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Critical Femininities: A "New" Approach to Gender Theory

"Why, when we embrace (or at least engage with) critical masculinity studies as a crucial part of our knowledge formation, do we so rarely imagine the possibility of critical femininity studies?" (Dahl, 2012, p. 57)

Introduction

Critical theory integrates scholarly approaches from a variety of social scientific and humanities backgrounds, with roots tracing back to sociology, philosophy, and literary criticism. Critical theories are described as those seeking to "liberate human beings from the circumstances that" maintain oppression (Horkheimer, 1982, p.244). Rather than simply documenting or explaining social phenomenon, critical theory develops the tools to critique and unpack systems that maintain the status quo. A central approach to critical theory is questioning how norms, power, and ideology have become calcified in their contemporary manifestation; for only then can oppressive power structures be transformed. Consequently, a critical theory framework attends to the ideological, social, and historical underpinnings that contribute to hegemonic norms, and identifies ideology as a primary means of remedying social inequalities (Freire, 2007). Critical frameworks also operate as methodologies that involve "scrutinizing" normative ideologies that define and stigmatize particular bodies (Schalk, 2017). Often, this is achieved by identifying, describing, and analyzing the "subsumed or hidden origins of social and political culture, discourses and institutions," which function to expose the "contingency of ideas or circumstances often presumed to be natural or unchangeable" (Hall, 2019, n.p.). For example, previous critical frameworks have attended to intersections of race and disability, examining how racism is informed by cultural perceptions and historical constructions of race (Delgardo & Stefancic, 2013), or how disability is a socially and politically produced phenomenon

(Burghardt, 2011; Hall, 2019). Building on these traditions of critical theory, emerging areas have focused on femininity.

While Critical Femininities is often deemed an emergent area of scholarship, this framing is both paradoxical and, conceivably, inaccurate. Rather than being a nascent field, interdisciplinary scholars have contributed to Critical Femininities for over 60 years, whether or not they labeled their research as such. Arguably, Critical Femininities is a field whose emergence can be traced back to the second wave of feminism or even earlier. However, while Dahl (2012) notes that the question of "what is femininity" is as old as de Beauvoir's (1949) *Second Sex*, there is a continued lack of scholarly endeavours not only in terms of how the question of femininity has been addressed, but also in terms of how this question is integrated within research. Additionally, while contemporary Critical Femininities scholars call attention to the broad strokes with which second-wave feminists painted femininity (e.g., Friedan, 1963; see Hoskin, 2017b), much of the work to emerge from this canon[1] marked a shift in the way we think about femininity and was, thus, foundational to the field of Critical Femininities. After all, what is a critical theory if not one that seeks to liberate humanity? And, in the case of second-wave feminist theory, this liberation meant attending to the ways in which femininity had been used as a tool of patriarchal oppression - one that had become synonymous with womanhood, and from which many women could not escape. For example, paradigm-shifting contributions like Betty Friedan's (1963) *The Feminine Mystique* argued that through the regulatory powers of patriarchal femininity, women were domesticated and kept in the home longing for "more" (i.e., careers).

Yet, as argued by theorists like bell hooks (2015), works like Friedan's overlooked how this phenomenon was predominantly experienced by white, upper-middle class, married,

heterosexual, cisgender women; thus, embedding whiteness, cissexism, and heterosexism within the construction of femininity itself. Women of colour, for example, were historically excluded from the sphere of white domesticity. Rather than being kept at home to raise the children, throughout history, women of colour have worked outside the home rearing the children of privileged white women. Thus, although Friedan's work is often touted for shaping much of second-wave feminist politics, the broad strokes with which femininity was painted is an exemplar of how the construct of femininity overlooked the complex intersectional axes that inform feminine embodiments. By framing femininity as a source of oppression, without attending to how it may be informed by race, class, or sexuality, *The Feminine Mystique* exemplifies the importance of wedding Critical Femininities to intersectionality[2]. Without an intersectional perspective, the field of gender theory continues to move a singular, myopic rendition of femininity forward. Critical femininities, thus, pushes scholars to think about femininity through a nuanced, multidimensional and intersectional framework, moving beyond femininity as a patriarchal tool, and even past the more contemporary critiques of femininity via neoliberal frameworks (see Dahl & Sunden, 2018; Gill & Arthurs, 2006), to instead consider the historical, ideological, and intersectional underpinnings of femininity.

Critical Femininities also moves past the analysis of femininity as an extension or experience of womanhood. For example, while the construct of woman has been dissected as a simple, unifying category, insufficient attention has been paid to femininity as a category (Dahl, 2012). Illustrating this scholarly gap, Dahl and Sunden's 2018 review of the *European Journal of Women's Studies*, found that *woman* "appears in titles of about 300 articles" whereas femininity "only appears in about a dozen articles" (p. 269). Outside of femininity's role as the process through which an individual assigned female at birth is socialized into womanhood (de Beauvoir,

1949), there is a lack of scholarship devoted to gender (i.e., femininity), much of which focuses instead on women (i.e., gender/sex) or on sex (i.e., female; see van Anders, 2015). In other words, as noted by Dahl (2012), the epistemic shift from "sex" to "gender "has not resulted in new ways of theorizing femininity on a comprehensive level" (p. 59). Instead, femininity has been maintained as a unidimensional, discrete construct (Hoskin, 2017a; Hoskin, et al., 2020; Blair & Hoskin, 2015). Within this construction, femininity tends to be stereotyped, reductive, and taken-for-granted as being synonymous with womanhood and experienced as pressure to conform to patriarchal norms (Dahl, 2012; Dahl & Sunden, 2018). Critical femininities scholarship, thus, expands beyond the reductive approaches that "always and only [tie femininity] to [the] oppression, subordination, sexualization and objectification" of women (Dahl & Sunden, 2018, p. 270). Grounding this framework in the tradition of critical theory, Critical Femininities must instead remain committed to the lives implicated in the "discursive institutions which undergird viable practices of exclusion" and representation (Burghardt, 2011, p.13). Thus, as critical femininities scholars, we must ask: Whose lives are implicated by the intersectional, cultural and political norms that shape patriarchal femininity[3]? And, what is the process through which these lives are implicated?

Critical Femininities: Stalled in a State of Emergence

How can an area remain in a continuous state of becoming and emerging, without recognition for its contributions as a field? Why, despite the epistemic shift brought forth by second-wave thinkers, and the ongoing contributions of interdisciplinary scholars, has Critical Femininities as a field of inquiry not yet received the same degree of attention or recognition as the field of Masculinities? Some, like Middleton (2019), would argue that this oversight is a result of how femininity is seen as "socially regressive or anti-intellectual" (p. 84). Supporting

Middleton's claims, others argue that the tendency to eschew femininity is a product of centring masculine epistemologies (Hoskin, 2021; Schwartz, 2018). Within western dichotomous ways-of-knowing, masculinity is coded as rational and stoic; the combination of which make up notions of objectivity (Bordo, 1993; Oliver, 1994). Conversely, femininity is coded as the antithesis of objectivity: irrational and emotional. Thus, as postulated by femme scholars, the omission of femininity from epistemological frameworks reflects the sterilization of scholarship that functions to preserve masculinist notions of objectivity, and that not only serves to maintain masculine ascendency, but also contributes to the systemic devaluation of certain kinds of knowledge (Hoskin, 2021; Mishali, 2014; Schwartz, 2018).

Conversely, or perhaps additionally, the continued state of emergence may be a product of how femininity is infantilized (Hoskin, 2017b). Even in feminist theory, scholars like Sontag (2004) describe femininity as a "characteristic of the weak [and] the vulnerable" (p. 244) and feminine behaviour as "childish, immature" and "weak" (p. 281). In a similar vein, Friedan (2004) describes femininity as preventing women from "achieving the maturity of which they are capable" and keeping them in a "state of sexual larvae" (p.71-72). While the ubiquitous theorization of femininity as infantile and weak upholds femmephobia, it is also structured around normative whiteness, such that Black femininity is often perceived as anything but infantile or weak (Micheline, 2019). Moreover, it is arguable that such a characterization of femininity may have contributed to the perception of Critical Femininities as never having fully emerged or matured into a focused area of scholarship.

Others, like Titchkosky (2000), have argued that particular assumptions and values "lie behind the social act of conceiving" a field as new (p. 197). In terms of gender theory, these assumptions and values revolve around the insidious masculine epistemological centre that not

only functions to privilege and position masculinity as gender neutral, but also informs the very fabric of society from language to ways of understanding the world and each other. Largely, and not unlike normative frameworks (e.g., normative whiteness), the inherent masculinity of gender theory remains unmarked. Given that a central tenet of critical theory is to critique and unpack that which maintains the status quo, Critical Femininities must therefore name the systems that maintain masculine ascendency. Put succinctly, the status quo within gender hegemony, under patriarchy, and in gender theory is masculinity ascendency. In this way the irony of discussing masculinity via Critical Femininities functions to dislodge and illuminate masculinity as the taken-for-granted norm. Thus, rather than signalling nascency, the newness of Critical Femininities is symbolic of challenging mainstream approaches to the study of gender.

At the same time, the importance of femininity as an intersectional axis worthy of consideration is not lost on many gender theorists. Many scholars have commented on femininity's displacement within gender hegemony[4] (Schippers, 2007; Paetcher, 2018) or how masculinity always takes precedence within gender theory (Schwartz, 2018). In 2007, Schippers called for additional research that centers femininity within gender hegemony. In 2012, Dahl posed the question of "why, when we embrace (or at least engage with) critical masculinity studies as a crucial part of our knowledge formation, do we so rarely imagine the possibility of critical femininity studies?" (p. 57). Nearly a decade later, Hoskin (2019a; 2020), Schwartz (2018), Paecher (2018) and countless others continue to speak of the need for the field of Critical Femininities. This special issue is a response to gender theorists' decades long call for additional theorizations of femininity that bare the same nuance and multiplicity taken within the study of masculinity, and that considers the ideological underpinnings of femininity and feminine discourse.

Critical Femininities via Femme Theory

Ample theoretical work has examined femininity as disempowering or as a sexist tool of the patriarchy, while far "less attention has been paid to the queer possibilities of femininity" (McCann, 2018, p. 287). Among those who *have* turned their attention toward queer femininities, femme's "multiple genres of femininity" (Dahl, 2012, p. 58) are often noted for their potential to rethink femininity (Brushwood Rose & Camilleri, 2002, McCann, 2018; Volcano & Dahl, 2008; Scott, 2019). Consequently, many Critical Femininities scholars have turned to Femme Theory and femme scholarship more broadly as a key framework for achieving the goals set forth in the field (Dahl, 2012; Hoskin, 2021; McCann, 2018; Schwartz, 2018). Femme Theory has been defined as a framework of analysis that centres "femme in the examination of femininity more broadly" (Hoskin & Taylor, 2019, p. 282). Femme Theory positions femme as the nucleus for understanding femininity differently, developing new ways of defining femininity, and novel approaches to understanding gender and power (Hoskin, 2019a; Hoskin, 2020). This is achieved by theorizing the commonalities across femme identities as deviations from patriarchal norms of femininity, and using the insight generated from these "feminine failures" to understand femininity as an intersectional axis.[5] Such a framework makes salient how femininities are simultaneously devalued and regulated (Hoskin, 2017a; 2021). In short, Femme Theory offers a two-pronged approach to the study of femininity, simultaneously examining the nuance of femininities while also considering femininity within hegemonic and binary structures (Hoskin, 2020).

Femme scholars argue that the way femininity "is predominantly understood is only part of the story" (Hoskin, 2021, p.12); or what feminist philosophers call a partial perspective (Haraway, 1988). In response, Femme Theory paints a more complete picture of femininity,

cognizant of intersections of race (Keeling, 2007; Lewis; 2012; Story, 2017), disability (Erickson, 2007), sexuality, body size (Taylor, 2018), class (Skeggs, 1997), and aging (Hoskin & Taylor, 2019; Walker, 2012). By expanding dominant feminine epistemologies, Femme Theory offers a way for scholars to radically shift the way we conceive of gender and the heterosexual matrix by rethinking some of the taken-for-granted assumptions made about femininity: that it signals sexual availability to men, that it is performed by cisgender heterosexual women who are assigned female at birth, that it is markedly white (Lewis, 2012; Story, 2017; Keeling, 2007; Tinsley, 2015) or that it stands as Other to masculinity's perceived neutrality (Hoskin, 2020). In this way, femme offers a "way out" of the rules governing femininity – a lens that allows researchers to identify their own assumptions about femininity and feminine people (Hoskin, 2021, p. 4). Such a perspective offers a novel approach to understanding femininity beyond the typical construction of femininity as a unilaterally defined tool of patriarchal oppression (Scott, 2019).

Critical Femininities via Femme Theory allows for alternative readings of femininity that are both intersectional and liberating (Taylor, 2018; Harris & Crocker, 1997). In centring femme as a framework of analysis, Critical Femininities asks how the study and theorization of gender can be reconfigured such that femininity is not perpetually maintained as the "abject antithesis of our very intellectual existence […] beyond a simple story of subordination, sexualization, objectification, and superficial narcissism" (Dahl, 2012, p.61). For example, Femme Theory challenges the common assumption that femininity is in itself a source of disempowerment or inherently subordinate. Instead, Femme theory grounds femme subjectivities as a means of highlighting how femininity is *made* subordinate through the societal tendency to see femininity as inferior. By challenging this notion, femmes and Femme Theory introduce the concept of

femmephobia: the devaluation and regulation of femininity across intersecting identities, separate from sexism/misogyny (Hoskin 2017a; 2019; 2020). Femmephobia offers a means of addressing the overarching ways that femininity is devalued and regulated, and inherently references the connections between experiences, rather than speaking to anti-femininity in isolation. Femme theory allows for an analysis "between" femininities (Dahl, 2012; Dahl & Sunden, 2018), but also provides a framework to address masculine ascendency and gender hegemony more broadly. Thus, femme theory's two-pronged theoretical contribution of simultaneously looking within and across the gender binary makes this framework of analysis paramount to the field of Critical Femininities.

Conclusion

Similar to the ways in which gender theorists have commented on the displacement of femininity within gender theory or gender hegemony, femme scholars have commented on the exclusion of femmes from LGBTQ+ and feminist histories (Blair & Hoskin, 2015; 2016) as well as how femmes have been overlooked as a rich resource for understanding gender (Lewis, 2012; Harris & Crocker, 1997). In response, femme theorists urge femmes to write themselves into these spaces. Likewise, Critical Femininities seeks to reconcile the marginalization of "fem(me)ininities in gender and sexuality studies;" a process that is achieved, in part, by turning femme literature and scholarship (Taylor, 2018, p. 4). The goal of this special issue is to bolster femme and femininities as theory so that both can be used as central analytical tools through which to understand gender hegemony. Following Lewis (2012), Hoskin (2019), Schwartz (2018), Davies (2020) and others, this issue contributes to the writing of femme and femininities into places where it has been overlooked. Critical Femininities is a response to these scholarly gaps that brings theoretical tools to aid in decentering masculinity within gender theory and to

shift this normative paradigm. Thus, given masculinity's centrality within gender theory, Critical Femininities and the deliberate examination of femininity holds the possibility of developing new approaches to analyses of gender (Gill & Arthurs, 2006). Moreover, echoing critiques from femme scholars, critical theory itself has also been criticized for its focus on "active" and "masculinized" agents of change, which can function to perpetuate the naturalization of masculinity and simultaneous denigration of femininity (i.e., femmephobia; Davis & Hoskin, 2021; Sheldon, 2017). Thus, the development of Critical Femininities via femme theory not only offers novel approaches to gender theory, but also holds the potential to ameliorate many of the tensions of previous critical frameworks.

In line with other critical scholarship, it was our goal to create a special issue that will bolster the field of critical femininities as one that challenges the social, historical, and ideological systems that structure and produce norms of patriarchal femininity; particularly those that contribute to anti-femininity and femmephobia. This issue brings together articles that examine how norms surrounding femininity can be toxic (McCann, 2020), act as an impediment for dating (Taylor, 2020), and can mediate the effects of transprejudice (Türkoğlu & Sayılan, 2021). Contributors to the issue also explore ways of reimagining femininity by grappling with questions such as: How can we conceptualize feminine power (Barton & Huebner, 2020)? In what ways can vulnerability act as a powerful mode of resistance (Schwartz, 2020)? And, importantly, how can we understand femininity as powerful without succumbing to masculinist frameworks (Scott, 2021)? Finally, articles in this issue demonstrate the use Critical Femininities as a framework of analysis, specifically how it can provide a new approach to topics such as breastfeeding stigma (Whiley, Stutterheim, & Grandy, 2020), Incel research (Menzie, 2020), or t(w)een sexual behaviour (García-Gómez, 2019). Taken together, these articles facilitate the

continued growth of a field that cultivates insight from a feminine frame of reference as a means of rendering visible the taken-for-granted presence of masculinity that remains pervasive within gender theory.

To some, *Psychology & Sexuality* may seem like an odd choice for a special issue on Critical femininities. While the broad aims of *Psychology & Sexuality* are to advance the understanding of LGBTQ+ issues in psychology and allied disciplines, the journal has established its reputation for facilitating conversations across ostensibly dissident fields of inquiry (e.g., science and queer theory) and has become an outlet for critical and discursive scholarly works. *Psychology & Sexuality* is a progressive, radical journal that is best "known for drawing from work traditionally seen as outside the remit of psychology"[6] as a means of informing current debates within the field. By bringing additional critical theory to psychological research, we aim to spark debates within the broader psychosocial research world surrounding the treatment of femininity, particularly in relation to LGBTQ+ issues. It is our hope that this issue inspires researchers within and outside of psychology to identify their own masculine-leaning theoretical and epistemological frameworks and begin to question how this might inform their work. Finally, we hope that the paradoxical nature of Critical Femininities becomes rectified through its recognition as a worthy scholarly endeavor.

Biographies

Dr. Rhea Ashley Hoskin is *an Ontario Women's Health Scholar* and an *AMTD Global Talent* postdoctoral fellow at the University of Waterloo. Rhea's work focuses on femininities, femme theory, femme identities, critical femininities and femmephobia. In particular, her work applies femme theory to understand psychosocial and cultural phenomenon, various forms of oppression, perceptions of femininity and sources of prejudice rooted in the devaluating or regulation of femininity.

Dr. Karen L. Blair is the director of the KLB Research Lab and the Trent University Social Relations, Attitudes and Diversity Lab. Dr. Blair's work focuses on LGBTQ Psychology, relationships and health, prejudice, femmephobia, hate crimes and Holocaust education.

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[1] It should be noted, however, that much of this work might position itself outside of, apart from, or prior to Critical Femininities while simultaneously, and paradoxically, constituting the canon itself.

[2] Importantly, many of these criticisms and theoretical frameworks are born from Black feminist criticisms, thus making Black feminist theory integral to the development of Critical Femininities.

[3] Patriarchal femininity refers to the norms and powers that regulate femininity (Hoskin 2017). See McCann (2020) for an overview.

[4] Gender hegemony refers to the relationship between masculinity and femininity that is characterized by complementarity and masculine ascendency (Connell, 1987).

[5] Femininity as an intersectional axis can take the form of embodiment, oppression, expression, privilege, among others.

[6] See *Psychology & Sexuality'*s Aims & Scope.

Biographies

Dr. Rhea Ashley Hoskin is *an Ontario Women's Health Scholar* and an *AMTD Global Talent* postdoctoral fellow at the University of Waterloo. Rhea's work focuses on femininities, femme theory, femme identities, critical femininities and femmephobia. In particular, her work applies femme theory to understand psychosocial and cultural phenomenon, various forms of oppression, perceptions of femininity and sources of prejudice rooted in the devaluating or regulation of femininity.

Dr. Karen L. Blair is the director of the KLB Research Lab and the Trent University Social Relations, Attitudes and Diversity Lab. Dr. Blair's work focuses on LGBTQ Psychology, relationships and health, prejudice, femmephobia, hate crimes and Holocaust education.