# Chapter 5: Power

## Case Study: Gendered Appearance Norms

In this discussion, we will be using the phenomenon of gendered appearance norms as a case study for illuminating the Foucauldian conception of power, as described in David Owen's chapter of the textbook. By 'gendered appearance norms', I mean social rules and expectations governing how males and females ought, respectively, to present, adorn, maintain, and modify their bodies. In many western societies, like the US and UK, these norms specify, for instance, that women but not men are to wear skirts, dresses, long hair, make-up, and high-heeled shoes, and that men should have large, prominent muscles, while women should be slender but large-breasted. Appearance norms, so understood, might seem at first sight like a somewhat eccentric choice of a case study on the political-theoretical issue of power. Appearance norms do not seem to be imposed on us by the state, or backed up by legal coercion. Indeed, one might think that they are not imposed on us at all, but rather endorsed and conformed to willingly. To assume that these norms are not an example of power at work, however, is to assume precisely the sort of understanding of what power is, and in what spheres of human activity it is found and exercised, that the Foucauldian model rejects. For as Owen explained, that model sees power not as something confined to the sphere of government or law, but rather as an inescapable feature of all social relationships and interactions. On this model, as Foucault himself famously put it, '[p]ower is everywhere' (Foucault 1978/1990, p. 93). Moreover, as Owen also showed us, for Foucault, power is not merely a matter of forcing people to act against their preferences. On the contrary, it operates by shaping people's preferences, and conditioning them to internalize and accept social norms. While Foucault himself did not consider gender in much detail, and has been criticized by feminists on that basis, many feminist political theorists have also argued that his conception of power provides a valuable prism through which to examine how appearance norms (and other norms of gendered behaviour) are transmitted and internalized, and might be resisted (see, for example, Bartky, 1997; Bordo, 2003; Butler, 1990; Chambers, 2008). In what follows, we will first examine what the Foucauldian account of power implies for the analysis of gendered appearance norms, and then what it implies regarding whether and how far the inequalities and disadvantages that accrue to women in particular as a result of those norms are to be understood as a concern of justice.

## Surveillance and appearance

In approaching this issue, the best place to begin is by returning to Foucault's use of the Panopticon to illustrate his account of the operation of power in modern societies. The Panopticon, you will recall, is a type of prison, deliberately laid out in such a way as to ensure that inmates can never be certain whether they are under surveillance by the guards, and thus that they must always assume that their rule-breaking would be detected

and punished. The effect of the Panopticon's design is, in Foucault's words (1977/1995, p. 201),

> to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power … [T]he surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its actions.

In this way, according to Foucault, the Panopticon secures prisoners' compliance with the rules more efficiently than a system which relies on the guards being physically present to keep order. Prisoners will follow the rules—specifying minutely what they are to do with their bodies, to what schedule—initially out of a conscious fear of being caught if they do not. But in time they will internalize the rules, as a result of having habitually followed them, and may eventually even want to obey. In short, the Panopticon does not merely coerce prisoners, but disciplines them into becoming their own prison guards, precisely regulating their own bodies and behaviour. And in a parallel way, according to Foucault, citizens in modern societies are disciplined into internalizing and identifying with complex social norms, such that they can ordinarily be relied upon to conform to them without being forced or continually monitored. All of us are aware, growing up in our given culture, that certain things are expected of us, and that there are penalties (ranging from legal punishment in some cases to social disapprobation, ridicule, scorn, and so forth in others) for failing to meet them. To begin with, we may conform only because we fear the penalties for infractions of the rules. However, over time, we will come to conform without thinking, and may develop a desire to do so□—a desire which is reinforced in social interactions in which our conformity meets with the approval of others, allows us to fit in, or results in our being given various benefits.

Now, consider how this analysis of power maps onto the issue of gendered appearance norms. The focus of the feminist writers who have done so is typically primarily on *feminine* appearance norms, since, as we shall later see, those norms are especially stringent and demanding, and raise troubling issues of gender inequality and female subordination. A Foucauldian account describes, first, the way in which feminine appearance norms are transmitted and reinforced in innumerable everyday interactions, as when people compliment or criticize others' appearances, and, second, the way in which women become self-policing of their conformity to these norms. This self-policing occurs because, as in the Panopticon, women are under the constant spectre of surveillance by others, and the associated threat of social penalties for non-compliance. Clare Chambers (2008, p. 27) illustrates this, for instance, by citing examples of the way in which women in modern western societies are explicitly encouraged to act out of concern that their appearance is constantly under scrutiny, and may be found wanting, such as advertisements for shoes and deodorants, which depict women on a perpetual catwalk, or having their underarms viewed when they least expect it. The result of this omnipresent threat of surveillance, then, is that women must constantly monitor their own appearances.

In an often-quoted passage, feminist writer Sandra Lee Bartky expresses the point by describing a 'panoptical male connoisseur' who 'resides within the consciousness of most women', and who judges them even when others do not (1990, p. 72). Bartky also describes (1990, p. 80) the way in which (again, in parallel with the prisoner in the Panopticon) conformity with appearance norms becomes habituated through repetition — in this case, of a wide range of intricate practices for altering or maintaining the size and shape of the body, removing, colouring or styling hair, applying make-up, and so forth. The repetition of these practices, Bartky argues, involves the disciplining of women, through their bodies, into conformity with the rules, just as the Panopticon inmates are disciplined by the regimentation of their bodily movements. Finally, Chambers notes the way in which, on a Foucauldian account, power can be seen as shaping not only women's external behaviour but, more deeply, their desires to participate in conventional beauty practices, their experience of those practices as pleasurable, and their sense of what is beautiful or attractive. For instance, in relation to women's desires for high-heeled shoes, she writes (Chambers, 2008, p. 29):

> High-heeled shoes aren't inherently, naturally sexy. On a man, even one with feminine, slender legs, the general consensus is that they look ridiculous … The fact that we find high heels attractive on a woman is entirely dependent on how our society constructs beauty, and this, in turn, is strongly affected by our social norms of gendered behaviour.

In sum, then, feminists have adopted a Foucauldian perspective in order to show that women's choices to conform to prevailing standards of gendered appearance are not, as many might assume, unproblematically free, but rather responses to power. And if that conclusion is correct, it is morally and politically significant, since it raises the possibility that, insofar as women are disadvantaged in being subject to power in the foregoing ways, they may be victims of injustice. The remainder of the case study elaborates on this point.

<A>Justice and change

Owen's chapter explained that one of the primary functions of a conception of power is to illuminate the distinction between disadvantages and inequalities that are to be considered matters of *injustice*, and those that are to be considered merely *unfortunate*. Different conceptions of power, he showed, have different implications regarding *when* the disadvantages people face are to be identified as injustices, which call for a solution or remedy, because of their different understandings about what people are and are not free to do, and what they can be considered responsible or accountable for. Feminists have persuasively argued that gendered appearance norms are in various respects harmful to women, whether or not they succeed in conforming to them. First, and perhaps most obviously, any woman who does not meet the impossibly demanding standards of appearance expected in many cultures is in danger of being denied various social benefits and opportunities —to an arguably significantly greater degree than men, for whom

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status and positive recognition seem less tightly connected by society to their appearances. Second, the beauty regimens which women are expected to practise routinely are seriously demanding in time, effort, and money. Third, some of the most popular beauty practices are physically risky or harmful, such as habitual wearing of high-heeled shoes, which damages the feet over time, and cosmetic surgery, which can cause complications of varying severity, up to and including death. And fourth, even successfully meeting feminine appearance norms comes at a cost to women's social status and perception in the eyes of others, insofar as it can lead to their being cast as sex objects for the gratification of others, as shallow and preoccupied with trivial issues like make-up, and so forth (Chambers, 2008, at, e.g., p. 210, p. 28). In short, female appearance norms appear to place women in a double-bind, whereby they must incur various burdens for the sake of an elusive social approval, which is never conferred without significant qualification.

Suppose the foregoing claims about the disadvantages faced by women as a result of prevailing appearance norms are correct. What is the moral significance, if any, of these disadvantages? On a liberal understanding of power and freedom, it appears that the harms or risks incurred by women in attempting to meet gendered appearance norms are not a concern of justice☐—at least if the women who incur them acted without coercion or interference. For the liberal perspective, as it is usually construed, holds that harm is rendered morally unproblematic if it comes about as a result of free and informed choice. On a Foucauldian account of power, meanwhile, the assumption that the choice of women to act in compliance with feminine appearance norms legitimates disadvantage, or renders it compatible with justice, is undermined. For as Chambers argues, in a powerful feminist critique of the liberal understanding of the moral significance of choice, the Foucauldian account indicates that 'our choices are much less free than we think' (ibid., p. 28). On Chambers's Foucauldian feminism, justice can require that the state take action to prevent or alleviate harms which individuals undergo voluntarily, in the course of conforming to socially constructed gender norms, and perhaps to shape those norms themselves in a less harmful, more egalitarian direction. Thus, as a notable and controversial example, Chambers argues that breast enlargement surgery—given its physical harmfulness, and the extent of the social pressure that women face to undergo it, for the apparent sake of personal and professional success—ought to be banned, not only for adolescents, but for consenting adults (ibid, ch. 5; cf. Jeffreys, 2005). As Chambers notes, her proposal that breast enlargement should be disallowed is in the same vein as proposals for the prohibition in many western societies of the minority cultural practice of female genital mutilation☐—to which, interestingly, liberals are often more sympathetically disposed. In both cases, Chambers argues, the normative significance of women's preferences for undergoing these harmful procedures is undermined by the fact that those preferences have been shaped by power. And in both cases, moreover, state interference can encourage changes to the social norms underlying those preferences, by ensuring that *no one* in future can conform to the existing aesthetic ideal (for unnatural, 'gravity-defying

breasts that are both large and pert' [Chambers, 2008, p. 30] in the one case, and surgically altered genitalia in the other), and thus that the successful examples of some do not increase pressure on others to follow suit.

In conclusion, we have seen that, while the phenomenon of gendered appearance norms may not seem the most obvious example of the effects of power, it provides an especially apt and helpful case study for the Foucauldian conception. It illustrates Foucault's understanding of power as present in social relationships, and as operating in the disciplining of agents into becoming self-policing followers of social rules. And it also illustrates the way in which, from a Foucauldian point of view, justice is not necessarily secured by respecting people's avowed preferences, but rather may require resistance to social norms that have unequalizing or harmful effects.

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