Beyond Bifurcation: Femininity and Professional Success in a Changing World

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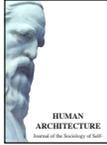## Femininity and Professional Success in a Changing World

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In a society that has only recently begun to recognize women as equals, the United States has undergone rapid change. In my own lifetime I have witnessed the expanding opportunities available to women, and am grateful for the chance to enter into such a diverse labor force. I am eager to prove my ability as a woman and as a professional. There is a constant struggle in my life to fulfill my goals of achievement, in a world controlled by masculinity, and to also embrace my femininity. As the role of women has changed so rapidly, women have faced the separation of femininity and identity. At one point femininity constituted a woman's identity. This is not to say that femininity does not continue to play a significant role but that there are more aspects to how a woman defines herself than femininity alone. Femininity is a broad set of characteristics that impinge upon many aspects of life, some that may resist other qualities important in today's changing world.

Throughout history women have played a subservient role to men. Women's responsibilities included taking care of the home and children while men were free to find success outside of the home. Women were not given the right to vote or to seek further education until fairly recently in history. Even as late as the 1950s, only a half century ago, the majority of women were viewed as childish and feeble-minded in comparison to men. The women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s brought on enormous change in the view of women. Women entered the workforce and pursued degrees, proving their abilities in a male dominated arena.

Although women were able to confirm their rights and their abilities, they are still expected to fulfill the classically feminine role of the caregiver. Many working women find themselves balancing a career, family, and housework. Now a woman must embody the expectations of dual roles. They must fulfill the functions of both a career and a family, a responsibility that despite progress made regarding women's equality remains persistently female.

The pressure to balance two distinct and opposing identities is felt by many women, including myself. The qualities continually associated with womanhood include nurturance, sexuality, physical appearance, and a sweet, easy-going personality. These traits can only be considered weaknesses in the professional arena where assertive and aggressive qualities (qualities that are characteristically male) are rewarded. In order to compete, working women generally learn to suppress their femininity. In the educational realm I become very conscious of what features I portray to my peers, often overcompensating for my femininity, or what I feel could be perceived as a weakness in the eyes of others, by striving for perfection. In many instances, more subconsciously than not, I tend to work hard to prove my intelligence as a way of defending my femininity, which I am reluctant to abandon.

Growing up I learned how to act out the role of a woman. I watched as the women in my life took sole responsibility for

cooking, cleaning, and child rearing. I played with dolls and pretended to cook the way I saw my mother and other women cook. With friends I grew interested in boys and clothes along with other things girls are supposed to be interested in. I learned that dressing "pretty" and responding politely gave me a favorable response. Eventually, these values associated with femininity became embedded in me.

There are several theories that explain social learning and the internalization of these norms. The **phenomenological perspective** in sociology questions many of the aspects of culture we take for granted. "Phenomenology asks us not to take the notions we have learned for granted, but to question them instead, to question our way of looking at and our way of being in the world" (Wallace and Wolf, 253). We see an example of this in the film, *Twelve Angry Men*, where the characters learn to question what they believe to be facts. They begin to see the world as a set of assumptions created by society. By the conclusion of the film we learn that there is never just one way to view things. There will always be questions as to what is happening around us and why. We tend to leave what we "know" as reality unquestioned and accept it without even realizing what event or thought is taking place.

An important concept in phenomenology is the **Social Construction of Reality**. This approach suggests that we continually construct and reconstruct our social reality through three steps: externalization, objectivation, and internalization. **Externalization** is the individual's ability to create or recreate society, like women's struggle to become equal members of society, and my pursuit of a career and success. I, along with other women, am practicing my ability to impact my own life. The underlying gender norms which dictate the acceptable behaviors of women in our society as if they are social "facts" are examples of **objectivation**. As I learn to accept and adopt these norms as my own I am **internalizing** society's institutional order.

Symbolic interaction "focuses primarily on an individual 'with a self' and on the interpretation between a person's internal thoughts and emotions and his or her social behavior" (Wallace and Wolf, 191). An important feature of symbolic interaction is the "**looking-glass self,**" described by Charles Cooley as "the imagination of our appearance to the other person; the imagination of his judgment of that appearance; and some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or mortification" (Wallace and Wolf, 195). In my situation I imagine that those around me are evaluating me based on the expectations held for women rather than based on my abilities as a working woman. I feel that when others perceive me that way, they focus on my appearance or my feminine demeanor, rather than on the intelligent thoughts and ideas I attempt to express. This is not to say that my assumptions are correct, but this only indicates how I believe people see me.

According to Wallace and Wolf (1999), symbolic interaction studies four segments of socialization. The **self** is an active interpreter of social behaviors, making sense of the values that a society holds. **Self-interaction** is the organization of these internal interpretations in order to then act. The **development of the self** is the process of internalization of the values of the community and the **symbolic meaning** is the mutual understanding of symbols and gestures within a community. Similar to the notion of the social construction of reality, symbolic interaction regards the individual, or the self, as an entity, who, through socialization, internalizes the core beliefs of a society, thereby acquiring the possibility of independent thought and action. As women are immersed in a culture they begin to perceive the norms of the culture as being basic "factual" components of their reality.

The feminine role confusion can be thought of as a natural outcome of wom-

en's longstanding subservience to men. This power discrepancy dates back as far as recorded history. Women have most often been the caregivers while men have been the providers. Why is there, now that we know men and women have equal abilities, a continuing divergence of power between the genders? Why women still continue to remain the caregivers and men the providers?

Dorothy Smith's **feminist standpoint theory** explores this issue from the point of view of women. Standpoint theory attempts to study everyday situations through the perspective of the subordinate persons. Smith's theory particularly explores the point of view of women. She describes the **woman's sphere** as the traditional areas that women are expected to occupy such as the home and kitchen, and the traditional tasks that women are supposed to accomplish, such as child rearing. This sphere was considered the core of womanhood. Smith also discusses the **bifurcation of consciousness** in which women are forced to maintain a dual consciousness in today's changing world. Women have to constantly worry about how to manage the household while also, now being expected to maintain an intelligent, thoughtful role in the larger society, are expected to devote attention to their careers and jobs. In her article titled "The Effect of Immigrant Experiences on the Bifurcation of Women's Consciousness" (2003/4), Guadalupe Paz expresses the same dilemma when she states: "I think I have been assigned two organizations of the world or two societies who have shaped who I am, that influence what I do and what I want" (Paz, 31).

Conversely, men dominate the **relations of ruling**, "or the ruling apparatus, which include not only the state but also institutions of administration, government, management, and the professions that organize, lead, and regulate contemporary societies" (Wallace and Wolf, 286). Once encompassing this command to regulate society it becomes simple to maintain that power by inhibiting the rights of the subordinate. Emily Margulies expresses her frustration, shared by many women, including myself, with this system of power in her essay, "From Anti-man to Anti-Patriarchy" (2002). She says, "Most of the decisions that I don't agree with are made by men and for men, and in turn I cannot see my place in the system" (Margulies, 1). Most women do not have the outlet to make decisions and laws that could have lasting effects on their lives. Only a select group of women have been successful in rising to the ranks of where they may affect the relations of the ruling. Smith discusses the division between commanding women who have made their way into the relations of the ruling and those who continue to represent the inferior class of women. These authoritative women tend to look down on the subordinate women from the ruling viewpoint, rather than to identify with them. In turn, many women who join the controlling apparatuses continue the cycle of stifling the less powerful women.

An interesting parallel can be drawn between this discussion and the film, *The Matrix*, which we watched at the beginning of the semester. In the film, the machines were comparable, in this case, to the relations of ruling; the humans, being submissive to the machines, are equivalent to women today. The machines' supremacy maintains the cycle of control because the humans are incapable of attaining the resources needed to rise above their superiors. In many ways the humans are oblivious to their lack of power because they are so completely submersed in the social order that they do not know any other way of life. Smith says, "how our knowledge of the world is mediated to us becomes a problem of knowing how that world is organized for us prior to our participation in it" (Farganis, 379). The only way to end subservience is to first realize

that it is taking place. We tend to see society as taking place naturally as it should be instead of asking what it could be. The only way to realize the problem with values we have embedded in us is to be shown an alternative way of life. Neo's awakening, by taking the red pill, opened his mind to ideas and realities he never thought possible. In the case of women, taking the red pill constitutes new awareness of their own equality and comprehension of the intricate institutions that have kept them under control. The machines have the power to create reality; however, they desire and the humans are at the mercy of that reality. They do not know to question reality because that is all they know.

Smith's feminist standpoint theory can be related to the macro-sociological **Conflict Theory**. According to Conflict Theory groups continually compete for control. "Those groups with power will peruse their interests, and those without power will pursue theirs" (Wallace and Wolf, 119). When one group has managed to suppress another, the conflict temporarily ceases, but will eventually be rekindled. "The battle of the sexes" is a quite real phenomenon that has existed all throughout history. Much of that time women have been oppressed and we currently live in a unique time where women are seeking equality against all social constructs that prevent that from happening.

There are definite reasons that the ruling class (men) have been able to maintain control for such a long time. The economic **substructure** of society has always maintained male dominance, an idea that, throughout the past, has also been deeply rooted in individual and ideological belief systems. The **superstructure** are the laws, ideals and government that manage the substructure of a society, and control the way people are allowed to view the world. **Civil law** can be thought of as a way of upholding order to benefit the group in power. We can see many examples of the imbalanced **structure** throughout the history of women's rights. Women were incessantly given the same rights as children, having no say in the government, work place or any other aspect of governing life. The **elite theory** states that only a small number of individuals can hold authority and that, for this reason, they are automatically at odds with those within their power. Because of this division between those in power and those who are controlled, **conflict** is seen as being inevitable.

The film, *The Big One*, delves into the struggle between the dominant and subordinate classes. Michael Moore illustrates the power structure that perpetuates the ongoing **exploitation** of the lower class by capitalist society. Our society keeps the lower class at a disadvantage by allowing big business to regulate jobs and the economy. Regardless of the success of a particular company, that company is given the right to pay workers far below their worth or to even give their jobs to others who will accept less. Capitalist society, according to Moore, allows for the rich to get richer, and the poor, poorer, or in light of the Conflict Theory, the powerful to get more powerful.

This class conflict relates directly to gender issues. While, for centuries women remained subordinate they are now demanding their equality in society. This causes serious conflict between men and women. The *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, by Friedrich Engels, discusses how women have been degraded and force into servitude throughout history. In a **patriarchal** society women are oppressed and their work exploited. They perform domestic duties for no money at all, which, in turn, strongly inhibits the ability to work outside the home. According to **Marxist Feminists**, "the sexual division of labor and society remains intact even with women in the paid economy" (Wallace and Wolf, 87).

The movie, *Erin Brockovich*, tells the story of a single mother who is unable to get

ahead in capitalist society. Her main responsibility is to her three children but this responsibility holds her back in the workforce. After attaining a job she is bombarded by concerns about having a nanny for her children, inhibiting her from performing to her full potential. Once she is able to find someone responsible to care for her children, ironically the male neighbor, she is able to function much better at work. She excels in her field and puts in many extra hours, only to lose her hold on her family life. Her children begin to resent the fact that she is never home with them. Women, not men, are always forced to balance between providing for their children in a capitalist society, and caring for them, unpaid and unappreciated.

Sociobiology "is concerned with the biological bases of behavior: with what is common to all societies, and common, moreover, by virtue of our biological nature and evolutionary history" (Wallace and Wolf, 382). Sociobiologists believe that information is passed on through genes and that much of this information affects the way humans interact today. One aspect of this theory deals with **reproductive strategies** where men have the ability to father several children in a small amount of time while women carry children for nine months before giving birth and are then responsible for the care of that child. This great difference between the reproductive strategies of men and women gave men the advantage to be free from responsibility and easily available to other prospects in life. Due to this one fundamental difference men were able to establish control over women while women were too preoccupied with childrearing to compete for power.

This idea correlates to several macro-sociological theories. *Functionalists* "tend to look at society as an integrated system of functionally interrelated structures, at times suggesting that societies have a life of their own and that their survival demands that particular needs of the system have to be met" (Farganis, 181). Structural-functionalism emphasizes the structural needs of a social system in order to survive. Functionalism emphasizes three points: there is a need for general interdependence, a state of equilibrium, and reorganization to bring things back to normal.

According to Talcott Parsons, "[f]or the structuring of sex roles in the adult phase the most fundamental considerations seem to be those involved in the interrelation of the occupational system and the conjugal family" (Farganis, 195). Several centuries ago there was a survival and reproductive need for women to be the caregivers. At the time it was more difficult for women to provide for the family in the wild, by hunting and gathering, while pregnant or nursing. Today the ability of a woman is equal to that of a man in the workforce, and in turn, men are just as able to care for children. There still remains a general interdependence to both care and provide for children but the need for this is not gender specific. Our current society is between states of equilibrium which will eventually correct itself, most likely in a way that finds more generalized roles where men and women both take part in each realm of society.

Evolution and *modernity* also relate to sociobiology and reproductive strategies. Parson's *Evolutionary Model* begins with *differentiation*, or role allocation, which, at first, separates individuals into groups, such as provider or caregiver. These groups then begin to gain or lose control in what Parson called *adaptive upgrading*. While women were preoccupied with child rearing, men took on the leadership role. Eventually, *inclusion* takes place and subordinate groups, like women and minorities, become capable of contributing to the structure of society. Finally, *value generalization* separates individuals into groups based on their abilities rather than superficial features. The basis of modernity, according to Anthony Giddens, is the

replacement of tradition with ***expertise***. Giddens argues, "that the accumulation of these processes [Parson's model] over time has brought us to a new phase in social evolution; that global "high modernity" is characterized by changes in personal identity and experience of the world" (Wallace and Wolf, 185). At one point in history it was traditional for the woman to stay in the home, based on a need that, in our society, no longer exists. Men and women are equally able to care for children and labor in the work force. As we move past this phase in human evolution, people are supposed to begin to be judged on their abilities rather than outdated stereotypes.

Women are expected to portray certain characteristics in social settings. Growing up I was taught that I must be cute, well mannered and quiet in public and in the presence of other people. I was taught not to be argumentative and to be polite to anyone I meet. An interesting way to view these character expectations is through Ervin Goffman's perspective of **dramaturgy**. "Goffman looks at the ways individuals in their everyday lives present themselves and activities to others" (Wallace and Wolf, 230). Through the analogy of a play, Goffman described the existence of a **front-stage** and a **back-stage** persona. The front-stage is the element of the personality and conditions that a person is willing to portray to an audience, or those present. In the front-stage we cloak our inner emotions and intimate details from those who are fellow actors and participants in our drama. These emotions and intimate details are only presented in the back-stage region where they are protected from the scrutiny of a larger audience. **Impression Management** is the process whereby an individual controls what aspects of his or her life and being should be shared with others. Around those I am close to, I feel comfortable laughing, arguing, and being noisy and emotional. Around others, maybe at work, at school, unfamiliar acquaintances, and strangers, I protect these private qualities from judgment. I allow them to see qualities that are deemed acceptable and continually revert to the expectations I was taught for "lady-like behavior."

Through my socialization growing up, I also learned that the way to carry yourself was not simply through internalized qualities, but appearance was also very important. Girls are constantly judged on more than their mental ability. We must also look pretty in order to be accepted. The physical expectations, dating back centuries, are strongly enforced through society. Women learn through magazines, TV, and just about every other form of media that they should constantly strive for society's definition of perfection, at the cost of their own identity, and at the all-too-common realization that they are never going to be up to standard. There are no laws (at least today) regulating how a woman should look or behave, but failure to conform can lead to social seclusion or simply loneliness. Women could be made fun of or even outcast from a group. In the film, *Affluenza*, which we watched in class, we saw that consumers are relentlessly being told that they must have more and better products. We, especially women, are told that there is always a way to improve ourselves through material products. "The media has convinced the female population that in order to be attractive to men they have to look like a certain 2% of the airbrushed women" (Margulies, 3). Women are forced into a cycle where they are continuously buying products to make themselves more attractive and at the same time they are told that they are never good enough. Instead of finding satisfaction we find ourselves unhappy and unsatisfied with ourselves.

Morrie Schwartz was a very thoughtful and caring man who came up with his own sociological theories on how to live a meaningful and happy life. His ideas can be found in his book, *Morrie: In His Own Words* (1996), and in Mitch Albom's book, *Tues-*

day's With Morrie (1997). Many of his lessons have and will continue to help me through the struggles I face as a woman. Morrie implores people to make the changes in culture that they, themselves, want to see. "The culture we have does not make people feel good about themselves. We're teaching the wrong things. And you have to be strong enough to say if the culture doesn't work, don't buy it. Create your own" (Albom, 35). It is difficult for a woman, even today, to defy what she has learned through socialization and climb the ladder of a male dominated world. "Expect that it is going to be harder and take longer to do things. Be prepared to do things in ways that are very different from the way you did them before" (Schwartz, 8). Women must be prepared to put in more effort than their male counterparts. Not only must they strive to prove themselves but they must also learn a completely different set of values than their own. Morrie bases most of his lessons on love and caring for others and yourself. "The way you get meaning into your life is to devote yourself to loving others, devote yourself to your community around you, and devote yourself to creating something that gives you purpose and meaning" (Albom, 43). I take these inspiring words to mean that individual success is meaningless unless I strive to set a standard for those around me and make the professional arena even a little more accessible to women that come after me.

With so many expectations placed on my shoulders—*be* thin, pretty, dress nicely, wear the right perfume, *act* nicely, sweetly, politely; *and in the business world,* forget how you were taught to act and become strong and assertive—it is difficult to find an identity that can comprise all of this. To be a woman, a professional woman and to someday be a nurturing mother and wife, I cannot seem to find my bearings in the real world. My entire being is bifurcated by all the realms in which I must find success. The multi-roles that I am living out are in constant disagreement but the idea of reducing any of these roles is out of the question. They all uniquely add to my character and they make up the foundation of who I am.

In many ways my femininity is a product of generic socialization of women nation-wide. In many ways I am conforming to a stereotype that was created to hold me back in life. But in many ways my femininity gives me pride and allows me to connect with millions of other women. That being said, my conformity to womanhood does not satisfy the piece that desires success and esteem. I share Jennifer Dutcher's sentiment in her journal, *A Precarious Balance: Views of a Working Mother Walking the Tightrope* (2003) when she says, "I have always believed that I owe myself something that is my own, and that a happy woman will be a better wife and mother" (Dutcher, 82). Belonging to a whole does not give me satisfaction in life or in my abilities as a human being. In that way I have decided to break away from the conformity I have been subject to throughout my life in order to find success.

Following the cue of many strong women, I am working toward finding a place in a still male-dominated arena. In this way I have begun to experience the stresses that can come out of separation. I am struggling to maintain my femininity while taking on a world where masculinity is the foremost way to get ahead. The traits that are prevalent and significant in success remain the traits we use to describe men. Assertiveness, aggressiveness, and lack of emotionality are some of these traits. Many successful women have incorporated these traits into their character but suffer a backlash for their non-feminine qualities. Women are commonly faced with a lack of respect if they do not hide their femininity and are disrespected if they do. Still other women use their womanhood as a means to get ahead by sleeping with superiors and flirting with their bosses. These women

face a double backlash. By using their sexuality they are abandoning their integrity in the workplace and compromising their femininity. Women who coat their womanhood in the workforce quickly earn various derogatory stigmas and labels.

In theory my goal is to encompass both aspects of my identity without compromising either. I hope to find success through my intelligence and effort and not through society's stereotypes and guidelines. I know that I am capable and that I am both proud of my femininity and of my ability to succeed in my career. I also am very aware of the difficulty in maintaining my whole identity. In my struggle for success I have found a sort of pride in my abilities to maintain two distinct identities within myself. I hope that my aspirations for the future and my drive for success will not only result in my own personal success but also represent an objective to other women who face this dilemma. Rather than focusing on my own success I also wish to support other struggling women to find their success and further break down the wall that has held women back for such a long time. Although the business world, dominated by men, focuses on aggression and competition, I feel that women supporting each other could achieve success in any given field. Perhaps, as women's rights continue to progress at such a rapid pace, I will, along with other women, be able to integrate my womanhood as an asset, instead of a burden, into the professional world.

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