considering femininity as potentially pleasurable, rather than only viewing it as a form of oppressive control of women. Thirdly, through stressing the need to bring women's day to day experiences into abstract, theoretical discussions. Finally, negotiation includes studies that attempt to interweave notions of femininity as pleasurable and problematic, as stemming from social discourses but also influenced by how women embody it, and by drawing from theoretical and lived accounts of femininity. Throughout my research I read the literature for tensions pertaining to how women embody femininity, in particular how different studies and theories on femininity correlate to these three main areas of emphasis.

My analysis of feminist literature provided me with a strong sense of current dilemmas concerning femininity. The themes that arose in my analytical review grounded my qualitative research and offered a framework from which to consider potentially new embodiments of femininity. Though small, the group interview\textsuperscript{25} provided insight into and deepened my understanding of the theoretical debate through the women's discussion of femininity. I chose a group interview as my research method because I believed the interaction with other women would be beneficial as it would demonstrate the "co-construction of realities between people, the dynamic negotiation of


\textsuperscript{25} My original intention was to hold several focus groups, in order to have women's experiences at the centre of my analysis. However, as I was only able to recruit four women, (which I discuss in further depth on pg.14/5), the term 'group interview' more accurately describes my research method. The literature on focus groups influenced and is still relevant to my analysis and methodology.
meaning in context."26 Esther Madriz argues that the interaction among participants within focus groups "emphasizes empathy and commonality of experiences and fosters self-disclosure and self-validation."27 Further, she states that through collaborative discussion "women confirm and recognize the existence of common patterns and experiences in their everyday lives" that would "be absent in other qualitative methodologies".28 The women's collaborative interaction about their experiences, I felt, would highlight the role that femininity has within their lives. Part of my decision to use group interviews was also an effort to shift, at least partially, the balance of power during data collection.29 Sue Wilkinson argues that in focus groups the researcher's power and influence is reduced because "participants have more control over the interaction than does the researcher."30 Further, she articulates that "group work ensures that priority is given to the respondents' hierarchy of importance, their language and concepts, their frameworks for understanding the world".31

The criteria I considered for the recruitment of research participants involved women of a specific age group, 19-24, who are university students in Sociology, Women's Studies or Biology, and who are also English speaking.32 I selected the age group of 19-24 because this period marks the transition between adolescence and adulthood. This period is typically a time of change and reflection with respect to one's identity and I thought that talking with women about femininity during this period would be very informative and insightful.33 I chose to select participants from a university campus because, in practical terms, it is a site that would provide me with a sample of

28 Ibid.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid, pg. 117.
32 I chose to recruit women who spoke English because I could not afford to pay for a translator. I recognize that this requirement limited the diversity of women that would be able to participate in my research, and consequently my research findings as well.
young women that fulfilled my criteria. I selected the three disciplines because I knew that women in Sociology and Women's Studies would have a foundation from which to reflect upon femininity and I was interested to see if the women in Biology discussed femininity differently. I was particularly interested to see whether women from Biology would talk about femininity as biological or 'natural' and, correspondingly, whether women from Sociology and Women's Studies would discuss femininity in relation to the socialization and subordination of women.

I submitted my research proposal to the University of British Columbia's (UBC) ethics review, outlining how I would recruit participants, ensure confidentiality, and conduct the group interview as well as the transcription of the group interview tapes, and was approved. My strategy for gaining participants was to recruit through undergraduate summer classes within Biology, Sociology and Women's Studies departments at UBC. I obtained permission from each department to speak to 15 separate classes within the three disciplines over the course of May, June, and July of 2002 and was successful in recruiting four participants for the group interview. I had hoped more women would volunteer for my research study, but became aware that most students were working as well as doing summer courses. I recognized that women might be too busy to participate, and that it would be difficult to co-ordinate an agreeable time and date. During my presentations to classes, I mentioned that each participant would be asked to sign a consent form and would be given a copy of said form. Also, I informed students that confidentiality would be guaranteed through the use of pseudonyms in the transcripts and final write-up, and that only my supervisor and myself would have access to the transcripts and transcript tapes.

The group interview took place at the Centre for Research in Women’s Studies and Gender Relations, on UBC campus. I chose UBC campus for the location of the group interview because I knew it would be a familiar and convenient location for all of the women because they were all UBC students, taking summer courses on campus. The group was informal and I asked them a small number of questions as a means to initiate, and, of course, steer the discussion (see Appendix One for group interview questions). The questions explored the rituals women engage in for the purposes of

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34 Ibid, pg.251.
generating a feminine outlook and persona, as well as how they challenged or dismissed some traditionally 'feminine' practices.

While the participants involved were all university students, and thus from particular social situations, my hope was that the group would be heterogeneous with respect to other factors such as race, sexual orientation, and ethnicity. The actual composition of the group was somewhat diverse: one of the four women was a woman of colour while the other three were White, and one of four women identified as 'gay', while the other three identified, to my knowledge based on the discussion, as heterosexual.\(^{35}\) I discuss the social make up of the group in more depth further on in this section.

Despite my goal to be an interested and empathetic facilitator, I was aware of the "importance of the context of the research and the differences in social status, power and resources" between the women and myself.\(^{36}\) The women in the group were quite similar to myself in terms of age, class and educational experience, but in relation to our roles as researcher and participants there was a power imbalance between us. Ann Oakley discusses the potential influence of the interviewer when she notes they can act as an:

"instrument for promoting a sociology for women - that is, as a tool for making possible the articulated and recorded commentary of women on the very personal business of being female in a patriarchal capitalist society."\(^ {37}\)

As the facilitator of the group interview, my goal was not to simply collect data but to contribute to a 'sociology of women' through a greater understanding of women's lives in this current socio-historical moment. Concerns that I had going into the group interview with respect to potential difficulties included; my own assumptions and the dynamics of the group, with respect to how they would interact and more importantly perhaps, the social make-up of the group. My personal background, growing up in a white, middle class Canadian family, combined with my academic grounding in Women's Studies, have contributed to the development of my perspectives and attitudes towards femininity. My concern primarily involved the influence of my assumptions in the analysis of the group interview, rather than during the interview itself. Recognizing "(my) assumptions, (and

\(^{35}\) I am using the term 'gay' because that is how Janet identified herself within the group discussion.


my) part in the research process” situates my research as a particular rather than a universal perspective on femininity. Central to this is my “coming to terms with the agency of the ‘objects’ studied” as this is “the only way to avoid gross error and false knowledge” within my research project. An example of ‘my assumptions’ concerning ‘femininity’ was apparent at certain moments during the group interview. One of the women occasionally asked for clarification with regards to some of my questions, specifically; was I asking her about her own notions of femininity or cultural/societal conceptions? Her requests for clarification on how I was using ‘femininity’ in our discussion demonstrates that I had assumed we all shared an understanding of what ‘femininity’ means.

With respect to the group, I was aware that holding group interviews as opposed to individual interviews meant that interpersonal dynamics would be a factor since, for example, some people are often more comfortable speaking than others. Related to this issue is the fact that I knew the women might alter their answers in the hopes of performing well and appearing knowledgeable. Also, the social make-up of the group might also alter women's responses, as people of dominant status (white middle class heterosexual) may feel more comfortable and, as a result, normalize and universalize their experiences with femininity, possibly having a silencing effect on women with less dominant status.

Reflections on the research process

The group interview took place on July 3rd, 2002 and was roughly two hours in length. It took over a month to co-ordinate a date and time for the group. Initially, I had hoped to hold two or three group interviews, with 6-8 women in each. My thoughts on why I was only able to secure four women to participate in the group interview include the time of year and lack of incentive for participants. All of the classes I spoke to were

during summer session at UBC. Courses offered in the summer are usually very intensive and, as many students are also employed, it seems possible that many felt they could not give up the time needed to participate. Second, I was not able to offer any financial or material incentive and this may have deterred women from volunteering, or at least did not encourage them to participate. The effect of holding one group interview as opposed to two or three focus groups has been a shift in the focus and analysis of my thesis. Originally, I intended to utilize the focus groups as my main source of data about how women negotiate femininity, with the literature providing the foundation for these discussions. However, my thesis has come to embody the opposite, with the analytical review providing the bulk of my argument and discussion on femininity and the group interview providing insight into this analysis. The challenges that I had in trying to recruit participants and co-ordinate a time and date for focus groups, combined with the wealth of literature on femininity that was relevant for my theoretical questions, resulted in the structural shift of my thesis.

Reflecting on the group interview, there are two areas that I specifically need to discuss: the dynamic of the group, and my role as a facilitator. The dynamic of the group was quite good: the discussion flowed smoothly and all of the participants appeared to understand and connect with each other. That being said, there are three features of the group dynamic that need to be discussed. Throughout the group interview and my reading over of the transcripts I noticed that one of the women, Liz, did not speak very much. I sensed two reasons why Liz may have felt silenced or at a loss for words in the group discussion. As I mentioned earlier, I was interested in seeing if women from Biology would offer different insights or ideas on femininity from women educated in Sociology or Women's Studies. However, in the actual group only one of the women was from Biology. This woman, Liz, was also the only woman of colour in the group, with the other women all being White. The combination of factors, such as different disciplinary language and socio-cultural perspectives, may have led to her feeling silenced and/or socially isolated. Sherene Razack talks about the continual demand for people of colour to share their stories for White people's benefit, in order to help White people learn about 'difference' rather than their own social position of privilege and
Recognizing social inequalities within the group, the dynamic that Liz was placed in was one where, potentially, she had the most to risk and consequently, may not have felt safe sharing her experiences in any great detail. I was particularly aware of the imbalance in discussion at the beginning of the group. For the first twenty minutes or so, there were only three women, and two of them, Tara and Susan, seemed to get along quite well, talking predominantly back and forth to each other. I do not think they consciously ignored or silenced Liz, rather they were inspired by each other's points of discussion and shared similar views. When the fourth woman, Janet, arrived, the discussion pattern shifted quite noticeably and became more balanced.

Another dimension of the dynamic of the social inequalities within the group concern the role or advantage that disciplinary foundation provided some of the women. Janet, who identified as 'gay' at several points in her discussion of femininity, was also in a position of social inequality in comparison with the rest of the women - who, to my knowledge, all identified as heterosexual. Janet spoke with relative ease comfort about the role her sexuality played in shaping her experiences with femininity. For example, she discussed the development of her own conceptions of femininity through her identifying as gay and being part of a local community that was supportive of her sexual identity. I have contemplated why Janet felt able to discuss femininity in relation to her position of social inequality, while Liz did not. I wondered if I could have done something differently as the facilitator to make Liz feel more comfortable or if I had, unconsciously, done something that signaled to Liz that she was not in a safe space. The only partially conclusive thoughts (in addition to the above discussion) I have with respect to this dynamic involves the differing disciplinary foundations the two women had. Perhaps because Janet was from Women's Studies, the space of the group interview and the discussion of femininity felt more 'normal' and familiar to her, and thus she felt able to speak about her sexual identity. As Liz was from Biology, the experience of talking about femininity in a semi formal setting, along with the language and theoretical considerations some of the other women utilized, may have been new to her and consequently stimulated (or heightened) feelings of insecurity and isolation. Lastly, it is important to note that none of the women discussed how their racial identity shaped their

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conceptions of and experiences with femininity, despite my inquiring as to how they felt it might.

The second point that I would like to discuss with respect to the group dynamic involves the performance and commentary of Tara. Tara spoke the most of all of the women, and after reading through the transcripts several times my overall impression is that Tara is struggling with femininity, and its role and meaning in her life, more than the other three women. Tara seemed to 'perform' throughout the group interview, as if wanting to appear knowledgeable and comfortable with herself and her identity. However, in going over the transcripts, her responses and the way she interacted with the other women seemed to indicate feelings of confusion and uncertainty which suggest that she found the issues discussed more challenging than she wanted to admit. Marjorie DeVault recommends exploring and paying more attention to the "patterns of talk and interaction through which the members of any group constitute a shared reality". 41 Further, she states that her methodological strategy involves "noticing ambiguity and problems of expression in interview data, then drawing on (her) own experience" to fill in what went unsaid or seemed incomplete. 42 I utilized this strategy in my interpretation of the group interview transcripts, in particular in my reading of Tara's commentary. On several occasions Tara's comments would be contradictory, she would go back and forth between differing ideas or opinions, and generally appeared to be having difficulty expressing herself. For example, at one point in the group interview, in response to another woman's mention of women's magazines, Tara questioned how far we can remove ourselves from the imposed ideology of femininity:

Tara: Do you ever worry though that, in terms of what is imposed on us, it's so pervasive, it's so over-reaching, and it is so subtle that we don't realize it, like I mean like you really have to take a step back and look...

Earlier on, however, she seems to downplay the role that cultural discourses of femininity have had on her life and identity:

Tara: In terms of, I don't know, in terms of like clothes or whatever that is more representing yourself, that is kind of how I see it, so I don't necessarily, I am sure that there are ways or things I could do that are more like femininity like um focused but I always think of it as, but I always think of it as just being yourself, unique, not male or female.

42 Ibid, pg.71.
Tara goes back and forth in the discussions between stating that she can be her own person and limit or control her engagement with cultural femininity, to remarking on how influential the messages within popular media are. She stated a couple times that 'she has issues or problems' without alluding to what she meant specifically, and on numerous occasions discussed examples or thoughts concerning a 'friend', rather than her own personal experiences. My interpretation of Tara's commentary is that she enjoys engaging in traditionally feminine practices, such as wearing make-up and getting dressed up, but does not want to be viewed as a 'cultural dope' adhering to the prescriptions of popular culture.

The last feature of the group dynamic that I want to discuss involves the nature of the discussion itself and how the women interacted with each other. I stated earlier on that part of my decision to hold a group interview was that I believed the interactive nature of the group would generate information that could not be obtained from an interview. There were a few occasions where the women probed each other, pushing for clarity and trying to get at the meaning underneath the response/commentary. The group interview dynamic was such that participants were able to "ask questions of, disagree with, and challenge each other, thus serving to elicit the elaboration of responses".43 There are two examples that demonstrate this interaction. The first example involves Susan's response to a question, with Tara probing and challenging her response. I had asked the women if there were things they have done or do that they would characterize as feminine, not in the traditional or popular sense, but in ways that were different or in opposition to popular meanings. Susan responded:

Susan: Well I think, I know for me, I am in a sorority and like that stereotypically then that is so like being...
Tara: ...valley girl...
Susan: ...yeah, like stereotypically, but for me what it is, is a resource for contacts and like volunteer opportunities and to do sports, and all the stuff that is not that, like I mean well not like being passively female it's like all this active involvement, it empowers me to be with all of these other women that are like

doing the same kind of thing, looking to be productive and so it is kind of like that.

Tara: Do you find, I am just curious, do you find that with your particular sorority you can do all the activities or do you find that even there there's sort of valley girls sort of, I am trying, I don't know how to pose the question, I just, I have talked to some people who are all in different sororities and they all sort of say different things but I do hear that yeah there are still a lot of, there is a certain amount of superficiality, not necessarily the sorority themselves, but the people, do you find you have to, that within your sorority that still goes on?

Tara probes Susan to talk about the broader assumptions and understandings of sororities, to get her to look at the socio-cultural context of sororities and connect that with Susan's own personal experiences within a sorority. Tara felt able to question and challenge Susan's experience in ways that I perhaps would not have. This dynamic generated an important discussion that would not have otherwise occurred.

A second example occurred in the middle of a discussion that began with my questioning about times or places where the women felt they had to be more or less feminine in their interactions with others. Tara talked about her notions of presentation and personality, and the boundaries or guidelines she considers in her own engagements with femininity:

Tara: For sure and I actually, I don't necessarily think how much one exposes of themselves is cheap and slutty, I just see a lot of things where it's either, like those white shoes, like fake leather, and big heels and they are really chunky, like they are not, aesthetically, personally, they are not aesthetically pleasing and when you put them on it is all really disjointed, like that is kind of it, I mean if you are not a size zero and you are wearing a short skirt and a small top, that is okay, I am not offended by it but it's just more actually in terms of, well it's subjective but, my, in terms of good taste in what you do wear, that what I always see coming up, that is what always makes me like, tsk, tsk.

Janet: Do you think that's a good thing or a bad thing though?
Tara: That I have a reaction?
Janet: Yeah
Tara: Oh, I am sure, I've got issues, I know I do, like I have...
Janet: No, I am actually talking about a different manner, in like do you think...
Tara: ...that people should wear?
Janet: Like what suits their body kind of thing
Tara: Do you mean if they are big they shouldn't wear revealing clothes?
Janet: Yeah
Tara: Oh, no I don't care, I don't care, it's really just a matter of good taste
Janet: But what is good taste?
Tara: But if I, my good taste, um well, right now it is just things that are like you know are cheap, it's kind of hard like, I mean...
Janet: What's cheap?

This discussion effectively illustrates the importance of probing and of interaction between participants. It thus illustrates the strength of group interviews as a research method. Further, it demonstrates how participants "often assist the researcher by asking questions of each other (perhaps more searching than those the researcher might have dared ask); by contradicting and disagreeing with each other (in a manner which, coming from the researcher might have seemed authoritarian) and by pointing to apparent contradictions in each others' accounts". 44

Finally, I think it is important and necessary to state, that the women's comments (and silences) are not simply based on my interpretations, but were created in, and the result of, the social context. To try and capture the women's identities or full conceptions of femininity from this group interview is impossible. Kathy Davis notes from her research that the "feminine voice was hopelessly multiple...Identities were ongoingly constructed, fluctuating and subject to a revision at a moment's notice". 45 Sue Wilkinson articulates that focus groups "highlight the extent to which what people say is actually constructed in specific social contexts" and is illustrative of the "social nature of talk". 46 Thus the group interview provided insight into the main themes and tensions within current literature on femininity by demonstrating, through the women's discussions, how meanings are generated, rejected, challenged, and potentially transformed in particular social and political contexts.

44 Ibid, pg.118.
Perhaps the most challenging aspect of this project is my consideration of my role as the facilitator of the group interview. There are three reasons that I have identified to explain my unease or difficulty in this role: my lack of experience in facilitation of this nature; my desire to be 'liked' by the participants; and the similarities between the women and myself, making it feel 'natural' to just join in the discussion. The first point is in many ways self-explanatory; because I am new at facilitation (research facilitation to be specific), I lacked a degree of confidence in my ability to effectively facilitate. Several of my attempts to probe responses or encourage further discussion had the opposite effect, by either stunting discussion (and perhaps confusing participants) or breaking up the flow of talk. As well, at times I felt unsure about how much to interact with the group. For example, in the beginning it was noticeable that Liz was not talking as much. I questioned whether I should interrupt the discussion and ask Liz her thoughts. In the end, I chose to address Liz first with my next question as I felt that would appear more 'natural' and would not break the flow of discussion. Related to this strategy was my consideration of how much personal information to reveal to the women. Ann Oakley states that: "the goal of finding out about people through interviewing is best achieved when the relationship of the interviewer and interviewee is non-hierarchical and when the interviewer is prepared to invest his or her own personal identity in the relationship".47 I fully supported this stance and wanted to be as open with the women as I could, keeping in mind my role as facilitator in order to be conscious of how my comments could steer or alter their responses. In her discussion of the interviewing process, Amber Dean (2002) notes that she did not plan out how much or what specifically she would disclose, but by being open to the idea of disclosure, she would discuss her personal experiences when she instinctively felt it would add to the conversation.48 This was the strategy I adopted throughout the group interview. However, upon reading the transcripts I am not sure if it always had the desired effect.

I think the second and third points, my desire to be liked and simply join in the group, stem from the first. I am extremely grateful to the women who participated in the

group and wanted them to not only feel it had been worth their while, but more importantly that they had been correctly interpreted. I wanted the women to like how I interpreted and portrayed their ideas, and overall to like me. I was particularly aware of these sentiments during the group interview and now feel this may have hindered my ability to probe more effectively. During the reading and analysis of the tapes and transcripts, however, my desire to be liked diminished. I re-directed to a focus on the process of my interpretation and analysis of their words. While I still hoped that the women would be happy with how their comments had been interpreted, I was more concerned with clearly demonstrating how I came to the conclusions I did, through linkages to both theoretical and personal foundations and contexts. Lastly, as I mentioned in the introduction of my methodology, there were many similarities between the women and myself, most notably, we were all females, in our twenties, all university students at UBC. As a result of these similarities and my insecurities with being the 'researcher', it would have felt natural for me to simply join in the discussion and abandon my role as facilitator. I tried to negotiate these feelings in accordance with my desire to enhance discussion rather than dominate or shape women's comments. Overall, I feel that my insecurities and concerns are not only normal, they are useful; their realization has been central to my perception and interpretation of the group interview dynamics.

Analytical Strategies

When considering the analysis of the group interview, I found Doucet and Mauthner’s essay very useful. They offer four steps to consider in the analytical process: first, locating oneself in relation to participants, second, attending to our emotional responses to informants, third, examining how we make theoretical interpretations of participants' comments and, lastly, documenting these processes for others and ourselves. As discussed in the previous sections, the first two are important because they contextualize the research and situate myself as researcher and 'knowledge' holder.

51 Ibid, pg.127.
producer. Further, exploring how personal experiences and biases shape the research locates it within a particular context, enabling a greater understanding of how ideas were linked and conclusions drawn.

Reflecting on my interpretation and 'reading' of the transcripts, I recognize that my first attempt was unsuccessful because, rather than letting the women's stories and ideas guide my analysis, I tried to fit them into the themes identified within my analytical review. This process was not only frustrating, but also would have led to a misrepresentation of the women's accounts, thus defeating the purpose of doing the qualitative study in the first place. Following this attempt, I went back to the transcripts and read them in three different ways. First, I read them taking into account how the women responded to the points raised by each specific question. Second, I read each of the women's responses separately, as if they were individual interviews. Third, I re-read the whole narrative alongside the notes I had taken from the previous two readings. After the third reading general themes began to arise concerning how femininity is performed and defined, as well as how socio-cultural location influences these performances. With these general themes in mind, I decided to cut up my transcripts to connect up quotes or stories that went together. I initially found this quite difficult because it felt as though I was breaking up the conversation. However, once I had finished cutting up the transcripts and grouping bits together, the themes became much clearer and I felt able to work constructively with them. Making notes about my interpretations and linking these with theoretical considerations went quite smoothly. Where I hesitated was in the actual writing up of my analysis. My hesitation stemmed from my concern for how the women would feel about my interpretations. As I have already touched on, I wanted the women to be glad that they had participated and, more importantly, I wanted them to feel I had interpreted them fairly. I went over my notes several times to probe my findings and ensure that I felt confident in my interpretive process, and, consequently, in my analysis. I provided the women with a copy of my analysis of the group interview to obtain their feedback on my interpretation for my final draft. In the end however, it is important to state that my analysis reflects a small moment in the women's lives, a moment set up by
my research questions and interpreted through my research interests and personal 'situation'. While I have tried to stay true to the women's accounts and voices, I recognize that my analysis is very much shaped by my role within the research process as the researcher, interpreter, and writer, as well as by my own social positioning.

My overall approach is one of a relational ontology: I viewed the women as “embedded in complex webs of intimate and larger social relations” rather than as independent agents in society. The use of relational ontology enforces my responsibility as a researcher to analyze the women’s experiences in relation to greater societal structures and dynamics. As well, it offers a format for recognizing and upholding women's own positionalities with respect to their personal and social lives in the research process.

**Limitations**

I have already alluded to many of the limitations inherent in my research design that, along with other factors, restricts the usefulness and validity of my final analysis. A crucial part of my research is an understanding of women’s lived experiences of femininity. However, the women who participated grant a particular understanding, as they are from select economic classes, educational programs and are of a particular age. Again, because of time constraints, I was not able to do follow up interviews with any of the participants. In Dawn Currie’s study, she mentioned that in follow up interviews some of the girls commented on how the group dynamics altered their reactions and responses. Without this type of follow-up, interpretations of the group interview dynamics are limited to my own awareness. Also, I focused on a particular definition of femininity, which speaks to my own socialization and personal experiences. The cultural ideal of femininity that I have outlined may not be what other women identify with or struggle to become. In my analysis, however, I speak to how this definition of femininity

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52 Following the group interview, I asked all of the women if they would like to read my analysis, and provide me with feedback, three of them said they were interested. I emailed them a copy of my analysis, but did not hear back from any of them.
53 Ibid, pg.125
was shifted, changed and negotiated through the bringing together of ideas in the literature, the participants’ voices and my own conceptions.

My research findings provide the first step in what I hope to develop, later in life, into a larger examination of femininity and its negotiation by women. In the next chapter, I discuss key feminist theoretical works on femininity. In this critical review, I explore tensions and recurring themes in the literature, as well as address how these inform my research.
Chapter Three: Analytical Review

The literature that provides the foundation of my research centres around the problematic of how women ‘do’ femininity, which has been approached by theorists in different ways. I identified the main areas of emphasis within this literature according to three themes; the disciplining of women’s bodies, women’s agency in relation to their identities, and, lastly, issues of negotiation with respect to femininity. Each of these themes relates to explorations into women’s engagements with femininity and should be viewed as interconnected, rather than distinct from, each other. Additionally, the discussions on how bodies become ‘feminine’ and what role women have in this process are far from conclusive. There has been a significant amount of literature on these topics, which has, in many ways, initiated more questions rather than providing any conclusive ideas or thoughts on ‘femininity’. In the review that follows I outline some of the main points of analysis and debate concerning women’s negotiation with ‘femininity’ in order to carry on this important discussion of gender, identity and subjectivity. Considerations of how one becomes ‘feminine’ and what ‘feminine’ means in Western countries are important to further our understanding of power dynamics and correlating social structures.

I begin by discussing how women’s bodies are disciplined to become ‘feminine’, following which I will examine theorists’ considerations of the pleasure experienced and agency enacted by women with respect to femininity, and lastly, I will focus on the literature regarding women’s negotiations with their identities.

Disciplining of Women’s Bodies

The three theorists that I examine are Sandra Bartky, Judith Butler and Susan Bordo, followed by three studies that explore different contexts of the disciplining of the body. I begin with Bartky as she clearly outlines the disciplining of women’s bodies, particularly in her essay entitled, “Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of
Patriarchal Power". Bartky identifies three kinds of practices that women engage in their pursuit of femininity: practices that shape the body, practices that regulate the body’s movements and gestures, and, practices that involve ornamentation of the body.

Rather than being thought of as a stable or fixed entity, the body is increasingly perceived as malleable; expected to change shape to adapt to cultural ideals. Bartky notes that current standards favour a female body that is “taut, small breasted, narrow-hipped and of a slimness bordering on emaciation”, which means that women must diet, exercise or undergo cosmetic surgery in their attempts to meet this ideal. Bartky remarks on the proliferation within the mass media of weight loss programs and exercise regimes, arguing that this proliferation leads women to believe that their bodies are inadequate and in constant need of improvement. Influenced by cultural messaging, women learn that their bodies are not ‘feminine’ on their own, rather, they need to be disciplined and contorted into the ‘right’ shape.

While women must continually strive towards achieving a ‘feminine’ shape, Bartky notes that they must also learn and practice acceptable feminine movements and proper stances. Through her discussion of women’s bodily positions she demonstrates that “woman’s space is not a field in which her bodily intentionality can be freely realized but an enclosure in which she feels herself positioned and by which she is confined”. Women discipline their bodies to take up as little space as possible through the adjustment and refinement of their walking strides, facial expressions, and sitting positions. Women’s gestures and motions must “exhibit not only constriction, but grace as well, and a certain eroticism restrained by modesty” in order to be deemed ‘feminine’. Thus, for example, while sitting women must take advantage of any opportunity to show off their legs or when walking they must hold their chest up high “to display (their) bosom to maximum advantage”.

The last form of disciplining that Bartky describes is the ornamentation of the body. To achieve a ‘feminine’ looking body a woman must master the use of products

56 Ibid, pg.132.
57 Ibid, pg.134.
58 Ibid, pg.135.
such as make-up, facial creams and body lotions, clothing/fashion styles, hair removal devices, and hair sprays or gels. These practices call for “specialized knowledge” of the “proper manipulation of a large number of devices” and “correct manner of application of a wide variety of products”\textsuperscript{60}. These products and procedures, from putting on mascara and waxing the legs to styling the hair, enhance a woman’s ‘feminine’ appearance. ‘Proper’ ornamentation is “a badge of acceptability in most social and professional contexts” but it grants women little latitude with respect to creativity and style.\textsuperscript{61}

For Bartky, the disciplinary actions of movement, presentation, and shape not only result in the ‘production’ of a “feminine body-subject”, but more significantly, in subjects that have an “inferior status” inscribed onto their bodies\textsuperscript{62}. She notes that women are not free to choose whether or not to engage in femininity; it is “something in which virtually every woman is required to participate” and on which each woman will be judged. Bartky’s key point is that the disciplinary actions of femininity demonstrate, above anything else, the “gross imbalances in the social power of the sexes”.\textsuperscript{63} Utilizing Foucault’s analysis of power and its disciplinary control of the body, Bartky states that “the disciplinary power that inscribes femininity in the female body is everywhere and it is nowhere; the disciplinarian is everyone and yet no one in particular.”\textsuperscript{64} For Bartky, the invisible or anonymous nature of disciplinary power is very important as it sustains the notion that women seek out feminine practices completely voluntarily. However, while women are not “marched off for electrolysis at the end of a rifle”, neither are they free from repercussions or severe social sanctions if they fail to adhere to the strictures of femininity.\textsuperscript{65} The consequences of a woman’s choice not to engage in femininity can range from a loss of heterosexual intimacy to “the refusal of a decent livelihood” for both lesbian and heterosexual women.\textsuperscript{66} Therefore, Bartky argues, though it may appear that women are choosing to wear make-up or high heels, their actions must be seen in the

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid, pg.136.
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid, pg.138.
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid, pg.139.
\textsuperscript{63} Ibid, pg.140.
\textsuperscript{64} Ibid, pg.142.
\textsuperscript{65} Ibid, pg.143.
\textsuperscript{66} Ibid, pg.144.
larger context of the societal subordination of women. Further, she articulates that ‘feminine’ disciplines can grant women “a secure sense of identity”, such that, being perceived as ‘feminine’ is “crucial to a woman’s sense of herself as female and, since persons currently can be only as male or female, to her sense of herself as an existing individual”. In essence then, Bartky regards women’s ‘choice’ concerning femininity as highly influenced, or even determined, by their subordinate status in society; women’s choices are limited to the extent that they can imagine a female body outside of the masculinity/femininity dualism. While I agree with Bartky’s argument that women’s actions cannot be considered outside the societal and cultural facets of their subordination, I believe she does not adequately address agency in relation to the pleasure, or for that matter, the multiple feelings women experience when undergoing specific feminine practices. She seems to suggest that there is only one way in which to read the disciplines of ‘femininity’, as oppressive, and only one way to challenge this form of oppression, by rejecting it wholeheartedly. I think that there is a diversity of meanings that can be generated with regard to ‘feminine’ practices, depending on who enacts them, when, where, and with whom. For example, a woman putting on make up with girlfriends versus putting on makeup before a date with a man holds different meanings, given the different contexts and social heterosexual expectations.

Furthermore, in connection with my second point of critique, Bartky does not explore different interpretations of the disciplines of ‘femininity’ in relation to the multiplicity of women’s identities. For example, what does wearing a short skirt mean for a lesbian versus a heterosexual woman? Lastly, Bartky’s analysis seems to suggest that women’s only option is to fully reject femininity, which is problematic for two reasons. First, this option gives priority to ‘masculinity’ over ‘femininity’, thus reinforcing gender dualisms. Second, this approach is overly simplistic because it gives the impression that women can easily stop their performance of femininity.

Bartky does provide one example of the ‘ornamentation’ that women of color undergo in their pursuit of ‘femininity’ when she discusses their use of fading creams. However, she does not elaborate on how this process also involves engaging in a form of

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67 Ibid, pg.143.
68 Ibid, pg.145-6. original emphasis
internalized racism, or the fact that ‘femininity’ is based on a White ideal or conception of beauty. Bartky states that “the larger disciplines that construct a ‘feminine’ body out of a female one are by no means race- or class-specific”. To elaborate on this point she postulates that while a wealthy woman may buy her cosmetics at Bergdorf-Goodman and a working class woman may buy them at K-mart, in the end they are both trying to achieve the same results. While I agree that femininity is not race or class specific, I feel Bartky does not sufficiently discuss how influential race and class are to women’s feminine embodiments. For example, a working class woman is not only trying to achieve a ‘feminine’ body, but also a body that will not be read as working class. Beverly Skeggs has argued that for the working class women in her study, the pursuit of ‘femininity’ is very much a classist pursuit, because performing ‘femininity’ means trying to portray a higher-class status. The ideal body of ‘femininity’ is always and only that of a white, middle-upper class, able-bodied, heterosexual, thin woman, thereby excluding the majority of women, begging the question of how the performance of ‘femininity’ is experienced and lived by women who do not fit these social categories.

My final point of critique relates to Bartky’s distinction between ‘sex’ and ‘gender’. She states that there are male and female bodies that are socialized and disciplined to become ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’, accordingly. I feel this distinction needs to be problematised or deconstructed. For example, ‘who’ reads or judges bodies and correspondingly determines who is female and who is male? What about bodies that do not fit into these two neat categories? This critique moves me into a discussion of Judith Butler, who effectively deconstructs the categories of both ‘gender’ and ‘sex’.

While also using a Foucauldian analysis of how bodies become gendered, Butler is distinct from Bartky and other feminists in her rejection of the notion of a pregiven subject or sex onto which cultural discourses of ‘femininity’ or ‘masculinity’ are proscribed. Rather, according to Hekman, Butler articulates that “there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performativity constituted by

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69 Ibid, pg.151.
70 Ibid, pg.139.
71 Ibid, pg.140.
73 Bartky, Sandra “Foucault, Femininity and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power”, pg.132.
the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results”. Therefore, there is no foundation of a female body that is then disciplined to express its ‘femininity’. Bodies are gendered through a disciplining process which involves the “repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts...that congeal over time to produce the appearance of...a natural sort of being”. Central to Butler’s argument is the notion that the disciplining of bodies as male/masculine and female/feminine is done for the purposes of maintaining “the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality”.

Her deconstruction of bodies and the disciplines that engender them demonstrates that the restricted production of only ‘male’ and ‘female’ bodies effectively means that other identities or bodies are not allowed to exist, without serious social recourse. The social performances that constitute and sustain the illusion of essential sex, and its related attributes, are “part of the strategy that conceals gender’s performative character” and restricts performances that are outside the confines of contemporary patriarchal heterosexuality. Butler argues that through gender parody, such as drag, the imitative nature of gender is exposed; “the ‘original’ is revealed to be a ‘copy’, and an inevitably failed one, an ideal that no one can embody”.

Of particular interest to my research is Butler’s discussion of agency and subversion. Whereas Bartky argues that as women we need to end our performance of ‘femininity’ in order to free ourselves from patriarchy, Butler states that it is precisely through our performance of ‘feminine’ disciplines that agency is located and subversion can occur. More specifically, she states that “‘agency’...is to be located within the possibility of a variation on (the) repetition” of ‘feminine’ disciplines. ‘Femaleness’ or ‘femininity’ is not a finished product; it is an ongoing process involving the constant repetition of specified and learned behaviours. Thus, to challenge or subvert this process involves “strategies of subversive repetition enabled by those constructions, to affirm

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76 Ibid, pg.173.
77 Ibid, pg.23.
79 Ibid, pg.176. original emphasis.
80 Ibid, pg.185.
the...possibilities of intervention through participating in precisely those practices that constitute identity and, therefore, present the immanent possibility of contesting them".\textsuperscript{81} Butler appears to be suggesting that in the performance of gender norms lies the possibility of challenging them, and that performing them subversively may cause a shift in the meaning of the performance, and consequently the nature of gender identities.

One of the main criticisms of Butler’s work is that it is abstract and detached from actual material bodies. Some theorists have found trying to bring her ideas of subversion into the daily experiences and practices of women difficult.\textsuperscript{82} The primary example with which Butler illustrates possibilities for subversion of gender practices is through the performance of drag or gender parody. She states that “in imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency”.\textsuperscript{83} Thus, through drag performances, sex and gender are denaturalized and “their fabricated unity” exposed.\textsuperscript{84} Susan Bordo offers an insightful critique of Butler’s discussion of drag performance that illustrates the difficulty of bringing subversive practices into the realm of everyday life. Bordo argues that Butler’s analysis of drag as subversive lies within the abstract confines of theoretical text and points out in contrast that “subversion of cultural assumptions is not something that happens in a text or to a text”.\textsuperscript{85} Drag performances are located within cultural and historical contexts that Bordo claims Butler does not adequately consider or make reference to.\textsuperscript{86} Specifically, Bordo states that Butler “does not consider the possibly different responses of various ‘readers’ or the various anxieties that might complicate their readings, does not differentiate between women in male drag and men in female drag, and does not consult a single human being’s actual reaction to

\textsuperscript{81} Ibid, pg.188.
\textsuperscript{82} Hekman, Susan “Material Bodies”, pg.68.
\textsuperscript{83} Butler, Judith Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity, pg.137.
\textsuperscript{84} Ibid, pg.138
\textsuperscript{85} Bordo, Susan “Postmodern Subjects, Postmodern Bodies”, in Feminist Studies, Vol. 18, No.1, Spring 1992, pg.171.
\textsuperscript{86} Ibid
drag". Bordo seems to be trying to connect Butler's theoretical conceptions of gender and sex performance, and their subversion, with women's lived bodily experiences. I think this critique is immensely valuable because it problematises Butler's notions of performativity and subversion in an attempt to push the ideas from a purely textual location into 'real' contexts and onto 'real' bodies.

Many theorists have argued that there needs to be a foundation, specifically a 'material body', that is the premise onto which the influence of 'cultural disciplines' can be inscribed and interpreted from. In many ways this critique can be summed up by Bordo's articulation that "if the body is a metaphor for our locatedness in space and time and thus for the finitude of human perception and knowledge, then the postmodern body is no body at all". Theorists have argued that Butler's deconstruction of 'sex' and 'gender' is problematic because it denies the materiality of the 'female' body and thus the foundation of feminist politics. Further, it is suggested that if there is no base or starting point of 'female sex', how do we explain and critique sexism and more specifically, the lived experiences of discrimination and violence of women in our society. Butler responds to the critique that there needs to be a 'material body' at the centre or foundation of feminist/gender theory and politics in her essay entitled "Contingent Foundations" and her book "Bodies that Matter".

For Butler, the process of the deconstruction of 'sex' and 'materiality' is important because it unravels and identifies the social and political meanings that the terms hold, and the corresponding power that they wield. She states that to critique the notion of a 'female' subject "is not a negation or repudiation of the subject, but rather a way of

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87 Ibid
interrogating its construction". In addition, she claims that by assuming the foundation of 'sex', theorists are also excluding and authorizing the rejection or denial of bodies that do not fit into the categories of 'female' and 'male'. Thus, she is arguing that we must examine and challenge the process whereby bodies are constructed and sexed and expose the rendering of bodies in our society into those that matter and those that are rejected and socially sanctioned. Butler's purpose then is not to do away with bodies, but rather to deconstruct, and find new ways to interpret and express, the body and materiality.

Hekman states that Butler's theoretical pursuit is to encourage a "radical re-signification of the symbolic domain in order to expand what counts as a valued and valuable body in the world". A deconstruction of the concepts of 'bodies' and 'matter' means to "continue to use them, to repeat them, to repeat them subversively, and to displace them from the contexts in which they have been deployed as instruments of oppressive power". It is significant to note here that Butler specifically states that "the options for theory are not exhausted by presuming materiality, on the one hand, and negating materiality, on the other". Rather, in her work she is attempting to navigate or weave a middle ground between these two. To deconstruct and critique materiality and the body is not to render them useless or insignificant but to allow for the possibility of alternative production of meanings of words.

Bordo's work also addresses the struggle to weave a middle ground between 'presuming' and 'negating' materiality. However, whereas Butler argues that materiality has a history and is a construction in and of itself, Bordo "conceives of materiality as our inescapable physical locatedness in time and space, history and culture, both of which not only shape us but also limit us". Butler and Bordo come to this discussion from different ends of the spectrum, but where they meet involves the deconstruction of

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93 Ibid, pg.7.
95 Butler, Judith "Contingent Foundations", pg.17.
96 Ibid, pg.17.
97 Ibid, pg.16.
'femininity', gender, and the body in order to understand and challenge the cultural and historical meanings that have shaped bodies. In Bordo's words, "Butler and I have each insisted - while focusing on different arenas, hers discursive/linguistic, mine practical/material - on the impossibility of 'getting outside history'".  

As mentioned earlier in the critique of Butler, for Bordo a study of the body that includes only or primarily a "study of representations and cultural 'discourse...cannot itself stand as a history of the body".  

The discourses that discipline us into 'feminine' and 'masculine' bodies and genders need to be analyzed at the local level of their daily practice. Bordo is trying to bring theoretical feminist ideas into the 'concrete' life of bodies: she states that we need to look at "what people are doing to their bodies in the more mundane service of the 'normal'". It is crucial for her that feminists do not "make the mistake of imagining that (dualisms) have been transcended or transgressed just because we can 'destabilize' them in theory". Therefore, she is interested in what practices women engage in on a regular basis in pursuit of the 'feminine' ideal, such as "the kinds of cosmetic surgery they are having, the hours they spend on the Stairmaster, (and) what they feel about themselves when they look in the mirror". Bordo, like Bartky and Butler, utilizes a great deal of Foucault's work in her analysis of the cultural influence and control of women's bodies. In particular she finds his distinction between the 'useful' and the 'intelligible' body, and his discussion of disciplinary power very useful for feminist discourse. I briefly discuss these ideas because they are important to Bordo's work, in understanding both her arguments and her theoretical starting point.

The 'intelligible' body relates to symbolic or scientific representations of the body, which involve "our cultural conceptions of the body, norms of beauty, models of health and so forth". The 'useful' body, or 'practical' body as Bordo refers to it, represents actual lived bodies. While the intelligible body is viewed as the cultural ideal, Bordo
suggests that it can also be seen as "a set of practical rules and regulations through which
the living body" is trained and shaped in an effort to meet its image/contours. In her
work Bordo applies these ideas to her understanding and analysis of the cultural
construction of women's bodies. Fashion models and movie stars represent the
'intelligible' body, the cultural ideal of the slender superwoman, and their images are
portrayed everywhere, from television shows and movies to advertisements and
magazines. The corresponding practices necessary for women to emulate these images
are diets, exercise and beauty regimes, and surgical treatments. These practices are
promoted everywhere as tools women can use to empower and care for themselves,
having an overall normalizing/naturalizing effect. The inherent contradiction is that
women "who (are) striv(ing) to embody these images" are often "suffer(ing) from eating
disorders, exercise compulsions, and continual self-scrutiny and self-castigation", so that
it seems doubtful that what they are experiencing is true 'empowerment'.

If women are suffering to the point of risking their health (emotional and
physical), why do they continue to engage, often consciously and willingly, in these
ritualistic practices? Bordo utilizes Foucault's conception of disciplinary power to
examine fashion and beauty ideals and explain how they are culturally sustained. First,
Bordo states that we must re-conceive how we think about power. Power, she suggests,
is not something that an individual or group can possess, rather it "is a dynamic or
network of non centralized forces". Second, she notes that while power can take on
particular historical forms, these forms exist or are exercised through multiple processes
rather than being sustained from above. Thus, gender norms and other aspects of
subjectivity are not forcibly imposed but are maintained through "individual self
surveillance and self correction". For example, the standard of slimness is maintained
through women's obedience to it, their 'trudging to the gym' despite hunger and fatigue,
and through the social sanctioning of those who do not follow suit.

106 Ibid
107 Ibid, pg.182.
108 Ibid
110 Ibid, pg.27.
111 Ibid, pg.171.
Bringing these ideas together, the oppression of women can be regarded as one of the current forms of power. Further, the oppression of women is not controlled or possessed by some particular group or individual, but rather is sustained through daily acts and practices that all of us engage in. This is precisely what Bordo is interested in: the practices that influence women and that, consequently, women engage in, which have the effect of maintaining their oppression. Correspondingly, she seeks to analyze the discourses that influence women with respect to their bodies, the discourses through which women try to emulate the cultural feminine ideal. These discourses inscribe onto bodies cultural meanings of femininity, beauty, and success. Included in these discourses, and of particular importance to Bordo, are popular representations of women, such as those in advertisements or magazines. These representations are increasingly homogenizing and normalizing functioning "as models against which the self continually measures, judges, 'disciplines', and 'corrects". Representations of 'ideal femininity' are cultural discourses that influence women's conceptions of themselves and their bodies as well as their expectations of others. Bordo argues that the construction of 'ideal femininity' that is represented in popular culture is not only a highly gendered process but also involves the smoothing out or erasing of racial, class, and sexual 'differences' "that disturb Anglo-Saxon, heterosexual expectations and identifications". The predominance of these representations means that they get taken for the 'norm' against which people judge themselves, instilling feelings of lack and the need for constant self-improvement. Women's sense of empowerment or self-esteem are important for Bordo and consequently her focus is on the "institutionalized system of values and practices within which girls and women come to believe they are (and are frequently treated as) nothing unless they are trim, tight, lineless, bulgeless, and sagless".

Like Butler, Bordo argues that bodies learn acceptable 'feminine' roles "not chiefly through ideology, but through organization and regulation of time and space, and movements of our daily lives". Thus "through the exacting and normalizing disciplines of diet, make-up and dress" bodies become coded 'feminine' and women learn the proper

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112 Ibid, pg.24.
113 Ibid
114 Ibid, pg.32.
115 Ibid, pg.165.
performance of 'femininity'. \textsuperscript{116} Two key points that Bordo discusses are the inherent contradictions of contemporary demands of femininity, or as she refers to it, the double bind of performing femininity alongside a version of masculinity, and the deconstruction of what 'femininity' means for women in Western culture. In a great deal of her work Bordo discusses the connections between the prevalence of eating disorders in relation to widespread cultural representations of women. The contemporary ideal body is one of hyperslenderness and Bordo notes that this body is generally viewed as the 'norm' which all women must struggle to meet. \textsuperscript{117} The promotion of this body type results in a contradiction; in order to attempt to meet the ideal 'feminine' body women must acquire 'masculine' characteristics, such as "self-control, determination,...emotional discipline, mastery, and so on". \textsuperscript{118} Bordo notes that "the ideal of slenderness, then, and the diet and exercise regimens that have become inseparable from it offer the illusion of meeting, through the body, the contradictory demands of contemporary ideology of femininity". \textsuperscript{119}

While Bordo utilizes theory in her analysis of cultural discourses and representations, her work is located primarily within the context of the practices and performances of actual, material bodies. She argues that while in theory we may be able to transgress gender or racial boundaries, this is not so easily done in practice. Rather she stipulates that "like it or not, in our present culture our activities are coded as male or female and will function as such under the prevailing system of gender-power relations". \textsuperscript{120} Bordo claims that women's adherence to the strict codes of femininity involves 'bondage more than choice' as this pursuit is still deemed one of the chief routes to "acceptance and success for women in our culture". \textsuperscript{121}

A final point here relates to where I see Bordo's work and my own diverging. While, as I have mentioned, Bordo examines and critiques the cultural influence and control of 'feminine' bodies, her focus is on the 'institutional' or 'cultural' conditions as opposed to the individual's experience or adoption of specific practices. \textsuperscript{122} What is missing in Bordo's work are actual women's voices and stories concerning how they

\textsuperscript{116} Ibid, pg.166.
\textsuperscript{117} Ibid, pg.170.
\textsuperscript{118} Ibid, pg.171.
\textsuperscript{119} Ibid, pg.172.
\textsuperscript{120} Ibid, pg. 22 and 242.
\textsuperscript{121} Ibid, pg. 180.
experience or conceive of femininity and their bodies. Her critique of Butler and other postmodern theorists is that their analyses are limited to the textual arena, and thus in her own work she centres on the context in which bodies exist. However, to some extent, her work still remains textual because it focuses on cultural trends and leaves out actual women's voices and experiences. Bordo states that "feminist cultural criticism is not a blueprint for the conduct of personal life" but should rather have at its goal "enhanced consciousness of the power, complexity, and systemic nature of culture". Therefore, she argues that feminists should not criticize what women do (the actions that they take) "in response to the system of cultural meanings that surround them", but should "highlight the discourse that is gradually changing our conception and experience of our bodies". My question for Bordo is, what better way to understand how this discourse is 'working' or influencing women than to listen to women's stories and get a sense of how they are experiencing and conceiving of their bodies? To highlight the discourse that is 'changing our conception of our bodies' it seems necessary to include women's voices, to obtain their ideas or experiences about femininity, what it means to them in their day to day lives. Lastly, while Bordo states that cultural discourses have a normalizing effect, erasing social and cultural differences of race, class and sexuality, she does not go into an examination of what this means for women's everyday existence in their bodies.

I discuss these ideas in more depth in the next section on agency, but first I want to briefly discuss three studies that consider the disciplining and inscribing of bodies as 'feminine' in everyday contexts. The three studies are: France Winddance Twine's "Brown Skinned White Girls: class, culture and the construction of white identity in suburban communities, Debbie Weekes' "Shades of Blackness: Young Black female constructions of beauty", and Linda McDowell and Gill Court's "Performing work: bodily representations in merchant banks".

122 Ibid, pg.32.
123 Ibid, pg.30.
124 Ibid, pg. 31 and 39.
Winndance Twine argues that the predominant theorizing about whiteness and white identity has not examined how these constructions shape young African descent women, whose mothers are Asian American or European American. Her study, based upon interviews with African-descent women, demonstrates how identities are socially constructed and "can be enacted under specific demographic and social conditions". The women interviewed were brought up in middle-class suburban communities and until they left home many of them identified as White. Winndance Twine identifies two key factors in their claiming of a White identity, firstly, socio-economic status and secondly, being raised and immersed in a social environment that embraced a racially unmarked identity. Some of the women made comments like, 'I didn't try to fit into white culture, I was white culture', or noted that their White identity was rooted in both 'cultural training and biological factors'. Winndance Twine notes that the women saw Whiteness "as an interpretive frame-a way of explaining and understanding social relations". Through this social lens Blackness was associated with being different and oppressed, whereas Whiteness granted these young women "the privilege of 'normalcy'". Dating stood out as a time when the women began to perceive themselves as 'different', since White boys were not pursuing them and their friends were encouraging them to only date Black boys. The women came to realize that they were not sharing the same social interactions as their friends, an experience which had the overall effect of instilling feelings of 'difference' and doubts about their White identities. The women's identities and sense of self were further destabilized once they were exposed to a different socio-economic and cultural environment - a university campus. Winndance Twine articulates that the "heightened sense of racial and ethnic consciousness that exists at Berkeley pressures students of any African ancestry to recognize and claim a Black racial identity as part of

Winndance Twine, F. "Brown Skinned White Girls: class, culture and the construction of white identity in suburban communities", in Gender, Place and Culture, Volume 3 Number 2, 1996, pg.205

Winddance Twine, F. "Brown Skinned White Girls: class, culture and the construction of white identity in suburban communities", in Gender, Place and Culture, Volume 3 Number 2, 1996, pg.205. Except for one woman, all of the women interviewed had African-American/Black fathers and mothers of predominantly Asian or European decent.

Ibid, pg.222.

Ibid

Ibid, pg.209.

Ibid, pg.219.

Ibid, pg.215.
their campus socialization process". Thus, the experience of being exposed to and immersed in a new socio-cultural environment challenged the stability of the women's White identities. Winddance Twine's study is important to my analysis of 'femininity' because it demonstrates that identities are not fixed or natural, they are constructed and influenced by many social factors. As well, her study illustrates how we learn to adopt and embody the practices and behaviours deemed appropriate to our community, personal environment and stage in life. These ideas are more fully explored later in this thesis.

Debbie Weekes' study examines constructions of beauty specific to young Black females and is based on conversations with young Black women that were part of a larger study, excerpts from letters in a British Black women's magazine, and other related studies. In her introduction she notes an important distinction between how beauty is perceived within academia versus how young Black women conceptualize it themselves. In academia identity is described as 'fragmented and diverse' whereas young Black women utilized 'restrictive definitions' based on physical signifiers such as hair texture and skin colour. Weekes suggests that the difference results from the fact that young Black females are defining themselves (and others) according to how "they experience their social positions and hence their racial identities". Further she argues that dominant perceptions of beauty in the West not only objectify women, but also are premised on the notion of Whiteness as the 'norm', which "indicates that Black and White women are objectified differentially". The colonial legacy has instilled notions of beauty that reference Whiteness as the yardstick against which Blackness is perceived and judged. Weekes provides two examples that illustrate how the 'white yardstick' has affected young Black women's perceptions of beauty and Blackness. First, in a response to a photograph of the winner of a British Black women's magazine's 'Face of 94' competition, one woman stated that she was upset with their choice because the

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132 Ibid, pg.218.
133 Weekes states in a footnote that her research within the cited chapter was part of a larger study on the identities of 31 young Black women aged 14-16, of whom 13 were of mixed parentage.
135 Ibid, Weekes' emphasis.
136 Ibid, pg.114.
137 Ibid, pg.115.
woman was "nearer to White than Black".\textsuperscript{138} She felt disappointed because she had thought that the whole point of the contest was to give Black British women the opportunity to show off their beauty, and that there were already enough images and attention given to "light-skinned, coolie haired women".\textsuperscript{139} This woman's use of an essentialist definition for Black beauty can be regarded as a strategy for empowerment because it challenges the dominant ideology that White (or as close to) is better. The second example is drawn from one of Weekes' discussions with a young Black woman who had been socially targeted by other young Black women because she is of mixed parentage. Weekes comments that most young women of mixed parentage perceive or experience themselves as on the "boundaries of Blackness", but one woman she talked with rejected the definition of 'other' by "placing Black females on the margins".\textsuperscript{140} This woman commented on how some individuals' inability to perceive her as Black resulted in her being called 'no nation' and 'mixed up bitch' by other young Black women. In response she stated that the other Black girls had spoken to her like that because they were jealous, that "most of 'em's got no hair, when their skin's dry it's just tough and...they have to buy cream".\textsuperscript{141} This response illustrates her rejection of essentialist conceptions of Black female beauty and demonstrates in a larger context the ability of Black women (all women) to define beauty and womanhood on their own terms.

Weekes' study is relevant to my own work in several ways. First, by looking at how young Black women experience and perceive of Blackness, beauty, and their identities, she establishes a link between theory and lived experience. Second, she explores how certain ideas about beauty are constructed and interwoven in our social fabric as well as how we can empower ourselves by trying to problematize or do away with some of these ideas. Finally, her study is also important to my research because it demonstrates the different conceptions of beauty that exist among Black females, thus dispelling the notion of a homogenous 'ideal'.

The last study I discuss before I move onto my examination of the literature on agency is McDowell and Court's paper on merchant banks. Based on interviews with

\textsuperscript{138} Ibid pg.117.
\textsuperscript{139} Ibid
\textsuperscript{140} Ibid, pg.120.
\textsuperscript{141} Ibid.
female and male bankers and an analysis of representations of bankers in newspapers, their study looked at the differences between women and men's experiences in merchant banking. More specifically, they explored "a particular link between representation and social practice seen through a gender lens"; how men and women were perceived and how they perceived themselves, versus how they experienced their role or profession.\textsuperscript{142} Utilizing Butler's theory of the performative nature of gender, they note that self-surveillance and policing of gender roles is essential in the day to day functioning of merchant banks. Further to that point, they state that "through a range of formal and informal procedures...acceptable versions of professional workers are created, policed, and maintained", all of which adhere to strict gender codes.\textsuperscript{143} They provide two powerful examples that illustrate how gender is perceived as or assumed to be 'part of the job' as well as how it is maintained and policed. The first example is of the trading floor environment and the second one involves interviews with men and women about women's place or role within banking.

Because masculine characteristics are deemed necessary for successful trading, a 'machismo culture' is maintained through the creation of an environment "in which crude bodily humour, pinups, practical jokes and various forms of verbal and nonverbal behaviour verging on sexual harassment are commonplace".\textsuperscript{144} When two women traders were portrayed in newspapers their active and embodied images challenged conventional conceptions of femininity as well as the assumption of required masculinity in trading. However, the two women concerned were shocked and upset by the images and demanded a reprint of them that demonstrated a more traditional feminine image that restored women to their 'proper place'.\textsuperscript{145}

In their interviews with bankers both men and women discussed women's performances as well as how they saw these in relation to the nature of the banking profession as a whole. Women talked about different roles they had adopted such as 'honourary man', 'executive bimbo', and more subtle strategies that meant simply trying

\textsuperscript{142} McDowell and Court "Performing work: bodily representations in merchant banks", in \textit{Environment and Planning D: Society and Space}, Volume 12, 1994, pg.729.
\textsuperscript{143} Ibid, pg.733.
\textsuperscript{144} Ibid, pg.737.
\textsuperscript{145} Ibid, pg.743.
not to stand out. Some of the women mentioned that they shifted between roles, depending on the situation and whom they were working with. When men were asked about their female colleagues some of them mentioned that they felt that women's attempts to be masculine or 'one of the boys' were counterproductive, not 'natural', and even sad. However, rather than responding that women should stick with and utilize their natural 'feminine' skills, some men argued that "femininity conferred unfair advantages on women, particularly in interactions with clients". McDowell and Court state that many men felt that women used their 'sexuality and femininity' to obtain clients and secure accounts. Many of the women agreed and spoke about feeling they were required to perform the role of 'feminine seductress or temptress', some with confidence and others with great unease. For example, one woman stated "Women seduce their clients, not literally. I'm quite certain it's done that way", while others felt "their workplace persona was unreal", that they were "alienated from their feelings". McDowell and Court conclude that the gendered identities of those they interviewed were important, not only to their individual positions and professional identity but also to the merchant banking system as a whole. This study demonstrates the constructed and performative nature of gender in the everyday context of merchant banking, both through individual descriptive accounts of self-surveillance and policing, and gender reinforcement in media representations.

The three studies discussed above are important to my analysis of femininity because they bring debates on the disciplining of the body into everyday, lived contexts. Further, they also demonstrate in more detail, and from different perspectives from the main body of literature, how constructions of race and gender are interconnected. The studies offer a starting point from which to begin filling in the gap presented in the literature on disciplining women's bodies; namely the inclusion of women's voices and personal experiences. Weekes' study illustrates how individual women tried to challenge cultural and essentialist conceptions of beauty and Blackness and how they utilized

146 Ibid, pg.745.
147 Ibid, pg.745 and 737.
148 Ibid, pg.746.
149 Ibid.
150 Ibid.
agency in order to define their identity on their own terms. This discussion on ideology versus individual practice will be further developed in the following section on agency. There has been a great deal of debate within feminist literature regarding agency. More specifically, feminists question how to make sense, theoretically and personally, of practices that are individually empowering, but culturally oppressive for women.

**Theorizing Women’s Agency**

There are two main studies that I discuss in this section, Kathy Davis’s "Reshaping the Female Body: The Dilemma of Cosmetic Surgery" and Dawn Currie’s "Girl Talk: Adolescent Magazines and Their Readers". Each of these authors has contributed to a greater understanding of the performance of and adherence to femininity by women in their everyday lives. They empowered the women involved in their studies by giving voice to their experiences and, of particular importance to my study, they theorized agency in relation to femininity. I have separated these two authors from the theorists in the next section on negotiation for two reasons. Firstly, both Davis and Currie address and situate their research between two theoretical approaches to femininity: the approach that deems women’s engagements with femininity as oppressive and the approach that considers the enjoyment women gain from femininity. Secondly, their studies conceive of femininity from the perspective of potential agency; Currie and Davis seem to be theorizing the possibility of agency whereas the studies in negotiation focus more on how, in a practical sense, women enact agency.

I begin with Davis whose study is both intriguing and personally challenging, for myself and I suspect for many feminists. Davis examines a particular practice with regards to femininity, that of cosmetic surgery. She asks, how can feminists (herself included) make sense of the popularity of cosmetic surgery without viewing the women who undergo it as ‘cultural dopes’? She specifically addresses the question of agency and explores the possibility of empowerment for individual women through cosmetic surgery.

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Davis has written extensively on cosmetic surgery and a primary focus of her work has been to fill what she perceives as a gap within feminist literature. She argues that while many feminists have discussed cosmetic surgery and its societal consequences for women, few of them have included the voices and experiences of women who have had cosmetic surgery. Her main frustration is that feminists seem to uniformly see cosmetic surgery as negative, that they “know that cosmetic surgery is the problem not the solution”. The only way feminists have made sense of women’s decision to undergo cosmetic surgery has been to view them as ‘cultural dopes’ who are conforming to patriarchal notions of beauty. Davis challenges this perception and, through interviewing women patients both before and after surgery, argues that cosmetic surgery can be empowering for individual women. She notes that while other feminist theorists, like Bordo and Chapkis, have “provided convincing explanations for the oppressiveness of feminine beauty norms and practices”, they have not been able to explain the increasing popularity of cosmetic surgery “without undermining the women who choose to undergo it”.

In attempting to situate her research within feminist theory, Davis states that there has been a theoretical shift from the 'oppression' approach to the 'discourse' approach in analyses of femininity. The oppression approach "is defined in terms of women's shared experiences, of which the most central is oppression", whereas the discourse approach seeks to abandon the unified category of 'woman' "in favor of a diversity of femininities". The approach to femininity represented by the oppression approach holds that it is something that women can overcome by rejecting or stopping their adherence to beauty practices. Within the discourse approach, beauty practices are linked to the "broader context of power and gender hierarchies" that shape and discipline women's identities. Thus, rather than being able to stand outside of the 'fashion-beauty complex' and end their adherence to its practices, women are a part of its construction and re-production. Davis argues that while both approaches provide valuable insight into the social and cultural context of femininity, they have limitations with respect to an analysis.

154 Ibid, pg.23.
of cosmetic surgery. She argues that both approaches would relegate women who choose cosmetic surgery "to the position of cultural dopes" and would dismiss the possibility of empowerment through surgical alteration. There are three reasons why Davis feels the 'cultural dope' viewpoint is inadequate. First, "it rests on a conception of power that is devoid of agency", where women are thought to be unconsciously obedient to patriarchal femininity rather than knowledgeably engaging in its practices. Second, she argues that feminist analyses of cosmetic surgery are lacking in actual women's accounts and bodily experiences. This absence has the effect of "reinforcing dualistic conceptions of the female body" and thus implies that, "cosmetic surgery can only be a transformation of the body as object, never as self". Lastly, by assuming that all women who undergo cosmetic surgery are 'cultural dopes', feminists are effectively closing the door on different potential viewpoints or analyses; they know everything about cosmetic surgery already, and there is nothing to learn from women's lived experiences. For Davis, feminist theory, and in particular any examination of cosmetic surgery, needs to be grounded, "it must take the...everyday social practices of women as its starting point". Her research on cosmetic surgery takes up this challenge; she interviews women about their decision to have surgery and situates their experiences within socio-cultural dynamics.

From her interviews with women, Davis identifies four features that demonstrate "cosmetic surgery can be a strategy for becoming an embodied subject". The first feature that all of the stories share is a 'before and after' component. All of the women reflected on their lives using the surgery as their critical "vantage point". The second feature is that the stories spoke to the women's 'trajectory of suffering'; the realization of feelings of 'abnormality', to suffering as a result of this bodily 'deformity', to finally having the surgical alteration. Third, all of the stories involved 'arguments and

156 Ibid, pg.28.  
157 Ibid, pg.29.  
158 Ibid  
159 Ibid.  
160 Ibid.  
161 Ibid, pg.33.  
163 Ibid, pg.97.  
164 Ibid
deliberations’ as the women defend or try to justify their decision to have cosmetic surgery.\textsuperscript{165} Lastly, all of the stories are about ‘identity’, about who the women believed they were before the operation and who they have become.\textsuperscript{166} For Davis the combination of all of these features in the narratives illustrates the transformation of self that the women underwent as a result of cosmetic surgery, thereby signaling its potential for empowerment.\textsuperscript{167} Davis notes that the women described their decision to have cosmetic surgery as a very important step because it marked the act of ‘taking control over their lives’.\textsuperscript{168}

Bordo, and Cepanec and Payne, the three main critics of Davis, argue that the central piece missing in her work is the societal context within which cosmetic surgery takes place. For Bordo, “cosmetic surgery is more than an individual choice”, it is “an increasingly normative cultural practice” and, as a result, it increases women’s suffering by making ‘beauty’ ever harder to achieve.\textsuperscript{169} While Bordo agrees with Davis that women are too often depicted as ‘passive’, she argues that the individually ‘empowering’ act of having cosmetic surgery ‘for oneself’ needs to be socially situated; what is empowering for one perpetuates ageist and racist norms and thereby increases the suffering of others.\textsuperscript{170} Cepanec and Payne find that Davis does not adequately address issues of aging relevant to women or the fact that cosmetic surgery has become so popular because Western society is prejudiced against aging.\textsuperscript{171} Like Bordo, they feel that Davis does not incorporate the socio-cultural environment within which women engage in surgically altering their bodies.\textsuperscript{172} They conclude that although cosmetic surgery may be empowering for individual women, “at the socio-cultural level, (it) is disempowering in that women may be seen to be collaborating in the dominant discourses that disadvantage them”.\textsuperscript{173} I agree with these critiques because although Davis does

\textsuperscript{165} Ibid
\textsuperscript{166} Ibid, pg.98.
\textsuperscript{167} Ibid
\textsuperscript{168} Ibid, pg.133.
\textsuperscript{169} Bordo, Susan Twilight Zones: The Hidden Life of Cultural Images from Plato to OJ, pg.43.
\textsuperscript{170} Ibid, pg.50.
\textsuperscript{172} Ibid
\textsuperscript{173} Ibid, pg.139.
situate her study in the Netherlands, where cosmetic surgery can be covered by public health, she does not explore what cosmetic surgery means for women that are unable to access it, nor how the predominance of cosmetic surgery affects women who do not want to have it done. Of significance is her complete lack of racial or class analysis with reference to cosmetic surgery, which again speaks to the greater cultural implications of ideal 'feminine' body. Related to this omission is Davis' use of the terms 'normal' or 'ordinary' in reference to bodily shape and size, mentioning that women undergo cosmetic surgery so that they can finally look 'ordinary' or 'normal' rather than abnormal or deviant.

174 Davis notes that the women's sense of deviancy about a particular body part is personally and individually determined, and in general that cosmetic surgery is 'predicated on the assumption...of) the norms of acceptable femininity'. However, she does not question this 'bodily ideal' in her discussion; it seems understood or taken for granted. As well, she does not address how this 'feminine ideal' affects those deemed socially and culturally beyond its reach: in short, issues of ableism, ageism, racism, heterosexism and classism are lacking in Davis's analysis.

I find Davis' discussion of agency incredibly useful, in particular her attempt to bring the 'active doing of femininity' into feminist theory. As she argues, and I agree, notions of "embodiment, agency, and moral contradictions are central to understanding women's problems with appearance", as well as to our knowledge of the different ways women experience femininity. 175 I believe she does fill in a gap within feminist literature by examining agency, through women's voiced experiences, shedding light on the way women think and feel about their bodies, and their sense of defensiveness or need for justification regarding surgically altering their bodies.

The second study that I discuss is Dawn Currie's "Girl Talk: Adolescent Magazines and Their Readers". Currie looks at how young women negotiate their identities and the role of teen fashion magazines in this process. Similar to Davis' discussion of the oppression and discourse approach, Currie situates her study within these two orientations concerning femininity, beauty magazines, and issues of agency. The first trend includes feminists who argue that fashion magazines are problematic

174 Davis, Kathy "Remaking the She-Devil: A Critical Look at Feminist Approaches to Beauty", pg.36-8.
175 Davis, Kathy Reshaping the Female Body: The Dilemma of Cosmetic Surgery, pg.64.
because they "work to reconstitute women's oppression". The second trend views fashion magazines as 'female-centred' arenas that provide women with pleasure and fantasy, following "recent theories of cultural representation, within which meanings are...unstable, and subject to subversive appropriation". Thus, women who engage in femininity, particularly through fashion magazines, are not seen as 'cultural dopes' but as "actively negotiating meanings in their everyday lives". However, the focus on the cultural construction of gendered identities within this trend has displaced "embodied women with hypothetical Subjects who exist entirely within...discourse". Currie argues that analyses of social dynamics cannot simply be read from texts, they must involve explorations into how they are lived. Further, she notes that while there have been a number of studies by feminists on fashion magazines, few of them include actual readers in their research. Her study is an attempt to bring embodied women into feminist theoretical discussions by examining how adolescent girls take up the discourses of femininity within fashion magazines in their everyday practices. In particular, Currie states that she wanted to explore how "young women come to understand and express themselves specifically as 'women' and how this understanding is (or is not) mediated" by discourses of femininity provided by fashion magazines. Girl Talk is based on interviews and focus groups with young women about their magazine reading, and an assessment of numerous teen magazines and related feminist literature. By focusing on how magazines are read by teens, the study not only gives voice to young women's ideas about identity and self, but also "emphasizes the agency of research subjects as meaning makers". Currie notes that the agency of the teen girls was most prevalent when the magazines presented them with contradictory messages or images. Rather than simply taking the messages at face value, the young women would negotiate the ideas in reference to their own lives and experiences, and then decide whether to accept or reject.

177 Ibid
178 Ibid
179 Ibid, pg. 11.
180 Ibid, pg. 126.
181 Ibid, pg. 94.
182 Ibid, pg. 97.
183 Ibid, pg. 128.
them. Overall, Currie found that few of the teens completely rejected fashion magazines, but that many of them were skeptical of the messages and/or representations within them. Importantly, she notes that 'skeptical readers' "accept magazines as a potential source of knowledge about self and the social world of adolescence", providing insight into the social dynamics that maintain the popularity of the magazines.\textsuperscript{184}

While incorporating a different population and focus than my own research, \textit{Girl Talk} was useful to my analysis in two important ways. Firstly, the study addresses power, in a similar fashion to Bordo, which is helpful when considering how femininity is sustained and reproduced. Currie states that while the study explores Foucauldian notions of power, which emphasizes agency and creativity, it also "testifies to the fact that some forms of knowledge are more powerful in their effects than are others"; magazines are often given precedence by the teens over their own intuition or experience.\textsuperscript{185} While women engage in and reproduce 'femininity' through their daily practices and activities, certain ideologies (such as the importance of 'beauty') exist that have dominance and shape the social environments in which they live. Secondly, Currie's analysis of the readers as 'meaning-makers' provides insight into the nature of subjectivity, because it highlights the "bringing-together of embodied women and cultural constructions of womanhood".\textsuperscript{186} These ideas are essential to my analysis of 'lived femininity' because they emphasize the process of negotiation that women are engaged in with respect to their identities (between cultural discourses and personal experiences), in a way that empowers the research subject(s).

My main critique of \textit{Girl Talk} is that it did not sufficiently explore how other aspects of the young women's identities came into play when reading the magazines. For example, how did race or class dynamics affect or shape how girls interpreted or negotiated the images and messages in magazines?

Both Currie and Davis address the shift in feminist theorizing about 'femininity', from deeming it as solely oppressive to exploring the possible pleasure and potential empowerment it can grant women, and they situate their studies within these two theoretical positions. Many feminists have mentioned this shift, such as McDowell and

\textsuperscript{184} Ibid, pg.20.
\textsuperscript{185} Ibid, pg.18.
Negotiating Femininity

In this final section I want to look at the literature that explores how women negotiate their femininity, how they make sense of their 'feminine' identities in their particular social circumstances, and what this means for our understanding of gender dynamics. The authors and ideas mentioned in this section intersect with the previous one on agency and in many ways they could be discussed together. There are, as I have mentioned, tensions within feminist literature regarding agency and pleasure with respect to femininity and I felt it necessary to consider these ideas/tensions specifically before moving into negotiation. The literature on agency deals with the question or possibility of agency with respect to femininity, exploring this potential, whereas work on negotiation tends to take agency for granted. As I mentioned in my introduction, these categories are not fixed or separate, but rather are interconnected, and I have separated them in order to demonstrate and work through the multiple ideas and tensions concerning femininity. The two studies I discussed in the previous section offer a useful theoretical framework from which to reflect on women's negotiations with femininity.

There are six studies that I want to discuss in this section. The first two involve research on how women negotiate femininity in relation to class, ethnicity, and race. The next two studies examine the role of fashion and beauty practices in the construction of women's identities. The final two studies address the contradiction and diversity that shape women's lives and state that this 'reality' should be at the centre of feminist theorizing.

I begin with Beverly Skeggs' study, which focuses on the negotiation of femininity by working class women in England. Through interviews with several women over a number of years, Skeggs looks at how working class women "take up, try on, and
discard positions of femininity" within their local environments. Femininity, she argues, has multiple meanings that are directly attributable to women's different social conditions and relations. Her study focuses on historical meanings of 'respectability' and 'femininity' and relates how these have shaped current perceptions and identities of working class women. Femininity has been, and is still, an important class marker, setting the boundaries between the upper class, who 'embody' femininity, the middle class, who try to emulate it, and the working class, who are positioned at a distance from it. Despite their social positioning, working class women engage in feminine practices because these practices are perceived as a way to achieve 'respectability' and gain cultural validation. Skeggs notes, however, that the women's performance of femininity is not without costs; there is a fine line between being admired and being viewed as a sexual object, which women must negotiate. This negotiation involves acquiring the necessary knowledge to distinguish between "style and fashion, between looking good and looking tarty, between looking feminine and looking sexy", and is derived from both local and conventional sources, such as magazines and television. Further, the women were conscious that making too much of an effort in their portrayal of femininity was a problem, but that not making enough of an effort (or worse, none at all) was equally criticized. The women also commented that there were appropriate and inappropriate times and places for 'feminine' performances. For example, 'making up' for work or school was deemed inappropriate or excessive, but was regarded as normal for going out in the evening.

Important to Skeggs study is the identification of 'glamour' as the form of femininity that the women "experienced as subjectivity". Glamour gave the women "agency, strength, and worth", and was negotiated between appearing desirable and being

189 Ibid, pg.99-100.
190 Ibid, pg.100.
191 Ibid, pg.104.
192 Ibid, pg.103.
193 Ibid, pg.108.
194 Ibid
195 Ibid, pg.111.
stereotyped as vulgar and rough. Successful glamour granted the women a look of respectability without the perception of having tried 'too hard' to be 'feminine'.

In her final analysis, Skeggs states that the women did not 'know themselves as feminine', but rather, they felt it necessary to perform femininity in order to obtain a degree of social and cultural validation. This necessity is based on the women's specific reality that "there were few culturally valid and economically possible or potential alternatives available". Despite the women's comments that femininity is 'inconvenient' and 'difficult to avoid', they also spoke about the pleasure it granted them. Skeggs notes their contradictory position with respect to femininity; on the one hand it granted the women autonomy and a sense of camaraderie and pleasure, while on the other, it instilled feelings of insecurity and constant need of validation by others. The women were always conscious of being judged by others; "their attempts to 'pass' as feminine were always in jeopardy of being read by others as representative of authentic femininity".

Skeggs's study of 'ambivalent femininities' focused on the development of women's identities over the course of a few years, through their transition from late adolescence into adulthood. This study addressed key points that are relevant to my own considerations of 'femininity'. First, Skeggs spoke about the 'temporality' of femininity, rather than being a constant in women's lives femininity is something they occupy strategically, at certain times and in certain places. The women could 'take on the appearance of femininity' but would rarely identify as feminine, which illustrates that "women are not feminine by default but that femininity is a carefully constructed appearance and/or form of conduct that can be displayed". I think this is a very interesting idea that connects with Butler's notion of performativity and the constructed nature of gender. If femininity is something that can be strategically displayed, can it be used in a way that transforms the oppressive and restrictive meanings, relating to class, race and sexuality, which are attached to it?

196 Ibid
198 Ibid
199 Ibid
200 Ibid, pg.115.
201 Ibid, pg.106.
Second, Skeggs states that 'femininity' cannot fully encapsulate the category 'woman' because it is simply one of many social categories that shape women's identities and experiences. Her study is a useful examination of how class intersects with gender to produce different meanings in the performance of femininity. Finally, and perhaps of greatest interest to me, is Skeggs discussion of 'glamour' as a distinct form of femininity that the women strongly identified with and struggled to portray. The use of 'glamour' was specific to the women's socio-cultural situation; it was constructed through their negotiation of stereotypes of working class women as 'sexual' or vulgar, of feeling too old to 'pull off' femininity, and their desire to be deemed 'respectable'. This is a powerful example of how women negotiate their femininity to adapt to their particular situations. Through negotiation, the women are trying to strategically utilize femininity to counter or transform societal constraints imposed upon them.

The second relevant work on negotiation is Claire Dwyer's study of young Muslim women's negotiations of identities in Britain. Dwyer notes that clothing, in particular the veil, plays a significant role in defining Muslim women's identities. The racialised and gendered meanings associated with their clothing are rooted in the 'Asian/English' dichotomy which constructs South Asian culture as "unchanging, static and 'backward' in contrast to an assumed homogenous, fixed superior 'English culture'". As a result of their clothing, South Asian women are viewed as "passive victims of oppressive cultures", which effectively suggests that identities can be read from appearances. Based on interviews with young Muslim women, Dwyer examines the possibility of alternative definitions or femininities through a 'reworking of dress' by young Muslim women. By wearing 'South Asian' and 'British' clothes interchangeably or strategically, Dwyer argues that the women are challenging "the dominant meanings attached to their dress". For example, one woman rejected the cultural validation given to 'English' clothes by stating her preference for 'Asian' clothes because they offered more variety and creativity, but also noted that 'English' clothes were sensible, and thus suitable.

203 Dwyer, Claire, "Veiled Meanings: Young British Muslim Women And The Negotiation of Differences", in Gender, Place & Culture, Carfax Publishing Company, Mar99, Vol..6, Issue1, pg.9.
204 Ibid, pg.7.
205 Ibid
As well, through the mixing of clothing styles, the women were experimenting with their identities. For example, Dwyer notes that, in choosing whether or not to wear the veil the women explored different or alternative subjectivities. In conclusion, Dwyer argues that the women's mixing and trying out of different clothing styles, even if minimal, demonstrates their experimentation and negotiation with the gendered, racialised and sexualized dynamics of their identities. She examines how young Muslim women negotiate racialised and gendered meanings inscribed onto their bodies and clothing in the construction of their identities. Her study demonstrates the interconnections of race and gender in the performance of femininity in an everyday context of the young women's school. Dwyer makes an important point: while identities and oppressive constructions may be transgressed in theory, this transgression is harder to do in everyday situations. For example, one woman stated that she liked and was proud "to wear clothes which reflect her...heritage" but did "not want to be defined" and socially stigmatized by the dominant meanings attributed to these clothes. Thus, while some of the women wanted to challenge the oppressive and racist meanings ascribed to their clothes, they only felt able to at certain times and in safe social spaces. These findings are important to consider in discussions of women's lived experiences of femininity and how these experiences are determined and shaped by other facets of their identities as well as by specific contexts.

The next two studies that I want to discuss both look at the role of fashion and beauty practices in the construction of women's identities. While neither includes actual women's experiences (except for those of the authors), both distinguish between culturally influenced femininity and lived, embodied femininity. The first article by Hilary Fawcett offers a historical examination of the influence of fashion on women's lives. Fawcett articulates that fashion enabled her to imagine different, potential realities which granted her pleasure and a form of escapism from day to day life. Similar to some of the women in Skeggs's study, she notes that fashion enabled her to feel 'ahead of the

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206 Ibid, pg.11.
207 Ibid, pg.16.
208 Ibid, pg.10.
game' despite few social advantages related to her family background. Fashion was central to the negotiation between her lived reality and personal background, and the cultural feminine ideal she sought to emulate. As she states: "my love of fashion was part of the tension between achieving me and the traditionally feminine me, the me that would be the first woman in the family to enter higher education and the me that identified with my housewife mother and her engagement with the rule of style and good taste".

However, as time passed, she began to realize that her engagement with fashion was in many ways at odds with her reality of "child rearing, domestic life and professional ambition". Fawcett argues that contemporary consumer culture portrays femininity and sexuality as purely about fun and pleasure and "ignores the continuing complexities that exist for women in relation to sexuality, and the relationship between sexuality and reproduction". Fashion, she suggests, is not simply about pleasure, rather it is part of the greater cultural discourse that informs and constructs women's lives. Fawcett states that fashion and other avenues of cultural femininity instruct women to indulge in the pleasures of 'proper' self presentation while also instilling a greater sense of bodily detachment through sending an the overall message that women's bodies are deficient and always in need of work and improvement. Therefore, Fawcett argues that while fashion may be a pleasurable endeavour that enables women to 'reinvent' themselves, it must be analyzed in relation to the greater social tensions and pressures that are at work in the construction and negotiation of women's identities.

Joanne Hollows examination of "Feminism, femininity and popular culture" is the second study on the influence of fashion and beauty that I want to discuss. In her introduction, Hollows states that the meanings of femininity are not only created and recreated in different social contexts, but are also critiqued within particular historical moments. She uses the example of 'white middle class femininity' and notes how this form of femininity, while being privileged over other forms such as lesbian or working

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210 Ibid, pg.122.
211 Ibid, pg.124.
212 Ibid, pg.141.
213 Ibid, pg.145.
class femininity, is also dependent on and challenged by those femininities.\textsuperscript{215} In her analysis of fashion and beauty practices, Hollows cites a study by Angela Parrington that identifies and challenges typical feminist perceptions of women's relationship with fashion. First, Parrington argues that women's participation in fashion and beauty practices does not mean they are simply reproducing the dominant meanings of consumer culture, rather that they are using these venues in the negotiation of their identities.\textsuperscript{216} Second, she states that any analysis of the meanings associated with particular fashions must involve an examination of not only the clothes themselves, but also how they are used.\textsuperscript{217} Hollows uses the example of the stiletto heel to illustrate this second point. Typically, in feminist literature, the stiletto is regarded as a symbol of women's oppression, but Hollows notes that this impression ignores other possible interpretations such as demonstrating female power or assertive sexuality.\textsuperscript{218}

Hollows states that while women's fashions may appear to be homogenous, such an interpretation "misses the complex decisions, and the creativity, pleasure and pain that negotiation of a feminine 'look' demands".\textsuperscript{219} Like Fawcett, she suggests that fashion enables women to experience themselves in potentially new ways, and thus through fashion women are able to explore different forms of feminine identity. For example, "power dressing provided the professional working woman 'with a means to fashion herself as a career woman' and, therefore, produce a new 'feminine' self". Femininity or, more specifically, fashion and beauty practices, involves not only the production of a 'feminine' self but also, within that process, struggle over gendered meanings and identities.

Both Fawcett and Hollows provide useful examples of women's negotiation with their identities through 'forays' with fashion and address the need for feminists to seriously consider these forays, rather than simply dismissing them. However, my overall sentiment is that Hollows gives too much weight to the pleasures and transformative potential of fashion and her work lacks the social context that Fawcett provides. She states that women's engagements with fashion are complex and involve

\textsuperscript{215} Ibid
\textsuperscript{216} Ibid, pg.151.
\textsuperscript{217} Ibid, pg.152.
\textsuperscript{218} Ibid
both pleasure and pain, but she seems to address the societal dynamics of class, race, and sexuality in a simplistic manner, as if they are easily negotiated. For example, when she relates the struggles young Asian British women have in negotiating two identities, her analysis seems more of a celebration of new 'hybrid' identities that have potential to challenge societal categories than an understanding of the, at times, immense difficulty of 'living' this reality, such as Dwyer describes.\textsuperscript{220}

The last two studies I want to discuss are both from collections of Third Wave feminist writing and have been helpful in situating my own research questions and ideas. Both "Third Wave Agenda" by Jennifer Drake and Leslie Heywood and "To Be Real" by Rebecca Walker stress the need for feminists to explore the diversity and inherent contradictions in women's lives. Their writings are specific to the socio-cultural context in which they have grown up, a paradoxical space of progress in women's rights alongside societal backlash against feminism. They are exploring feminist debates and tensions concerning identity and the potential for using personal struggles and experiences as the basis for feminist theory. Central to their work has been the recognition that while all young women are struggling to come to terms with their 'feminine' identities, their experiences are diverse, fragmented, and embody a lived messiness. This diversity has been adopted as a strategy that is meant to challenge societal attempts to "categorize and dismiss" difference.\textsuperscript{221} Third Wave feminist writing, based predominantly on critical discussion and analysis of personal testimonies, is trying to bridge the gap between theory and lived experience. Many of the writers argue that feminism has excluded their voices and denied their experiences of pleasure, agency, and 'difference', particularly in relation to popular culture and 'femininity'. Heywood and Drake state that Third Wave feminists are 'pop culture babies' and part of their struggle necessarily involves "an often conscious knowledge of the ways in which (they) are compelled and constructed by the very things that undermine (them)".\textsuperscript{222} These ideas link up with and are situated within greater feminist discussions on agency and the challenges

\textsuperscript{219} Ibid
\textsuperscript{220} Ibid, pg.157, and Dwyer, Claire, "Veiled Meanings: Young British Muslim Women And The Negotiation of Differences", pg.13.
\textsuperscript{221} Walker, Rebecca To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism, Anchor Books: New York 1995, pg.xxxix.
of trying to understand and theorize lived experiences of femininity. Third Wave feminists are aware and critical of the oppressive nature of 'femininity', but they argue that as a dominant socializing force it is impossible to 'get outside of it'. Feminist analyses should thus focus on exploring how femininity has shaped women's experiences of subordination as well as of pleasure and agency.

Third wave feminism is quite diverse in nature and I have only mentioned work that relates directly to my study. While I find some third wave writing problematic because it embraces aspects of femininity without providing a strong critical analysis or explanation of the larger social context, overall I find the focus on diversity and contradiction useful and powerful. Exploring how women 'embody' femininity provides a deeper understanding of how social dynamics are experienced, sustained, and potentially shifted.

Conclusion

There has been a significant amount of literature on femininity and the nature of women's role in the construction of their gendered identities. I have outlined the major sources as well as highlight the debates and tensions, within feminist literature on these themes. Feminist theorists have approached the 'doing' of femininity in different ways. I have explored the main areas of emphasis according to three themes: the disciplining of women's bodies, theorizing agency, and negotiating femininity. Drawing on feminist and Foucauldian theories, the literature on disciplining focuses on the process whereby bodies are inscribed and shaped by dominant gender ideologies. Femininity is not perceived as something that is 'forcibly imposed' on women, rather it is understood as everyday practices that women are actively engaged in. This discussion is predominantly theoretical in nature and does not include women's lived experiences in the analysis of gender performance. The literature on agency and negotiation, however, situates theoretical examinations of women's 'feminine' identities in the voices and experiences of women. Some of the tensions that have been explored by feminists with respect to

femininity involve how to theorize agency. Susan Bordo, for example, argues that while performing particular feminine practices may be empowering for individual women, feminists must focus on the cultural context and overall social meaning of these practices. Other feminists state that the diversity of individual women's experiences of femininity illustrates its constructed nature and thus offers the possibility of transforming dominant gender norms. All of these discussions, involving theoretical and lived gender performance, and questioning the role of agency in the construction of gendered identities, have deepened my understanding of the theories on femininity, and consequently have aided my research into how young women negotiate femininity. The following chapter explores several main themes raised by the four women in the group interview. These themes are: performing femininity, the influence of socio-cultural location, and strategic embodiments. In my analysis, I consider how these themes extend, challenge and deepen our understanding of the feminist literature explored in this chapter.
Chapter Four: Negotiating Femininity: Analysis of a Pilot Study

"In terms of, I don't know, in terms of like clothes or whatever, that is more representing yourself, that is kind of how I see it, so I don't necessarily, I am sure that there are ways or things that I could do that are more like femininity like um focused but I always think of it as, but I always think of it as just being yourself, unique, not male or female"

(Tara 2002)

"Everything I do, I am a woman, I mean, not according to society, but yeah, if I see myself as being a woman then anything I do is feminine"

(Janet 2002)

Femininity was not a clear or fixed concept for the women in the group interview; rather, their being and becoming 'feminine' was shaped by numerous and often ambiguous factors. How each of them interpreted, considered, and negotiated femininity demonstrates the contradictory and diverse influence it had on their identities. Femininity has been described as the "process through which women are gendered and become specific sorts of women", and is regarded as a central element of women's subjectivities. In the previous chapter, I examined and critiqued several theoretical interpretations of femininity. Within feminist and post-structural literature on femininity, there are two important conceptual threads: first, the interpretation of femininity as either oppressive or pleasurable for women and second, the 'abstract', theoretical approach versus 'real' or 'lived' experience approach. These theoretical discussions will be present throughout my analysis, providing a foundation from which to consider the women's experiences and viewpoints. How do women's lives provide insight into these theoretical considerations? How is femininity lived, experienced, and negotiated? These were the questions that I was interested in addressing and exploring in my discussions with the four women in the group interview. My goal in this chapter is to "analyze the ways in
which different forms of feminine identity are made to mean and (to explore) how these representations are lived.\textsuperscript{224} Inherent in this process is the problematizing of 'femininity.' In her study with working class women Beverly Skeggs found that:

"Unpacking the category femininity was useful as an exercise in seeing how the women were constrained in the interpretations, appearances, performances, and movements that they could make. This suggests that the (concept is) not necessarily redundant but rather that (it) may need continual modification and grounding to understand the specificities of lived experience."\textsuperscript{225}

As the introductory quotes by Janet and Tara suggest, how the women experienced femininity in their day to day lives was intricately tied to how they defined it, and consequently how, and if, they recognized themselves as 'feminine'. The group interview granted me a window into women's day-to-day experiences with femininity, enabling me to reflect on what meanings it held for them and how they negotiated femininity in relation to other aspects of their identities. Further, the women's contextual accounts provide insight into feminist deliberations with agency, oppression, pleasure, and identity. In particular, how the women defined and negotiated femininity, not only in terms of their attempts at different forms of recognition, but also in relation to their struggles to understand what being female means to each of them, informed feminist theoretical considerations of femininity.

In my analysis, I draw on and explore the main themes that arose from the group interview. These themes pertained to how femininity was performed; to what degree these women (as well as other women) should perform femininity; how specific locations, including social dynamics associated with certain places, influenced or shaped their performance; and the strategies the women deployed in negotiating their performances. Through the discussions on their performance of femininity, several other underlying themes were revealed. These involved the boundaries and 'taken for granted' aspects of femininity in women's everyday lives, as well as women's attempts to simultaneously distance themselves from femininity and identify as 'feminine'. My

\textsuperscript{224} Hollows, Joanne \textit{ Feminism, femininity and popular culture}, Manchester University Press: Manchester 2000, pg.32.
analysis examines three themes: Performing femininity, Influence of socio-cultural location on Performances, and Recognition and Definition.

Performing Femininity

The women's engagements with femininity can at best be described as contradictory in nature; some aspects of femininity were automatic or routine, and thus seemingly unchallenged or unconscious, others were clearly struggled over and problematised, and some were rejected outright. In response to so introductory considerations of what practices the women defined as feminine, two of the women's comments were indicative of the 'naturalness' of certain aspects of femininity.

"I find like when I do stuff like, whatever, doing your make-up or doing, getting your hair done, whatever, I'm not, I don't feel like, well at least consciously, I'm not oh I feel more feminine now, it's like no, I just feel good like or cleaner or I don't know..." (Susan 2002)

"Well, I think being clean, is one, like I don't know, taking care of yourself, not the make-up or stuff like that, but just general hygiene and exercising, whatever, you know, taking your calcium, stuff like that, that I would, yeah..." (Liz 2002)

Liz and Susan's comments about the inherent 'naturalness' or 'normalcy' of their bodily routines informs and brings to life Susan Bordo's and Sandra Bartky's theorizing about how women's bodies are disciplined through socio-cultural discourses to be 'feminine'. Bordo and Bartky both argue that the predominance of cultural messaging on the 'proper performance of femininity' shapes women's conceptions of how they should be or act. Utilizing Foucault's analysis of power and its disciplinary control of the body, Bordo and Bartky demonstrate that women are not forced to take up or perform femininity, rather they are socially and culturally disciplined to believe that femininity is the 'natural' performance of their subjectivities within our gendered society. Thus, as Bordo states, it is through the "organization and regulation of time, space, and movements of our daily
lives, our bodies are trained, shaped, and impressed with the stamp of prevailing historical forms of selfhood, desire, masculinity, femininity".226

Along with the perceived 'naturalness' of particular practices of bodily maintenance, the underlying ideas and knowledge of femininity that the women held and that informed their performances were thought to be 'natural' or simply 'personal taste'. For example, when Susan comments on the fact that she feels uncomfortable wearing a tank top because she has large breasts, she focuses on 'her' preference, rather than cultural messaging about the 'appropriate' 'feminine' body.

"And also I feel like, it's like I have big boobs and like if I am in a tank top that it's like somebody else could wear, I feel it looks slutty on me where it's like somebody else with smaller boobs is wearing the same thing I wouldn't have thought twice about it, but when it is on me, it's like I have cleavage which is like I can't help but I am not like forcing my boobs on like here (shows, points to her breasts) but it is still there and I feel like it looks..." (Susan 2002).

These underlying ideas were particularly evident in a conversation between Tara and Janet about 'personal' preference and style in relation to femininity.

"...I have always noticed, I mean I have friends who will dress and they'll look pretty good, I mean they are not wearing cheap anything or anything ill fitting or even too slutty but it's, they're not quite there because they sort of have this, sort of negative vibe coming, yeah, and so, that is certainly how it is for me..." (Tara 2002)

"But I mean that is different for every person, too like, when you say something too cheap or too slutty, or like..." (Janet 2002)

"For sure and I don't actually, I don't necessarily think how much one exposes of themselves is cheap and slutty, I just see a lot of things where it's either, like those white shoes, like fake leather, and big heels and they are really clunky, like they are not, aesthetically, personally, they are not aesthetically pleasing and when you put them on it..."

is all really disjointed, like that is kind of it, I mean if you are not a size zero and you are wearing a short skirt and a small top, that is okay, I am not offended by it but it's just more actually in terms of, well it's subjective but, my, in terms of good taste in what you do wear, that's what I always see coming up, that is what always makes me like, tsk tsk."

(Tara 2002)

"Do you think that is a good thing or a bad thing though?" (Janet 2002)

"That I have a reaction?...Oh I am sure, I've got issues, I know I do..." (Tara 2002)

"No, I am actually talking about a different matter, in like do you think that is a product of society or do you think people should wear...like what suits their body kind of thing"

(Janet 2002)

"Oh, no, I don't care, I don't care, it's really just a matter of good taste" (Tara 2002)

In relation to her study on femininity, Skeggs noted that: "(t)o construct a sense of autonomy through clothing a particular form of knowledge is required...(t)he women had learnt the distinctions between style and fashion, between looking good and looking tarty, between looking feminine and looking sexy. The women's knowledge of femininity was not just absorbed directly from the traditional textual sources of femininity (such as magazines, advertising, etc), rather, it was an amalgam of this and local knowledge". 227 Susan and Tara's personal conceptions of good taste and what looks cheap or slutty are strongly influenced by their individual social backgrounds in relation to popular cultural notions of femininity.

While femininity appeared to some degree to be a 'taken for granted' or unconscious element of the women's daily lives, in fact, to a much greater degree it was something over which the women continually struggled. The women talked with feelings of frustration about the strong influence that cultural conceptions of femininity had on them. In Skeggs' study, the women "did not want to be middle class even though some of (their) performative passings come to take on a quality of being". She thus concludes that

"processes of being and becoming are held together with processes of not being and refusal". Similarly, some of the women in my study found that, despite their efforts to just 'be' themselves, the desire to appear 'feminine', and thus engage in particular practices was at times overwhelming:

"...it's so hard because I mean part of you just wants to say, well you know it's not a big deal, I want to make myself presentable sometimes, I mean I don't wear make-up to work, you know I can go out without a bra sometimes, not too often but sometimes, but I know, but you get swept up with it..." (Tara 2002)

"Like I oftentimes feel like I'm, when I wear make up, I don't like to wear it as much cause I was in such an environment when I was younger, it is just um I am wearing a mask you know, like I am looking from inside a mask outside and I hated it like for the longest time, now I am trying to you know, just wear stuff that is just simple and...when I wear more make up even though I was like oh damn do I, you know, that certain way that you behave to and stuff like that, a lot of crap comes in, you can't help it, but it is so tempting not to be a part of it and then yeah, especially when you want to impress somebody, you are like, oh, do I look pretty, just cause again the whole mainstream thing kicks in, you are like oh damn". (Liz 2002)

Femininity was in many ways experienced as an instinctual embodiment; engaging with femininity involved behaviours or practices that some of the women fell back on and seemingly accepted as part of being a 'woman'. As Bordo articulates, "our conscious politics, social commitments, strivings for change may be undermined and betrayed by the life of our bodies, not the craving, instinctual body imagined by Plato, Augustine, and Freud, but what Foucault calls the 'docile' body, regulated by norms of cultural life". However, as is suggested in the women's comments above, performing femininity does not "automatically lead to the comfortable take up of that position; rather it may be a straight forward acting out of a necessary performance". The women were aware of the need to perform femininity in order to pass socially and be deemed 'acceptable' in

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228 Ibid, pg.165.
229 Bordo, S. Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and The Body, pg.165.
230 Ibid, pg.165.
Western society. Remark ing that femininity can be 'so hard', or make one feel 'damn' I am caught up in it again', does not indicate to me an unconscious or 'natural' engagement with femininity. Rather these sentiments suggest, as Kathy Davis noted in relation to women who undergo cosmetic surgery, that while women who engage in 'feminine' practices "are complying with the cultural constraints of femininity, they do not necessarily agree with them".\(^{231}\) Indeed, the frustration with which Tara spoke about what she perceived to be 'excessive' engagements with femininity reveals that while she, to some degree, willingly engages in 'feminine' practices, she does not agree that women should adhere to the cultural requirements of femininity all of the time:

"Lots of opinions. I, you know, it has gotten to the point right now like seriously, when I go to the mall, like to run an errand, I just have such contempt and I don't know why, there is some underlying issue, such contempt for the, a lot of the girls that I see at the mall. Just how they are dressed, just how you have to get dressed up for the mall and just like the clothes and the image and I mean, I am not, I mean I don't not get dressed up, I'll put on my make-up, I'll put on a short skirt, I'll go out and I'll go dance or whatever, but just at all times and to the extent, it's amazing, the tan, the bleach blonde, make-up and earrings." (Tara 2002)

The annoyance embedded in the above comment suggests the uneasiness of Tara's engagements with femininity. More broadly, her remarks demonstrate that the options of embodiment available for women are bound by how other women engage with the cultural ideal of femininity. Tara is annoyed because she feels that women who 'dress up' to go to the mall are being excessive in their performance of femininity, but more importantly, because she now feels pressured to perform to that degree as well.

While a main component of each of the women's subjectivities, femininity was not easily occupied or wholly accepted. Central to the women's attempts to negotiate between the cultural constraints of femininity and their own individual (albeit socially influenced) positions was the establishment of boundaries on their engagements with femininity. I now move on to explore how socio-cultural location shaped the women's

\(^{231}\) Davis, Kathy "ReMaking the She-Devil: A Critical Look at Feminist Approaches to Beauty", in Hypatia, Vol.6, No.2 1991, pg.35.
performances of femininity as well as consider what shifting location means in relation to
the cultural meanings associated with femininity.

Influence of Socio-cultural Location

The influence of socio-cultural location on the women's engagements with and
performances of femininity was one of the predominant themes in the group interview
discussions. Importantly, the women identified places where they felt a greater need to
'be feminine' as well as how certain locations altered others' expectations or perceptions
of them. Socio-location then, refers not only to specific places, but also to the social
dynamics, and corresponding expectations and pressures, the women felt were present in
different environments. While not always specifically stated as such, the women's
discussion suggested that the different feelings and pressures they felt in different
environments were directly related to their social position and background (ie their class,
etnicity, age and sexuality). The experiences the women recounted during the session
revealed that "the women made feminine performances appropriate to the situations they
were in". Work and school were the two main locations that the women spoke about
as specific examples. Both Susan and Liz talked about work, in particular how they felt
policing by other women in relation to their appearance and the 'proper' portrayal of
femininity for the workplace.

"I used to work in retail selling like suits, like high end suits and stuff like that, it was so
funny cause it is obviously not like something I know anything about but it was like on the
list of what you need to do, like employee just kind of, like there was rules about like
looking like, basically it's like they said nicely made up which to me hints that you should
be wearing make up and like it was just weird to me that like, that they would actually
write that out. I can understand them kind of suggest, I don't know, just the environment
itself gave me that impression but like to have it actually written down to say, have your
hair up or brushed, it was just so weird, like to have the nerve...(and further on in the
discussion)...like I would come, like everyday, she would be like, oh you have lost weight,

232 Skeggs, B. Formations of Class and Gender, pg.115.
in a like good happy like, not like oh are you okay, are you losing weight which isn't going to be you know, but she would just be so happy about it...and then it would be like, oh look you are wearing make up today, oh you look so nice that is like, opposed to normal when you look like a piece of crap like, which is like in brackets, that is what I feel like." (Susan 2002)

"Like, sometimes, you think that mostly male figures are just influencing these rules and all this stuff and you know, I met this woman anyway um so I was wearing sort of a tank top but with a broader sleeve or whatever and then it was hot so I too off my jacket or whatever and I was just sitting and then we were just talking and then she was like uh, maybe you should put the jacket on and I was like, huh, you know, I was like shocked, you know she was like no you know cause you know when you have, cause I do filing and stuff for her right and she said it and I was like...you know when you bend over and stuff, I was like what the hell kind of reasoning is that, like am I exposed? Like, it was not like down here (demonstrates) and any given t-shirt or whatever, you bend, you do, and they know I have boobs, what the hell is the problem?" (Liz 2002)

Liz and Susan's comments demonstrate that a specific portrayal of femininity was expected of them in their respective jobs; wearing make up and being thin were thought to be 'appropriate' for a high-end retail store, whereas wearing 'revealing' clothing was deemed 'unsuitable' for an office environment. What seems implied within their comments is that it was not simply or even predominantly a higher authority dictating this 'dress code', but rather the preferences of female colleagues. In their study on merchant banks McDowell and Court stated that; "power relations in the workplace are based not solely on bureaucratic domination from above but also through the manipulation of patterns of desire, fantasy, pleasure and self-image, in which gendered notions of appropriate behaviour and expressions of sexuality in this wide sense are important mechanisms of particular norms of acceptable workplace behaviour". The suggestive commentary of their colleagues, whether consciously or not, is part of the cultural discourses that discipline women's embodiment of femininity. By encouraging certain practices and discouraging other behaviours, the proper workplace persona is impressed
upon employees/colleagues. Both Liz and Susan reacted to what they felt was an
insulting and constricting pressure on their femininities; Susan no longer works at the
same store and Liz continued to wear tank tops to assert herself (and her body) in her
workplace. Through their workplace experiences Liz and Susan questioned their
engagements with femininity and negotiated what they felt was 'acceptable' for them.
Their dialogue about these experiences demonstrates how their performance of femininity
was shaped by the commentary, and underlying assumptions, of their colleagues.

The underlying expectations of many work environments effectively "demand a
performance by an aesthetically pleasing body", which, for women, translates into a
specific, usually explicitly heterosexual, self-image".234 This 'desired' body is achieved
through dress codes about things like jewellery and make up.235 In connecting up with
Liz and Susan's discussion, Janet talked about decisions she had made concerning work,
specifically about her negotiation between the embodiment of femininity that she was
comfortable with and what she perceived was expected or demanded in many
workplaces.

"But I mean you hire who you don't need to enforce, like I decided like five years ago that
I'd never get a job like that cause I decided that I was going to stop changing my
appearance to do that, ....that is fine cause I don't really want to work at a job where they
want me to be something I am not...But I think maybe I am being reactive to that and
being less feminine, where I am supposed to be more feminine, just in my own, like in
those situations where they want me to be more feminine I try to be less feminine to say
that I don't have to be more feminine cause you want me to, yeah". (Janet 2002)

Janet feels there is, or would be, an expectation on her to be 'more feminine' in certain
workplaces, to the degree that she would be expected to be 'someone she is not'. Further
on, she mentioned that one of the consequences of her decision not to change her
appearance for a job is that she will not be hired to work in certain fields, such as the
service industry, because she is perceived as not 'feminine' enough. Janet's embodiment

233 McDowell and Court "Performing work: bodily representations in merchant banks", in Environment
and Planning D: Society and Space, Volume 12, 1994, pg.733.
235 Ibid, pg.733 and 740.
of femininity has developed out of her reaction to specific socio-cultural locations, because she perceived that certain workplaces would require her to be 'more feminine'; she was determined to be 'less feminine', even while recognizing the potential consequences of this decision.

The second socio-cultural location that was highlighted in the group interview discussion was UBC campus. Each of the women identified different aspects of being at UBC that influenced their engagements with femininity. One key theme was how they felt perceived and judged by others.

"...the first week at UBC, and I mean there is a couple, me and my friends all notice which is like wow, everyone is sort of dressed up and I mean, you just, you felt, more like geez, you know I feel kind of bad I mean, and I wore a skirt like...I felt I had to and my mother...she was like, what are you getting all dressed up for and it's just like well, well, but I mean we kind of joked about that like I guess to make us not feel bad we, we'd kind of say well, yeah not everyone went to a West Van private school like that is kind of that influence of money and whatnot that seems really pervasive". (Tara 2002)

In her desire to fit in at UBC, Tara felt pressured to dress up and adhere to what appeared to be the 'appropriate' level of femininity. She states that the 'influence of money' was really pervasive at UBC, which seems to suggest that the feminine ideal at UBC had specific class connotations for her. Bringing together Tara's discussion of 'good taste' (which I mentioned earlier in my analysis), with her comments above about the 'influence of money', emphasizes the role that class plays in her negotiation of femininity. While Tara did not reveal her specific class position, it was evident in her remarks that she wanted to uphold and give off a particular image or status. Tara seemed to want to position herself as someone with 'good taste', someone who knew how to dress 'properly' and would not be characterized as looking 'cheap or slutty'. Further, she felt uneasy about her identity when she came to UBC because, as she stated, 'money seemed more pervasive', which made her question her femininity, in particular the clothing she felt she should wear to be 'accepted'. Utilizing Skeggs' discussion of recognition and
disidentification of class as a foundation for my analysis of Tara’s comments, it seems apparent that her class position "was the omnipresent underpinning which informed and circumscribed (her) ability to be".236

Janet had a different, but comparable experience in coming to UBC. Similarly to Tara, she felt there is an emphasis on appearance, in particular that her appearance was often deemed to be a defining characteristic by others.

"I feel really tokenized at UBC, like my roommates have said to me that, that people have come up to them being like, I saw you walking down the street with the girl with the mohawk the other day, and every single one of them always remembers my name and they've said things to them like, oh invite that Janet girl to the party, like it's so ridiculous to me, it is solely based on my looks...I have had so many people come up to me at UBC, so much more than anywhere else..." (Janet 2002)

Within the social environment at UBC, Janet felt that her embodiment of femininity was judged by others to be her central and defining attribute, rather than being regarded as one of many facets of her identity. As mentioned earlier, Janet noted that when she is in situations or environments where people are judging her by placing their ideals of femininity on her, she reacts by embodying the opposite; when expected to be 'more feminine', she tries to be 'less feminine'. Taking this into account, people's remarks and efforts to identify her by her appearance may well incite Janet to alter her performance of femininity while at UBC.

In discussing UBC as a specific socio-cultural location, all of the women talked about the role that appearance played in their daily interactions and activities. While I have used two of the women's experiences as examples, I want to discuss one last point in relation to Susan and Liz's comments more generally. In both Liz and Susan's comments about UBC, they indirectly spoke about underlying expectations that existed in relation to femininity. While Liz felt "free to wear whatever (she) want(ed)" to the gym and to lectures, she also remarked that "I don't feel that I have to please anyone else, even though it's, that's what they prefer around there..." which hints at the greater social expectations she felt at UBC. Susan found that within her chosen fields of study,

236 Skeggs, B. Formations of Class and Gender, pg.76
women's studies and sociology, there were pressures on her to embody specific characteristics and perform a certain way. Susan felt that if she dressed up or wore her sorority shirt to one of her classes she would get a negative reaction from her classmates, and, as a result, she felt the need to "remain as casual as possible". She noted that, "liking something mainstream puts me outside the norm in like those kinds of contexts". Overall, UBC influenced the women's negotiations with femininity in different, but comparable, ways. Appearance, or more specifically how each of the women appeared in contrast to the 'feminine' expectations they felt were present at UBC, played a significant role in how they identified and presented themselves while on campus.

Before I conclude this section on socio-cultural location, I explore one final example that came up in the group interview. Liz moved to Canada from Sri Lanka prior to her coming to UBC, I believe during her teenage years. She discussed how this transition had a strong influence on her identity, in particular on her embodiment of femininity.

"...back home uh, where I was in Sri Lanka anyways, you know we weren't expected to wear clothes that were revealing, I mean...we never wore like you know tank tops...that was considered slutty and everything and so that was a huge part of my, my sister was little when we came here so suddenly I saw same family but she was different, she was dressed up, she would you know wear make-up and stuff...she would do things differently and I was like hey, is that okay, and we would talk about it and stuff like that, but yeah, I think that's um, that's huge, like that's, it pretty much inhibited me from being a lot of stuff..." (Liz 2002)

In moving from Sri Lanka to Canada, Liz was forced to negotiate between the dominant meanings attached to appearance that she had grown up with and those of her new cultural context. While Liz does not talk about the racist stereotypes in Western countries of South Asian women as "passive victims of oppressive cultures", I cannot but feel that her experience of being policed about her appearance at work (as discussed previously) would have been influenced by their existence.237 The attempt made by her colleague to

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discipline her appearance, involving a piece of clothing she would not have felt comfortable wearing prior to moving, directly attacked and/or insulted her embodiment of femininity.

Socio-cultural location was a predominant factor in the development and negotiation of the women's 'feminine' identities. Different environments, and the correlating social pressures, influenced the women's performance of femininity and made them think about their individual preferences and levels of comfort. Their experiences at work and at UBC illustrate how "women take up, try on and discard positions of femininity" depending on the social context in which they are in.\textsuperscript{238} As well, their discussions suggest that "feminine constructions had appropriate times and places", for example, both Liz and Susan felt it was inappropriate or unnecessary to dress up for lectures.\textsuperscript{239} The women embodied different forms or degrees of femininity within different contexts, which suggests that their identities were fluid and diverse, rather than stable or fixed. By exploring how their identities were shaped by different environments, I obtained a greater understanding of the women's negotiations with femininity as well as how other factors, such as class, ethnicity, and discipline, impacted their lives.

\textit{Strategic Embodiments}

Within this last section I explore the strategies the women deployed in their negotiations with femininity. The women were conscious of the social constraints imposed on them of the 'feminine' expectations of our culture, and the "limitations on how they c(ould) be".\textsuperscript{240} With that awareness ever present in their minds, they engaged in "many constructive strategies to generate a sense of themselves with value".\textsuperscript{241} My analysis of these includes how the women each defined and conceived of femininity, as well as specific strategies they deployed.

I asked the women to define femininity in two different ways, in relation to what practices they would define as feminine, and what they felt the difference was between

\textsuperscript{238} Skeggs, B. \textit{Formations of Class and Gender}, pg.98.
\textsuperscript{239} Ibid, pg.108.
\textsuperscript{240} Skeggs, B. \textit{Formations of Class and Gender}, pg.162.
\textsuperscript{241} Ibid
the cultural ideal of femininity and their own, lived notion of femininity. What came out of these definitions was a mix of biological or essential 'femaleness', individualistic and inherent identity over and above gender, and recognition of the huge influence of Western culture.

"Like no guys, I usually don't think about it as that was really feminine, but I could think of things that I don't know any guy who's done that. Like on, um Canada day, I had my eyelashes tinted and my eyebrows dyed and I don't think one needs it, I mean sure, there is always people who do everything right but, in that kind of sense, it is a weird thing to do and like there is no reason, like I can't really even think of the reason but I don't know, I like, it's fun for me I like it, but I mean, I guess it's the kind of thing where it's ridiculous when you really think about it, it's such a weird thing to do. I think it's feminine in the sense that, just in the sense that only women I know would do that but I don't know why, like I don't, doesn't make me feel more feminine." (Susan 2002)

"I think for me ideally it will reach the point where, like I said before, everything I do is expressing my femininity and is feminine because I am female and because I identify as being biologically female and I identify as gender female and so I can like burp louder than almost any guy and I'll have a burping contest in public and I don't give a shit and regardless of what it is like don't tell me that it wasn't very feminine cause I did it and I'm a girl..." (Janet 2002)

Both of these definitions of femininity are rooted in biological or essential notions of 'being female', and also contain a sense of ownership and self-recognition. Susan's remarks suggest recognition of society's gender roles, but also her sense of pleasure within that dynamic. She knows that there is no specific value to be gained from tinting one's eyelashes, she even finds the practice to be ridiculous. Despite this view, however, she continues to engage in this practice because of the fun she gains from it. Susan, though aware of the gendered implications of dying one's eyebrows or tinting one's eyelashes, which seems apparent in the almost guilty manner in which she discusses them, nonetheless engages in these practices because of the personal benefit. How is one to interpret or understand these feelings and actions? Susan's comments bring up important points that have been discussed by many feminists in recent years. By
engaging in practices such as dying one's eyebrows, it could be argued that Susan is engaging in practices that perpetuate women's oppression. Tinting one's eyebrows is a part of the process of disciplining one's body to become 'feminine', which has a greater social effect of making women feel that their bodies and selves are inadequate and flawed. However, one can also read Susan's engagements with feminine practices quite differently; in fact, there are a diversity of ways these engagements could be read. We need to consider the meanings behind her performance; is getting her eyebrows dyed something she does before a special date or is it a weekend treat with her girlfriends? Susan stated that she gets enjoyment out of these practices, and thus one assumes that having them done makes her feel good (better?) about herself. Or, is she aware of societal constraints on women, trying to make the best of the societal dynamic in which she lives and thus taking advantage of what she does enjoy? If the latter is the case, would her efforts not change the meanings attached to 'feminine practices'; would they shift from making women feel inadequate and flawed to feeling good about their bodies? My research did not fully probe these questions, although in my research they highlight the importance of considering personal enjoyment in relation to societal context, within a situated and lived experience. As Bordo states, "exposure and productive cultural analysis of such contradictory and mystifying relations...are possible only if the analysis includes attention to and interpretation of the...practical body", the actual lived experience.

Janet's discussion of femininity, like Susan's, was situated in biological conceptions of gender; everything she does or expresses is feminine because she was born 'female'. However, Janet's conception of 'feminine' goes beyond traditional cultural characteristics and encompasses (or seeks to encompass) a much broader palette of possible attitudes and ways of being. Femininity, for her, was a negotiation between societies prescribed gender roles and her ownership of 'feminine' embodiments outside of the boundaries of those roles. Conscious of the fact that we are "in a culture that is in fact constructed by gender duality" and that "one cannot simply be 'human'", Janet utilizes the cultural code of 'female' to attempt to alter its meaning and challenge the confines of

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societal gender norms. Going back to Janet's example then, by identifying as 'female' and engaging in practices typically socially associated with 'males', such as burping loudly, Janet is attempting to expand the confines of 'feminine' behaviours and, consequently, of what it means to be 'male' and 'female' in our society. What I find particularly interesting, and potentially transformative, about Janet's definition is that her conception of femininity is rooted in essentialist and biological notions of sex and gender in a way that inherently seeks to disrupt and challenge them. This strategy is unique and I feel challenges the literature on femininity because it utilizes essentialist foundations while directly challenging them, with the overall effect or desire being to alter the meanings culturally associated with gender and sex. Many feminists argue that we need to do away with the concepts of sex and gender as the cultural and historical associations embedded within them concerning gender duality, effectively mean that other identities and bodies are not allowed to exist. Theorists that do argue for the strategic use of sex and gender, such as Susan Bordo, have done so in order to deconstruct the cultural meanings these terms hold and have not postulated using their essentialist foundation as a means of shifting or transforming them.

Tara and Liz's discussion about what being 'feminine' meant to them in relation to the cultural ideal of femininity was focused on their negotiations between their outer appearance and their internal feelings and sense of self.

"...I guess um, mainstream they consider like um things like oh you know if you wear this you are feminine and for me it doesn't matter what I wear personally it is how I feel and what I am doing and you know I am always, um, how I feel as a you know woman or, it doesn't yeah, it's more like internal stuff, it's not external stuff that defines my femininity, according to me anyways, but mainstream is different, yeah, it's just how I feel that day regardless of what I am wearing..." (Liz 2002)

"...I wear make-up, I will put on skirts and dresses and I can't think, but I don't wear jewelry usually, almost never, I don't usually wear high heels, something like that you

243 Ibid, pg.182.
know, but I mean, so on some, in some ways I am presenting myself, but there's....but I think it has to do with sometimes I do some things that I would define as feminine and I do it to feel feminine and to look feminine but I think if you have your own understanding that I mean, well this is what they are all pushing on me and I agree with this, I don't agree with that, then you can kind of have that sort of peace about it. Like I don't really worry, sometimes I do, but I don't for the most part, how much of it is like my desire to present myself as opposed to society imposing". (Tara 2002)

In both of these comments there is an attempt to make a distinction between their individual sense of sense of self and the roles or characteristics they have been socialized to accept and embody. Their desire to claim an identity that is separate from cultural influences is tied to the fact that "people don't like to think that they are pawns of astute advertisers or even that they are responding to social norms". However, as Bordo suggests, it is "hard to account for most of (people's) choices...outside of the context of current cultural norms". How does one effectively separate what is 'internal' and what is 'external' or what is self determined as opposed to culturally influenced? Liz and Tara's negotiations between their 'individual' desires and societal influences are not founded on a clear cut knowledge of how and where the two differ, rather they are based upon a sense of understanding and gut feeling of what is right for them.

Lise Nelson states that "subjects can be constituted through hegemonic discourses of gender, race, and sexuality while remaining reflexive of, and (potentially) intervene in, that process." While the women's definitions of femininity are demonstrative of their critical reflections on the social processes within which they are embedded, it is through their engagements in femininity that their ability to intervene in cultural processes and to challenge meanings associated with femininity becomes possible. Specifically, the strategies the women deployed in their embodiments of femininity indicate their simultaneous awareness of the cultural 'feminine' ideal and struggle to make femininity meaningful in their everyday experiences.

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247 Ibid
Conscious of society’s gendered expectations of women, such as shaved legs and wearing dresses, Janet actively rejects these embodiments as a way to challenge the meanings they hold. By identifying herself as feminine while rejecting ‘mainstream’ femininity, Janet creates a possible disruption of culturally defined gender codes. Janet’s femininity has developed through her continual assessment of what she doesn’t want - from her parents’ relationship, to societal pressures about relationships and sexuality. Also embedded within Janet’s strategic embodiment of femininity is her class awareness:

"...class is huge in terms of femininity, and a million other things, but I mean you can’t establish the proper level of femininity if you don’t have the money to do it..." (Janet 2002)

Thus, her engagements with femininity stem from her understanding of the cultural meanings associated with being ‘feminine’, such as class status and heterosexual expectations, and her desire to challenge and disrupt their continual reconstitution.

Liz and Susan each deployed strategies that were more subtly performed, with the intent of resisting pressures imposed upon them at a more local level.

"My older sister is like way more like, she is just like together all the time and like she works at...and is all corporate like suits and stuff and like as we were growing up she would always be like can you please put your hair up like put it in a pony tail, can you please do this or whatever and I would always be like, I would just make it worse...where
you know what I mean she would just be like to get dressed up to go somewhere and then it's just like no like half the time I wore my most casual clothing like just to prove a point that you asked, like it's so rude to ask me to do it that it is like I have to just counter act it because it is so, you know what I mean, so frustrating..." (Susan 2002)

And Liz, in response to a colleague asking her to cover herself up by putting her sweater back on (as discussed earlier), said;

"...I don't believe you told me that and I was like really pissed off and so for the next few weeks or whatever I wore like you know a tank top..." (Liz 2002)

Both Liz and Susan are acting in defiance of the desires and social expectations of other women in their lives. Through their actions, they are pushing others, as well as themselves, to re-consider and deconstruct social norms, such as the expectation that women should get dressed up when they go out, that is often assumed and goes unchallenged. Conscious of the cultural role that women are supposed to engage in, Susan and Liz's ownership of their bodies and their 'feminine' identities demonstrates their struggle to shift these engagements to make them more reflective of, and meaningful in, their lives.

As I have mentioned above, Tara's engagements with femininity are uneasy and fluctuate (as they do with most of us), depending on the social environment she is in. She seems to be cautious about how she performs femininity because on the one hand, she does not want to appear to be obsessed with 'feminine' or 'beauty' rituals, but on the other, she wants to present herself 'well', given social and cultural expectations of women.

"I definitely feel, I mean I don't feel un-feminine, like not shave my legs cause I'm pretty, I mean I can go months without it and, I wear make-up a bit more frequently, but I actually, if I find that like oh no, I need make-up, like I can't go out looking like this, I will purposely not put on make-up, sort of thing, cause I don't want to get too attached to sort of that image kind of thing, but um I definitely, once you shave your legs, you know, you are kind of like, like that commercial (demonstrates running her hand up her
Tara seems to be testing herself. She wants to ensure that she can go without make-up or shaving her legs as a way to prove to herself that she is not a 'zombie' or 'cultural dope'. I think many women struggle with this, in their different ways, as part of the negotiation of their identities. It is important to remember, however, as Bordo notes, that "to act consciously and responsibly means understanding the culture we live in, even if it requires acknowledging that we are not always 'in charge'" and "(t)hat we are not always in charge does not mean we are 'dopes'".\footnote{Bordo, S. Twilight Zones: The Hidden Life Of Cultural Images From Plato To O.J., University of California Press: Berkeley 1997, pg.50-1.} By not wearing make-up when she starts to feel she needs to wear it, Tara is trying to 'stay in control' of her femininity even though she recognizes (and states at several moments in the group interview) that this is not always possible. Tara's make-up strategy also speaks to her desire to engage in 'feminine' practices 'for the right reasons' rather than because she feels she has to. She is aware of cultural representations of women and of the influence they have on her, but does not want that influence to fully dictate her embodiment of femininity.

Conclusion

For the four women in the group interview, negotiating femininity was a strategic embodiment, shaped by socio-cultural location, personal experiences and desires, cultural expectations, and general feelings of comfort. All of the women discussed the influences and pressures of mainstream femininity in their lives and how they attempted to, subtly and directly, challenge social norms imposed on them. Their experiences demonstrate that their embodiments of femininity are not either solely pleasurable or oppressive, they are both. Rejecting certain aspects of 'ideal' femininity, while not easy or always comfortable, was at times a preferable and more meaningful embodiment for them. At other moments, critically engaging in traditionally 'feminine' practices, such wearing make-up or reading fashion magazines, was a way to enjoy being 'feminine' while still...
being conscious of its limitations and frustrations. In my attempt to link up theoretical arguments about agency and femininity with my analysis of the group interview, I found Ann Brooks’ citation of Sheridan's definition of agency useful. Sheridan contends that agency involves two components; first, "there is the sense of people producing meaning rather than passively consuming it, through their exchange with cultural commodities, and second, there is a concept of political agency implied in notions of struggle and contestation, resistance and subversion".  

I found the women engaged with both components. They were not simply being (or not) 'feminine' for the sake of it; they were struggling, resisting, and embodying femininity to try to make it meaningful in their everyday lives. Conceptions of agency, performativity, and subjectivity would not have been as influential in my analysis if I had not seen the ideas come to life in the women's discussions and stories. However, as it has been noted elsewhere, the women's ability to intervene or disrupt the cultural (re)production of femininity was far more limited in real life than in theory.

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Chapter Five: Conclusion

The focus of my thesis has been an exploration of how young women negotiate femininity in their everyday lives. This exploration was situated in and has grown out of my own considerations and negotiations with femininity. I have struggled between my knowledge and awareness of the constraints put upon women by and through femininity, and the actual, physical difficulties of trying to challenge the cultural feminine ideal or to embody an identity that is not gendered. Central to my research has been the examination of feminist literature that explores how women experience femininity and considers how it is reproduced and sustained within Western culture. Discussions of women's embodiments of femininity pivot around how theorists conceptualize women's ability to intervene in the construction of their identities. Within the literature, the main research problematic focused on how to theorize, as well as recognize, femininity as both a socializing agent that shapes women's sense of self and an aspect of their identity that they are able to negotiate. My analysis of the main areas of emphasis within the literature gave rise to three themes that depict the different, but often overlapping, theoretical positions on femininity. The first one is rooted in Foucauldian and social constructionist theory, and suggests that women are disciplined to embody femininity. 'Appropriate' feminine behaviours are inscribed onto women's bodies through their socialization in and corresponding engagement with prevailing historical and cultural notions of femininity. The second theme attempts to theorize, and in turn recognize, the agency that women enact in the development of their identities. Analyses of agency explore why women engage with some feminine practices and not others, as well as question the meanings and feelings' women invest in and gain from femininity. The third theme addresses the notion of agency, in a sense more broadly, with respect to how women negotiate their ever-changing identities in relation to social as well as individual pressures and circumstances. This final theme also includes attempts to re-theorize the

notion of 'women's experience' to incorporate the multiple and diverse aspects of women's identities.

The group interview informed this analysis by providing a glimpse of how femininity as an embodiment is taken up, performed, and conceived of by women. The women's discussion deepened my understanding of the theoretical tensions and areas of emphasis in the literature. The group interview also offered insight into how femininity is made meaningful in everyday contexts. The notion of disciplining was addressed within the group interview in relation to social contexts and taken for granted characteristics of femininity. The women stated that in particular environments, such as the workplace, they felt pressured to be 'more' feminine, and that this pressure, while often implicit rather than overt, was intensified by other women's reactions to, and effectively monitoring of, their femininity. These findings support and enhance the literature by demonstrating how women's engagements with femininity are enacted in conjunction with their response to the policing of other women's identities. Another main aspect of the group interview was how each of the four women defined femininity. In their definitions, the women made a clear distinction between the cultural ideal and their personal conception of femininity. This distinction is indicative of their attempts to negotiate and shift what femininity means, while at the same time remaining cognizant of the cultural predominance and influence of a dominant discourse of femininity. Overall, my findings from the group interview demonstrate the importance of including lived experience within theoretical considerations of femininity.

The methodology I employed in my analytical review was to critically read the literature for the tensions within feminist theory on femininity. More specifically, I examined how women's engagements with or embodiments of femininity were perceived, and how notions of agency and experience were articulated and debated by different theorists. These considerations probed much deeper issues concerning the nature of identity and the degree of agency women are thought to have in the development of their identities. These discussions are drawn in part from feminists' questioning that femininity is always and only oppressive, as well as from their attempts to consider and give value to the pleasure women gain from traditionally feminine practices. In part this theoretical shift has stemmed from three ideological postulations. First, a rejection of
femininity often meant that priority and cultural weight was given to masculinity, which essentially re-asserts male superiority. Second, more broadly, postmodernism has influenced the deconstruction and analysis of gender within feminist theory, involving the examination and critique of the cultural meanings associated with femininity. Finally, the struggle by feminists influenced by postmodernism to theorize about the construction of women's identities, without undermining the women themselves.

The methodology concerning the group interview was focused on gaining insight into women's lived experiences in order to more effectively understand and critique the theoretical literature on femininity. The women's discussion enabled me to reflect on the areas main of emphasis within literature in the following ways. The women supported the literature on disciplining through their recognition of specific daily practices they engaged in that seemed 'natural' and 'normal', rather than feminine, to them. However, they also challenged this literature by demonstrating their ability to critically reflect on the cultural ideal of femininity. They employed strategies to subtly and directly alter the meanings associated with specific practices they engaged in, such as wearing tank tops or being in a sorority. The women discussed their engagements with femininity as both problematic and pleasurable. Their recognition that femininity had numerous, and at times contradictory, meanings for them strengthened my understanding of feminist work that has tried to interweave the two main approaches to femininity: as either oppressive or as potentially pleasurable. They were conscious of the strong influence that cultural expectations had on their lives, but also stressed their attempts to shift the meanings traditionally associated with femininity. Through the women's discussion and my critical review of the literature, the notion of one ideal or embodiment of femininity was replaced by multiple femininities. Women alter their engagements with femininity depending on whom they are with, where they are, and how they are feeling as well as in relation to their social positioning and background. Women's embodiments of femininity are contradictory and continually change throughout their lives. The women in the group interview demonstrated that there are multiple femininities, not only in relation to the differences between each of them, but also with respect to different socio-cultural locations they inhabit and stages in their lives.
My thesis has helped emphasize and advance three areas of analysis within feminist theory. First, explorations of how women negotiate femininity need to recognize the physical and social constraints of women's everyday experiences. Theoretical considerations about the meanings behind women's feminine engagements, and hence about the possibility of transgressing or subverting femininity, provide limited insight if they do not incorporate women's voices and lived accounts. Second, by discussing the influence socio-cultural location has on women's engagements with femininity, women's identities are shown to be performative and temporal, rather than fixed or static. Women negotiate their embodiments of femininity depending on where they are, whom they are with, and how they are feeling, as well as in relation to their socio-cultural background and personal positioning. Lastly, through probing the literature for discussion and analyses of agency, I have argued that women's ability to recognize and critically reflect on the influence and cultural weight of femininity in their lives is demonstrative of the agency they enact in the negotiation of their identities.

Discussions and considerations of agency and 'women's experience' have been central to my thesis. In contemplating how women negotiate femininity, I conclude that women's lived experiences need to provide the foundation from which we can theorize. However, I am not suggesting that there is a definitive 'women's experience' that can be utilized in analyses of femininity: women's lives and identities are diverse, contradictory and produced through relations of power pertaining to sexuality, class, race and gender. Rather, I argue women's experiences can be an informative entry point from which to reflect and theorize from. Understanding the diverse and multiple ways femininity influences and shapes women's daily lives provide a base from which to move into an examination of broader, societal dynamics. Furthermore, we need to ground our theorizing about how femininity is made meaningful, as well as how it is reproduced and engaged with, in the experiences of actual lived embodiments. Otherwise, our considerations of how gender inequalities could be transgressed or subverted will remain solely theoretical and thus devoid of practical means for initiating them.

Notions of agency have proved difficult primarily because one cannot clearly or obviously distinguish between socialization or cultural influence and notions of self and personal choice. Because something feels good or we enjoy it, does deciding to do it
mean we are enacting agency and not simply adhering to cultural norms? As I have discussed, agency is one of the main areas of debate within feminist theory on femininity. Debates about agency centre on the problematic of not being able to be or act outside of the sphere of cultural influence, while at the same time attempting to envisage women as having agency or as not simply being powerless to the disciplines of femininity. Further to these considerations are questions concerning what effect context has on feminine embodiments; if an action is personally or individually empowering, but on a cultural level reproduces women's subordinate status, how do we theorize or make sense of it without undermining women in the process? This is a fine line to negotiate, that many feminists, including myself, find theoretically as well as personally challenging. The desire to believe that our actions stem from choices we have made, rather than being culturally determined is very strong; we live in an individualistic culture and like to believe we control our destines. Thus, despite our awareness of the predominance of social and historical norms of femininity, it is still tempting to view the decisions we make, and our lives more generally, as self-determined. Feminists have argued that we need to explore the things we do on a daily basis because it is through our participation in these daily rituals and routines that societal power dynamics are reproduced. However, feminists also recognize that women cannot simply stop engaging in or being influenced by femininity, and therefore have debated how to conceptualize and theorize notions of agency and the ability (or possibility) of women to negotiate their identities.

What I find problematic and struggle with relates to where we draw the line concerning agency. As I proposed above, if a woman finds a certain practice, for example breast enlargement, personally empowering, would I consider this action as demonstrative of her negotiating femininity? This would depend upon how agency is conceptualized. Within my thesis, I challenge the notion that femininity can be theorized solely as a socializing agent that women passively adopt and argue that femininity is also an embodiment that women actively negotiate. While recognizing, as Bordo does, the 'impossibility of getting outside culture' Bordo, Susan Twilight Zones: The Hidden Life of Cultural Images from Plato to O.J., University of California Press: Berkeley 1997, pg.181, I agree with Vivien Burr that our ability to consciously and engagingly critique the nature of our existence not only demonstrates the
possibility of agency, but also the potential to transform the social and cultural world in which we live.\textsuperscript{253} Negotiation, specifically how femininity is negotiated, is premised on the notion that "the everyday life of people is larger than the scope of any discourse and is structured not only with complex social relations but also with multiple and competing discursivities".\textsuperscript{254} As many feminist theorists have noted, femininity cannot solely be theorized as a means to the (re)production of women's subordination; women's identities are much more complex than such a theoretical position allows.\textsuperscript{255} Femininity is "produced from and susceptible to divergent poli-cultural notions of difference".\textsuperscript{256} We need to explore the numerous and conflicting ways that femininity shapes women's lives, paying particular attention to class, race, and sexuality but also to the socio-cultural context. This type of analysis offers insight into the meanings behind women's engagements with femininity, which consequently enriches our understanding of the construction of our collective and individual identities. Negotiation, therefore, also addresses my attempt to understand how femininity is lived in relation to the diverse and contradictory nature of women's experiences and embodiments. Thus, while not providing an answer or definitive conclusion to debates concerning agency, identity, and experience, I have offered up an approach that can be useful in future theorizing and consideration of these processes.

Throughout my thesis, I have sought to illuminate how femininity is negotiated and made meaningful in the lives of young women. This involved an analysis of current literature on femininity, which brought together different theoretical approaches and viewpoints, and has drawn out and identified themes of subjectivity, agency, and experience. Being primarily theoretical in nature, my research findings are limited to the extent that they can portray how femininity is embodied and lived. To build upon these informed but tentative postulations, further research needs to have women's experiences at its centre. Involving more women would enable research on femininity to be drawn more directly from women's experiences, rather than supplemented by them. My analysis

\textsuperscript{253} Burr, V. An Introduction to Social Constructionism, Routledge: London 1995
would have greatly benefited from not only a larger number of participants, but also and more importantly from a more diverse sample and in-depth discussion with women. Within the group interview there were not enough opportunities to probe issues specific to individual women, partly because of timing, but more so because of the group dynamic. Given that the women did not know each other or me, they may not have felt comfortable disclosing personal and/or sensitive information. I think follow up interviews would have granted me the opportunity to probe each of the women individually about topics or points they had touched upon in the group discussion. This would have had particular benefit in relation to their responses to my question of how they felt other aspects of their identity such as race, sexuality, and class influenced their embodiment of femininity. All of the women, except Janet, answered this question fairly generally and I sensed that it was not that they had nothing to say, but rather that they were cautious of or concerned about answering to the group. I mentioned in my methodology that one of the women, Liz, talked noticeably less than the others, and I suggested that this might have been because she was the only woman of colour in the group as well as the only woman studying biology (the other three women were White and were in sociology or women's studies). If the group had been a little larger and more diverse, this potentially could have created a dynamic where all of the women felt comfortable and safe to disclose and/or talk freely.

Within my analytical review as well as in my qualitative research femininity was conceptually bound to the cultural feminine ideal, undoubtedly leaving certain implicit assumptions as yet unexamined or unchallenged. In future research I would like to explore in more depth notions of femininity that are not centred on the dominant cultural ideal, for example, how femininity is taken up and negotiated outside of the White, middle to upper class, heterosexual norm. One way to undertake this research would be to focus on how women initially conceive of femininity or identify as feminine, before asking how they respond and negotiate in relation to a defined cultural ideal. Additionally, this approach could incorporate further research on identity with respect to sexuality and anti-racist theory as well as in relation to notions of performativity and agency.
My thesis provides a useful foundation for this future work by drawing attention to the multiple and interrelated aspects of women's identities. Negotiation, as an approach, enables a critical analysis of femininity, while suggesting the possibility of different embodiments. Negotiating Femininity: An Exploratory Study of Young Women’s Everyday Experiences strengthens theoretical explorations of how femininity is negotiated and experienced, deepening our understanding of social dynamics and thus our ability to transform them.
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Appendix One: Group interview Questions

1. Can you tell me about practices or things you do that you would describe or characterize as being ‘feminine’?
2. What makes these particular practices ‘feminine’ for you? Do you feel there is a wrong (or proper) way to do these practices?
3. Are there particular times or places where you feel more or less ‘feminine’ than others, or perhaps where you feel you are expected to act more (or less) ‘feminine’?
4. Where do you think/feel these ideas about femininity come from?
5. How do you think other aspects of your identity, such as sexuality and ethnicity, influence or shape your engagement with femininity?
6. Can you tell me what the difference(s) are between the cultural ideal of femininity and your own, personal notions of femininity?