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Masculine femininities/feminine masculinities: power, identities and gender

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Abstract

This paper is basically about terminology. In it I discuss the terms 'masculinity' and 'femininity' and how they relate to being male and being female.

My theme arises from an increasing difficulty that I am finding in understanding how individual identities relate to dominant constructions of masculinity and femininity. Christine Skelton and Becky Francis (2002) argue that we should not be afraid to name certain behaviours as masculine even when they are performed by girls. After a discussion of the problems of defining both 'masculinity' and 'femininity', and a consideration of the power

relations between these terms, I go on to consider the concept of 'female masculinity' (Halberstam (1998). I argue that this formulation is problematic, due to its dependence on a main term whose definition is unclear. Finally, I argue that we need to distinguish 'masculinity' and 'femininity' from 'masculinities' and 'femininities'.

Introduction

This paper is about the terminology of gender and its implications. It is about how the language we use for gender both seduces and restricts us; about how we become caught in particular gender discourses that may have greater seductive force than explanatory usefulness. It is about the effects of the grammar of some of the phrases we use, and about the power relations embedded in different constructions. To address these issues, I am going to examine some specific configurations of words and ideas around masculinity and femininity, maleness and femaleness, and consider whether they draw us into discourses that are less than helpful both for our theoretical thinking and for how people live and understand their lives.

To start with an anecdote: Recently I was asked to write a book chapter on femininities in schooling. I have been writing a lot in the past few years about masculinities and femininities, so being asked to do this is not particularly surprising, nor was I puzzled about what I was being expected to

do. When we talk about 'femininities in schooling' what we mean, and take each other to mean, is those ways of 'doing girl' (West & Zimmerman, 1987) that are particularly related to or found in school contexts. So I have produced an account that, after some caveats which basically confirm this underlying assumption, discusses a range of ways in which girls construct and enact collective femininity and their individual femininities. I have not discussed feminine boys, although I (forthcoming-b) and the people who commissioned the chapter have separately argued (Skelton & Francis, 2002) that there are some ways of doing boy that are undeniably feminine. So why do these not count as femininities, or as forms of femininity?

In our everyday speech and in our writing we slide constantly between uses and understandings of words such as masculinity, femininity, masculine, feminine. Some of this is conscious; we know that these are slippery terms and to some extent have to live with that. At other times I think we just become seduced by the 'obviousness' of a particular term or its use in a specific context, so that we fail to perceive the problems it brings in its wake. In this paper, therefore, part of what I want to consider is whether it makes sense to talk of 'masculine femininities' or 'feminine masculinities', and if not, why not. I am also wondering what the status of 'male' and 'female' are in relation to all this, and where the body fits in. Much of my discussion, however, will be terminological, and some of it will focus quite precisely on

the grammar of the phrases we use, trying to unpick what they mean to us

and if they really have the explanatory power that they seem to promise.

Power, language and the problem of definitions

This problem of shifting definitions is exacerbated by our inability to define

either masculinity or femininity except in relation to each other and to men

and women. Connell (1995: 71) argues that

> 'Masculinity', to the extent that the term can be briefly
>
> defined at all, is simultaneously a place in gender relations,
>
> the practices through which men and women engage that
>
> place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily
>
> experiences, personality and culture.

What this means is that in practice masculinity becomes 'what men and boys

do', and femininity the Other of that. This would not be such a problem if we

actually had a clear picture of what men and boys *do* do, but we do not, and,

indeed, cannot; men and boys, and what they do, are many and varied

(Connell, 1995). Thorne (1993) notes that in the literature on boys there is a

'"Big Man bias" akin to the skew in anthropological research that equates

male elites with men in general' (98); this means that we end up attributing to

'masculinity' ways of being that are found in dominant male groups in

particular social circumstances. As a result of the increased awareness of this,

many theorists refer instead to 'hegemonic' or 'dominant' and 'subordinated'

4

masculinities, recognising that in any social grouping there are a number of masculinities, with intersecting power relations.

Connnell (1995) defines hegemonic masculinity as

> The configuration of gender practice which embodies the
>
> currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimation
>
> of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the
>
> dominant position of men and the subordination of women
>
> (77)

While noting that 'the number of men rigorously practicing the hegemonic pattern in its entirety may be quite small' (79), he argues for the salience of these dominant forms of masculinity in providing a much wider group with a 'patriarchal dividend', in terms of the overall subordination of women. Hegemonic masculinity thus confers considerable power, vis-à-vis women, not just on the hegemonically masculine but on all men, while at the same time standing as an ideal type against which various ways of 'doing man' can be constructed and performed.

What this does not allow for, as Connell himself seems to admit at some points in his argument, is 'the usage in which we call some women 'masculine' and some men 'feminine', or some actions and attitudes 'masculine' or 'feminine', regardless of who displays them' (69). This seems to me to lead to a situation in which masculinity in general remains a somewhat out of focus concept, but 'hegemonic masculinity' becomes some sort of ideal-

typical construction of what men do that may not fit what is found

empirically, but does relate quite closely to collective ideas about men in any

particular society. Once we start also talking about 'subordinated

masculinities', we then seem to have a situation in which the various

masculinities have reverted to being 'how men are empirically found to

behave' but are then classified according to the closeness of their relationship

to a particular hegemonic masculinity.

We have a similar problem with femininity, but here the situation is

more complex. As I argued earlier, in 'common-sense' sociology-speak,

femininity or femininities are seen as ways of 'doing girl or woman', and can

thus be discovered empirically in any social group. At the same time, there is

an understanding of 'femininity' which in some ways parallels hegemonic

masculinity, but in others is more a mirror image of hypermasculinity:

emphasised femininity (Connell, 1987), or femininity as supergirly. Butler

(2004), for example, talks of drag queens who could 'do femininity much

better than I ever could, ever wanted to, ever would…Femininity, which I

understood never to have belonged to me anyway, was clearly belonging

elsewhere' (213). Here, 'doing femininity well' seems to mean enacting a

hyperfemininity that many women, possibly the majority, do not themselves

perform, at least much of the time. Indeed, it seems to denote a form of

dramaturgical, glamourised femininity that bears little relation to those

activities conventionally given over to women, such as cleaning houses, doing

laundry or caring for children. This is reflected in comments in the popular

media made by women whose lives are mainly focused around such tasks;

they complain that, partly because of the practical clothing required, they no

longer feel feminine. Hyperfemininity in this form is idle, or at least leisured,

operating outside the practicalities of the lives even of those women in

traditional heterosexual family relationships.

There is a key difference here between hegemonic masculinity and this

extreme, but still in some ways ideal typical, femininity. Even though there

are many ways of being male that are not what 'Big Men' do, there are still big

men to study, and much of what they do, often by virtue of their dominance,

constitutes hegemonic masculinity within a particular community. It is not

possible to discover the features of local parallel hegemonic femininities in the

same way, because there are not 'Big Women' in the same way; indeed, it is

arguable that, because of this, we cannot really talk of 'hegemonic femininity'

at all (Connell, 1987). Femininities are not constructed in the ways

masculinities are; they do not confer cultural power, nor are they able to

guarantee patriarchy. They are, instead, constructed as a variety of negations

of the masculine, with the hyperfemininity exemplified by Butler's drag

queens being one of the most extreme and overt examples of this.

This is because masculinity and femininity are not just constructed in

relation to each other; their relation is dualistic. A dualistic relation is one in

which the subordinate term is negated, rather than the two sides being in

equal balance. Femininity is, thus, defined as a lack, an absence of masculinity (Kessler & McKenna, 1978). There can be no hegemonic femininity, because being in a hegemonic position is also about being in a position of power; it is about being able to construct the world for oneself and others so that one's power is unchallenged and taken (more or less) for granted as part of the order of things. Hyperfemininity, on the other hand, is a powerless position, one that is defined by the absence of the power inherent not just in hegemonic masculinity, but, by virtue of the patriarchal dividend and the dualistic construction of masculinity and femininity, all masculinities.

A result of this is that there are different power relations inherent in how individuals relate to hegemonic masculinities and hyper or even normative femininities. Distancing oneself from hegemonic or hypermasculinity is about giving up power, symbolically, if not in practice. Redman (1996) points out that 'there is no self-evident reason why boys and men should want to give up any of the power that their social position affords' (170), and it is notable that is largely those men who have other sources of hegemonic power, through their race and class positions, who are able overtly to distance themselves from some hegemonic masculine forms (though of course they still benefit from the patriarchal dividend).

This public renunciation of particular forms of masculine power is not, therefore, a complete abandonment of dominance in interpersonal relations. Such positioning, especially when set against wider power relations, may

indeed confer considerable advantage in interpersonal relations with women. Connell (1995) recognises the complexities of this situation when he points out that though the choice to separate from hegemonic masculinities 'is likely to be difficult' (132), it can be enacted in remarkably hegemonic ways. He says, for example, of one of his informants, who 'gave up a successful career and pressured lifestyle at the age of thirty' (131), that his

> renunciation of his masculine career was a highly masculine
> act. Among other things, he did not tell his wife about it until
> after he had bought their farm. Renunciation can be
> conducted as an act of individual willpower, and this
> presupposes the masculine ego that the act is intended to
> deny. (132).

The manner of this renunciation transforms it into a symbolically powerful repudiation of power. Giving up masculinity can thus be personally empowering; maybe it is not so difficult or contradictory to 'empower men to disempower themselves' (Redman, 1996).

Distancing oneself from stereotypical femininity, on the other hand, is a claiming of power. Whether from a feminist standpoint, or through the personal rejection of the feminine declared by tomboy girls (Reay, 2001) and butch women (Halberstam, 1998), to oppose stereotypical or normalised feminine positioning is to reject the disempowerment that comes with it. For extreme tomboys, rejection of the feminine goes along with identification with

9

boys, with the adoption of a form of hegemonic masculinity and a claiming of a share of male power through acting as an honorary boy. For butch women, or at least for butch lesbians, the situation is possibly more complicated; Butler (2004) points out that the butch community cannot really be seen as antifeminine, as many butches 'are deeply, if not fatally, attracted to the feminine, and, in this sense, love the feminine' (197). They do not want to be it, however. It is also unclear what form of 'the feminine' Butler means here. She is talking very specifically of desire, and of desire as constructing gender binaries. This seems to exclude much of what is stereotypically considered to be feminine. Such desire is surely of limited forms of femininity such as those parodied and performed by drag queens. While much of dominant masculinity positions the men who personify it as sexually desirable, its opposite, the nurturing, home-focused, childbearing woman, is outside of sex, beyond the desire of both men and butch lesbians.

It is also the case that butch, like masculinity in males, requires the feminine as its Other. Without femininity, masculinity makes no sense; without the rejection of femininity, butch is simply another way of 'doing woman'; it loses its transgressive and oppositional quality. It is interesting that both butch women (Lee, 2001) and extreme tomboys emphasise their difference from other girls and women. As one of Reay's (2001) respondents remarks: 'Girls are crap, all the girls in this class act all stupid and girlie' (161); she distinguishes herself from them through the repudiation of girlhood.

While this feeling of difference may reflect lived experience, it is also a power-claiming positioning that is reminiscent of the Othering of girls by young boys attempting to dominate through identification with adult males and the exclusion of females. The dualistic relation between masculinity and femininity, whether claimed by males or females, positions both extreme and normative femininity as without power, and, indeed, as pathological. Halberstam (1998), for example, argues that 'It seems to me that at least early on in life, girls should avoid femininity' (268-9), suggesting that they would be much healthier if they embraced masculinity. Renouncing femininity thus becomes an act of renouncing powerlessness, of claiming power for oneself.

Female masculinity

This brings us to a concept that is growing in frequency of use, that of 'female masculinity', popularised in particular by Judith Halberstam's book of that name (Halberstam, 1998). While I entirely agree with both Butler and Halberstam that 'masculinity must not and cannot and should not reduce down to the male body and its effects' (Halberstam, 1998: 2), I have a number of concerns specifically about this term, which I am now going to explore. I am particularly interested in the grammar of 'female masculinity' as a descriptive phrase, and in what it allows to slip into discourse unchallenged. It seems to me that the term is not as unproblematic as it first appears, nor as

liberatory as Halberstam would have us believe, and that there are other, rather more unwelcome, implications of its use.

Some of the difficulties I have with Halberstam's work arise from her very clear positioning within cultural studies. She explicitly rejects social science methodology as a 'project of surveying people and expecting to squeeze truth from raw data' (10). Where she does refer to work within social science (Halberstam, 1999), it is to a limited range of survey-based psychological papers, not to that found in sociology, much of which, in contrast, does not involve large-scale surveys at all. Consequently, she has been unable to benefit from the contested and problematic but nevertheless sophisticated and insightful discussions that have taken place within sociology within the past fifty years, around issues such as the relationship between sex and gender and gender and embodiment. Halberstam talks entirely about 'gender', doing this in a way in which slides between how an individual understands him or herself and how he or she is perceived by others. She focuses repeatedly on outward appearance, rather than the self-perception of the individual, treating gender as fundamentally about how one is recognised by others, as opposed to who one experiences oneself, including one's embodied self, to be. For example, she asks, about women who are challenged as potential impostors in women's public lavatories,

So what gender are the hundreds of female-born people who

are consistently not read as female in the women's room?

> And because so many women clearly fail the women's room
>
> test, why have we not begun to count and name the genders
>
> that are clearly emerging at this time? (27)

Halberstam argues that such unwelcome challenges occur both because 'as a society we are committed to maintaining a binary gender system' (27) and because the fluidity of the definitions of male and female allow for considerable variation. While I agree with her about the first of these explanations, it seems to me that the second is not the problem that Halberstam wants to make of it. Indeed, the increasing breadth of what is considered in Western society to be an acceptable performance of male or female gender seems to me to be of general benefit; it makes the problematic bathroom encounters such as Halberstam describes less, rather than more likely, while broadening everyone's possible behavioural repertoire. Furthermore, Kessler and McKenna's (1978) classic study suggests that 'male' and 'female' are examples of what is referred to in philosophy as a 'cluster concept': one that is not amenable to straightforward definition but is recognised through a cluster of attributes, some of which are more salient than others, but which may not all be present. The gender binary, in consequence, only operates at the level of the label. There are only two labels, but what they denote will vary considerably between situations, and will frequently overlap.

There is also a long history within social science of treating gender as something that is an internal understanding of oneself, a claimed identity, rather than focused around how one is recognised by others. This both fits empirical findings and the experiences of many for whom the relationship between gender and embodiment is non-straightforward. The Intersex Society of North America, for example, is emphatic that intersex children should be assigned a gender despite their sometimes ambiguous bodies, because 'we are trying to make the world a safe place for intersex kids, and we don't think labelling them with a gender category that in essence doesn't exist would help them.'(Intersex Society of North America, 1995-2005). While considering that such assignments may be preliminary, and that surgery to construct genitals 'appropriate' to the label should not take place, they argue that gender is a matter of the individual's identity, not biology or others' perceptions. Similarly, Whittle (2000), a transsexual activist and academic, defines gender identity as answering the question: 'Am I a man or a woman or something else entirely?' (7). Gender is thus centrally concerned with who one considers oneself to be, not how one appears to others.

This approach, which treats gender identity as something internal, that only the individual can attest to (Kessler & McKenna, 1978), while problematic in its separation of mind and body (Paechter, forthcoming-b), is useful in other ways. In particular, it provides something relatively solid and unchanging onto which we can hang descriptors. Stoller (1968), one of the

earliest writers in this field, regarded the individual as being male or female, with the degree of masculinity or femininity that a person 'has' being variable. This view seems to have been shared by other writers up until about the mid-1990s. A man could therefore be predominantly masculine, predominantly feminine, or as was also suggested, androgynous (Bem, 1993), with a more or less equal mixture. We might therefore talk of a masculine woman or a feminine man, and here the woman or man is the main term, with 'masculine' or 'feminine' as the qualifier. What this qualifier might denote is not always defined, and varies not just between writers but between cultures, but it is a qualifier of something that is basically fixed, the person as man or woman. In these discourses, therefore, maleness or femaleness, however defined, has been that which is qualified by various degrees of masculinity and femininity. This is important because, despite difficulties in gender attribution, gender identity is something that we all seem to have. In most cases it is also something fairly definite and constant over time (even for those who change gender during their lives this is not a day-to-day or situationally-adjusted matter), and is related (in conformity or otherwise) to our bodies and how we experience them. Consequently, while my sense of how feminine I am, and the femininity or otherwise of my behaviour, change according to time, place and circumstances, my sense of myself as female does not.

Halberstam's (1998) formulation of 'female masculinity', however, turns this on its head, treating 'female' as the qualifier and 'masculinity' as the seemingly more solid noun. Halberstam is in many ways a persuasive writer, able to use examples that 'hook into' the experiences of many masculine women, with the result that this formulation has been accepted apparently without examination. She herself writes that 'there is something all too obvious about the term "female masculinity"' (Halberstam, 1998: xi), and it seems to me that this 'obviousness' has meant that it has not really been subjected to critical scrutiny. The key issue for me here is that instead of the gender identity term, 'male' or 'female' being central, it is now what might be called the 'gender role' term that is dominant, with identity as a qualifier. This has a number of implications.

The first is that we move from comparatively solid ground to a space which is constantly shifting. Most of us, even if we disagree about definitions, and even if this knowledge is at odds with our outward appearance, know if we are men or women (or something else). Thus to say someone is a 'masculine woman' is to qualify (in ways that may be up for discussion) someone's womanhood, something that is usually fairly solid and constant over time. To change things round and talk instead of 'female masculinity' does something else entirely. For a start, there is only a broad agreement (if that) about what masculinity is (Connell, 1995), particularly if, as Halberstam overtly and correctly wishes, you decouple it from maleness. Now while it is

probably a good idea to think about what masculinity might be if it were not

simply taken as that behaviour generally attributed to males, to do this while

also treating it as a noun leaves us, it seems to me, hanging in the void; it

suggests that masculinity is something clear that we can grab onto and apply

qualifiers to, while simultaneously removing the basis of this supposed

clarity.

In configuring her object of enquiry as 'female masculinity' rather than

'masculine femaleness', Halberstam treats 'masculinity' as something fixed.

While at some points in her book she stresses the multiplicity of masculinities,

the use of the singular in the title suggests that there is only one female

masculinity, and the attributes she gives it are those which are usually

associated with dominant males. For example, she argues that

> If masculinity were a kind of default category for children,
>
> surely we would have more girls running around and playing
>
> sports and experimenting with chemistry sets and building
>
> things and fixing things and learning about finances and so
>
> on. (269).

This is surely a list of things that are associated with ideal typical (and rather

middle-class) Western male childhoods. At the same time the idea of

masculinity as a 'default category' has echoes of the schema that Kessler and

McKenna (1978) found empirically to underpin Western gender attributions:

See someone as female only when you cannot see them as male (158, italics in

original). Halberstam thus moves from a position in which she is attempting to 'make masculinity safe for women and girls' (268) to which she promotes it as the best thing for girls' physical and mental health, against a portrait of femininity as both uniform and highly problematic.

Using 'masculinity' as a noun suggest that there is a thing that is being named, that masculinity is something definite. But masculinity, particularly when disassociated from maleness, is rather more complex and shifting than that. Despite her repeated assertions that female masculinity is somehow different, more liberating, giving rise to possibilities outside of gender boundaries, her descriptions of masculinity, male or female, are highly stereotypical accounts of the sort of things that 'Big Men' are found to do. Female masculinity, for Halberstam, seems only to be concerned with the appropriation of dominant forms of masculinity; she does not seem to consider that some women might identify positively with a range of subordinate masculinities.

Furthermore, Halberstam herself seems to be unaware of the grammatical and sociological implications of her preferred formulation, and at times uses 'female masculinity' and 'masculine women' as if they refer to the same thing. They do not, however, in important respects, and these differences are central to how we understand ourselves and the sorts of people we can be. A discourse in which 'man', 'woman', and, if an individual wants it, 'intersex' (or something else entirely) is the noun, the solid term,

with 'masculine' and 'feminine' as qualifiers, is one that allows for variety

and variation, over time, place, social circumstances, and biography. It allows

for girls and young women to behave in masculine ways, without having this

as their central defining quality. Similarly, boys and men can be and act as

feminine, without having to see femininity as central to their being. This is

surely a more flexible and equitable way for us to understand gender, one

which treats masculinities and femininities as truly multiple, and as ways of

'being a man or woman, boy or girl', rather than central to our whole

existence. It allows identity to be related to, among other things, masculinities

and femininities, but treats these only as aspects of identity, and does not

insist that it depends on them entirely, with one's sense of oneself as male or

female as somehow secondary.

Conclusion

> But if there is a masculinity at work in butch desire, that is, if
>
> that is the name through which that desire comes to make
>
> sense, then why shy away from the fact that there may be
>
> ways that masculinity emerges in women, and that feminine
>
> and masculine do not belong to differently sexed bodies?
>
> Why shouldn't it be that we are at an edge of sexual
>
> difference for which the language of sexual difference might
>
> not suffice, and that this follows, in a way, from an

19

understanding of the body as constituted by, and

constituting, multiple forces? (Butler, 2004: 197-8)

It seems to me that two things result from this discussion. The first is, that we are unlikely to be able to move away from having two main genders, in the sense that each one of us knows whether we are male or female, or, less frequently, something different or in between. The second, is that knowing that someone is male or female says very little about how their masculinity or femininity is constructed. While most, though not all, of us are men in male bodies and women in female bodies, how we understand ourselves as masculine and feminine varies according to time, place and circumstances.

In order to understand the implications of this we may have to distinguish between 'masculinity' and 'femininity' as ideal typical forms that are connected with a local hegemonic masculinity and either its Other or something that is related to it in a more equal way, and 'masculinities' and 'femininities' as actual ways that real people construct and understand themselves in terms of how they 'do' boy/man or girl/woman (Paechter, forthcoming-a). This would mean that any individual's personal set of masculinities or femininities (assuming that we all have several at our disposal) would consist of attributes that would have varying relationships to masculinity or femininity as ideal types, and which would be related to identity and embodiment in multiple ways. This would make it much harder to classify ourselves and others into normative boxes. For example, I am not a

masculine woman, in as much as I do not perform an overtly masculine

bodily style or self-presentation. However, the various femininities I construct

and enact in different circumstances all involve significant masculine

attributes (such as my combative style of argument) alongside more feminine

ones (such as my major role in the care of the children I have with my male

partner, and my interest in embroidery). These do not make me masculine or

feminine; they are part of what it is to be the person who is me, enacting and

constructing varying personal femininities in relation to times, places and

circumstances.

This approach may also help us to shift femininity from its position as

the negated Other of hegemonic masculinity, to break through the dualistic

relation and have a more equal construction. Once we understand that not all

masculinities are entirely masculine, or femininities feminine, we may be able

to think of ourselves as humans who construct our identities in various ways,

some of which are related to ideal typical forms of masculinity and

femininity, and some of which are not. Butler argues that

> It seems to me that the future symbolic will be one in which
>
> femininity has multiple possibilities, where it is…released
>
> from the demand to be one thing, or to comply with a
>
> singular norm, the norm devised for it by phallogocentric
>
> means. (Butler, 2004: 196-7)

If Butler is correct, this will also be the case for masculinities, which equally need to escape the dominance of a phallogocentric worldview. That said, it seems likely that we would need to stick with the idea that for the most part there will be two genders, as this seems to be deeply ingrained in most societies. However, at the same time we would have to understand being male or female (or something else entirely) as simply how an individual classifies her or himself, and that this has little bearing on how that person then proceeds to construct her or his femininity or masculinity. In doing this, we will free ourselves, both as researchers and as individuals, from binary conceptions of masculinity and femininity that constrain both what we can think and who we can be.

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