Exploring the Complexities of Choice in Women's Beauty Work

Introduction and Aims

This research focuses on one theme which forms part of my wider thesis titled: 'Exploring How Panoptical Ideas of Inter- and Intra-Surveillance affect women's beauty work'.

This theme explores how ideas surrounding choice were invoked by participants when it came to their beauty work. To do this I draw upon feminist, post-feminist and Foucauldian-feminist literature to analyse particpant responses.

Theory

Previous literature in beauty work studies tends to polarise feminist debates surrounding the idea of choice. For example, is beauty work oppressive or liberating for women?

'A salient debate within this literature is based on assumptions about whether women are socially coerced into striving to achieve cultural standards of beauty or whether they freely choose to do so'

(GAGNE AND MCGUGHEY, 2010: 193)

Method and Methodology

- Semi-structured interviews and two focus groups with 28 women from Yorkshire and the Midlands.
- Participants were aged between 20 - 76, predominately white and heterosexual.
- Recruited by word of mouth, university email, and social media.
- Interviews were analysed using thematic analysis to identify patterns of meaning across the dataset.
- The analytic approach was situated within a critical-realist framework.

References

Bartky, S, L. (1990). 'Narcissism, Femininity, and Alienation.' in Sandra Lee Bartky (Ed). *Femininity and Domination*. pp. 33 - 44. London. Routledge.

Braun, V and Clarke, V. (2013). *Successful Qualitative Research: a practical guide for beginners*. London. Sage

Gagne, P and McGughey, D. (2010). 'Designing Women.' In Rose Weitz (Ed). *The Politics of Women's Bodies: Sexuality, Appearance, and Behavior*. Oxford. Oxford University Press.

Findings and Analysis

1) Some women carried out "beauty maintenance" for their male partners, which echoes previous feminist literature which posits beauty work as oppressive to women and for the benefit of the male gaze (Bartky, 1990):

Claire, 25: *Like with my legs – I shave my legs for my boyfriend, but the rest of it I do it for me.*

2) Many women stated that they did beauty work "for themselves". This relates to post-feminist theory describing beauty practices as something which is enjoyable, empowering and creative for women.

Whitney, 52: *Yes I like to do it and I like to buy nice products. I used to make a lot more effort than I perhaps do now, but I've always enjoyed doing my makeup.*

3) The most prominent factor underpinning responses was a "knowingness of being made visible." This was where beauty work was carried out only when participants entered the public sphere, whether that be for university, work, or their weekly shop.

Interviewer: *Who do you wear makeup for?*

Verity, 27: *Hmm... I wanna say myself. But then if I could, I wouldn't because the first thing I do when I come home is I wash my makeup off. So it's only really when I go outside.*

Conclusion and Future Research

Participants were aware of socio-cultural norms surrounding beauty and femininity and this lead to complex responses when it came to the idea of choice. However, the idea of being made visible and self-surveillance was an important factor in participant responses.

Future research could use a Foucauldian-feminist framework to account for complexities and nuances surrounding women's beauty work, particularly those from minority backgrounds.

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