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Competing Discourses of Femininity [1997]

The two most important things being accomplished in the talk of women friends are friendship and femininity. In this chapter I want to focus on femininity and on the role of talk in constructing us as gendered beings, as women. (‘Femininity’ is a problematic word, because of the everyday connotations of the adjective ‘feminine’. By ‘femininity’ I mean the abstract quality of being feminine, just as masculinity is the abstract quality associated with being masculine. ‘Doing femininity’ can be paraphrased as ‘doing being a woman’. The latter is a much clearer and less ambiguous way of saying what I mean, but far too clumsy to use repeatedly.)

Most of us spend very little, if any, time thinking about gender, and we are rarely aware of ‘doing’ (or ‘performing’) gender. (By ‘doing’/‘performing’ gender, I mean presenting ourselves to others as a gendered being.) We just take for granted that we are women. But we assume that ‘being a woman’ is a unitary and unified experience – in other words, we think of ourselves as ‘I’/‘me’, that is, as singular. However, the woman we perform is not the same woman in all circumstances: we have all had the experience of feeling like a different person when we are in a different situation. For example, the ‘me’ that mashes a banana for a toddler is a different ‘me’ from the one who participates in a committee meeting or who poses as a life model at the local art school. Even in the same context we can change if something alters in that context. Liz’s anecdote about her friend changing when her husband joined them for a drink is a good illustration of this:

(1)
LIZ: when I was at the Health Club the other night/ and this girl I went with her husband turned up to have a drink with us in the bar/ . and like the

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whole atmosphere changed when he arrived/ <LAUGHS> [...] and she changed/ she changed/ she- she- she suddenly went tense/ you know/

We change because different audiences require different performances – and also because we sometimes feel like playing a different role. All kinds of different ‘self’ are possible, because our culture offers us a wide range of ways of being – but all these ways of being are gendered. These possible selves are not different kinds of person, but different kinds of woman. Moreover, the alternative versions of femininity available to the women in my recordings are specific to the so-called developed world at the end of the twentieth century.

A range of femininities

In this section I shall look at a few examples from the conversations to show what I mean by ‘doing’ or ‘performing’ femininity, and to give a sense of the range of femininities available to girls and women in Britain today.

The first example comes from a conversation where three 16-year-old girls are commenting on the appearance of the fourth, Sarah, who is trying on Gwen’s make-up.

(2) [Sarah tries on some of Gwen’s make-up]

GWEN: doesn’t she look really nice?
KATE: yes/
EMILY: she DOES look nice/

GWEN: I think with the lipstick
KATE: you should wear make-up more often . Sarah/

GWEN: it looks good/
EMILY: yeah looks [Sarah your lips . s- suit lipstick/ nice/]

GWEN: ((I’m saying)) what you said- big lips suit [lipstick/]
KATE: oohh yes/
EMILY: you should be [share it/ a model/]

GWEN: yeah/ looks good to me/ Sarah you look really nice/
KATE: yeah/
EMILY: models have big lips/

In this talk, the girls are overtly complimenting Sarah. This is part of the routine support work that girls and women do with each other as