

The Affects of Patriarchal Views on Female Friendships

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The patriarchal structure of our society- one that values men more than women- creates many difficulties for women. They earn less than male counterparts, command less respect, and deal with the consequences of their bodies being sexualized against their will- occasionally with violence. However, rather than sympathizing with one another, they often view each other as rivals (Roosmalen, 2000; Bleske-Rechek & Lighthall, 2010). The role of females in advertising clearly exhibits the objectification of women that occurs in patriarchal societies. Not only do men objectify women, but women also objectify other women, and themselves- which is referred to as *self-objectification*. Objectification of anyone, male or female, causes the viewer to separate the objectified person's physical characteristics from his or her personal characteristics (Gurung & Chrouser, 2007). Self-objectification causes the person to view their own body in this light. Many studies measure the prevalence of female objectification amongst men, and how this affects relationships between the two genders. However, while studies have been done measuring how females objectify each other, the effects of these factors on female-female relationships have not been extensively studied.

The literature is difficult to come by regarding objectification in female relationships and assimilation of other patriarchal views. These first two studies observe the dangers of objectification and self-objectification. Heflic and Goldenberg (2009), proclaiming to be the only study of its kind, sought to discover if the people who objectify women are less competent and less human, as this occurs in women who self-objectify. Their results supported this hypothesis, but their methods seem too limiting. The study had a sample of men describe two prominent women in the media- Sarah Palin and Angelina Jolie. In a control group, men were instructed to describe the person. In the experimental group, they were told to describe the

person's appearance. In the questionnaire that followed, it was observed that men in the experimental group rated both women as less competent than those in the control group. However, several men in the control group also described the appearance of the women without prompt. Despite claiming that all people view objectified women as less competent and less human, only men were used in the study. The use of two famous women, especially one in the political arena, also raises a high chance of polarizing the view of competency. A participant might rate both incompetent because he dislikes Angeline Jolie's films and the Republican platform, rather than the appearance of either.

The second study, which observed the effects of self-objectification, suggests that self-objectification leads to self-surveillance, which promotes body shame and appearance anxiety. These two factors led to behaviors such as disordered eating, depressed mood, and poorer sexual functioning (Tiggermann & Williams, 2012). Suggested treatment involved lowering the woman's value of her physical appearance and concern with other's perceptions of her body, including cognitive-behavioral therapy to address anxiety, body image disturbances, and depression. If internalizing self-objectification leads to such stress, it seems odd that heterosexual women would objectify other females with a male perspective.

The study that lends the most knowledge to inner-workings of female relationships under the influence of patriarchy was conducted by Roosemalen (2000). In this study, the author analyzed 875 letters written to *Teen Magazine* advice column. The girls' ages ranged from nine to eighteen, but most of the letters were written from girls aged eleven to fourteen. These letters were categorized into sections highlighting the common themes found within them: (1) relationships with boys give life purpose and meaning, (2) female relationships involve

competition, (3) sexuality as a market system, (4) females as sexual gatekeepers, and (5) sexual violence and harassment.

This study illustrated how the forces of patriarchy and capitalism socialize adolescent females. Evidence was provided to suggest that in a patriarchal society, relationships with males are viewed as more valuable. Many letters from these girls bemoaned their 'boyfriendless' status. By placing more value on a relationship with a male, their female friendships were devalued. Other letters written by these girls detailed situations where they contemplated choosing a boy, or even their best friend's boyfriend, over their friend. This is due to the fact that these adolescent girls assimilate their identity with the values of patriarchy; girls define themselves by how desirable they are to males, whom they see as more important than females (Roosemalen, 2000). This sparks intense rivalry and mistrust among female friends.

Roosemalen (2000) also discusses confusion among what is sexually appropriate. Boys are seen as expected sexual aggressors, whereas the responsibilities and consequences of sex: unwanted pregnancy, protection from STD's, and social stigma, are placed on the girl. Many of the letters in this section detail the indecision girls experience in sexual situations and the prevalence of coercive sex. High value is placed on maintaining a boyfriend during adolescence. However, girls who have sex report feeling disrespected or used, and face harassment from both genders. This creates a large amount of difficulty for young women who wish to both follow the cultural expectations of purity but maintain a relationship. Because girls adopt this patriarchal view, they are likely to police themselves and each other, denigrating sexually promiscuous girls along with their male classmates.

Roosemalen's (2000) study touched on the aspect of female rivalry and the tendency for women to expect themselves and each other to perform according to male views of femininity. However, this study mainly delved into the influence of patriarchy on the individual female, not her social circle. The females studied here were also children who wrote to a self-help column, not healthy and stable adult women who have possibly outgrown the all-encompassing need to seek approval from boys.

The study itself also has severe limitations. First, these 875 letters were anonymous. The study does not confirm that each letter contains a written age of the writer. Also, there is the fact that these girls could be lying, older, or possibly even men. The sample itself is comprised of girls(?) who read *Teen Magazine* and felt the need to ask their advice column for help with a large problem. If these girls do not feel comfortable asking someone they know, this could suggest a lack of trusted female role-models, which could factor as a source of an adopted patriarchal viewpoint. The study does not necessarily measure healthy adolescent girls, only those experiencing some sort of social problem. While it does provide several insights to the socialization of adolescent girls, it does not examine female friendships closely.

Another study set out to measure attractiveness and rivalry in women's friendships with other women. They proposed that female friendships both facilitate and complicate the pursuit of an opposite-sex mate, so women prefer to make friends with women who are equally attractive to diminish complication. Because men choose female mates based on attractiveness, females perceive more rivalry in friendships with friends that are more attractive than themselves (Bleske-Rechek & Lighthall, 2010). Forty-six pairs of friends (Aged about 18-21) took individual tests which asked how attractive they perceived themselves to be compared to other women their age, how attractive they perceived their friend to be compared to other women their

age, and whether they perceived themselves as more or less attractive as their friend. They were also asked several questions designed to assess mating rivalry. After this, the women had pictures taken of them from the shoulder up, which were later given to a panel of impartial judges to rate on attractiveness.

This study (Roosemalen, 2000) supported the hypothesis that less attractive women view more attractive friends as stronger rivals. The authors also discovered that many female friendships were, as they suspected, between women of roughly the same level of attractiveness. This concept of female friends competing for mates was also discussed in the study of adolescent girls, which pinpointed rivalry as part of female friendships due to patriarchal influence. However, this study only supports the hypothesis that rivalry over attraction *exists*, not why it exists.

While very well executed, this study was not without admitted limitations from the researchers. First, the women studied were all college aged, and only 29% were in a serious romantic relationship. This perception of rivalry could be much different among older, married women. Secondly, rivalry may not outweigh the benefits of having a friend who is more attractive and could possibly have access to a selection of potential mates or offer knowledge that could raise the attractiveness levels of the less attractive friend. While this does not explicitly contribute to the theory that patriarchal societies have a large effect on female relationships, the fact that levels of attractiveness affect friendships between heterosexual females is consistent within the literature.

Research supports that women and men will both objectify a woman wearing provocative clothing (Johnson & Gurung, 2011). A study was done to discover if women in provocative

clothing appearing competent will arouse less objectification from other women, with interesting results. The experimenters used three different full-body pictures of female models: one control with the model against a blank wall, one suggesting competence by standing near a gymnasium pool and holding an award, and a third suggesting competence by doing a math problem on the whiteboard. Each model wore a different set of clothing from each other to avoid alerting participants, and were photographed each time in that same outfit. When viewed as a control, the models were rated on average as a 6.44 on a 1-9 scale of sexiness, '1' meaning not at all, and '9' meaning extremely.

The results supported the hypothesis that women showing competence while dressed provocatively will be viewed as more competent and less feminine, but the researchers also discovered something unexpected. The view of the female models at the blackboard received significantly different ratings than the model at the pool. Females were more likely to view this woman as more promiscuous, more likely to be in a short-term fling, more likely to use her body to get what she wanted, less honest, and less trustworthy (Johnson & Gurung, 2011). The researchers attributed this to a phenomenon called *Queen Bee Syndrome*- where a woman denigrates and discriminates against other women by individualizing her own success. This happens often when a woman rises to a place of prestige, especially in a male-dominated field. According to the researchers, the academic models were rated as less likeable and popular than the athletic models because the academic models were performing math problems and competing in a stereotypically male arena. Because competitive swimmers race against their own gender, the gender violation was not present and women rated liking them significantly more.

What is interesting about this study is that competence and femininity were found to be negatively correlated; women rated more competent were rated less feminine. The fact that

women were more critical of a female appearing competent in an academic, male-dominated setting also suggests women adhere to patriarchal views of themselves and their gender's competence. A limitation in this study was the relative size of the models in the picture. In order to set the scene, models in both the academic setting and the athletic setting were viewed from further away than the control. The fact that all the models are dressed provocatively could have affected the participants' perceptions of the competent models when compared to the control picture of the model in her same outfit, rather than a more modest control. Though this study generated surprising results that suggest patriarchy affects how women view other women, the results might have been different had these women been friends with the models in the pictures.

The available literature suggests there are a variety of views women hold toward their own gender. While the study by Roosemalen (2000) provides the most detailed information on what these views are and how they manifest, little has been done to study what effects these views have on friendships between women. If women view each other as rivals and value male relationships over female, how much effort is put into seeking or maintaining female friendships? If women put down other women for competing in male-oriented activities, do female friends discourage each other from participating in activities they might enjoy otherwise? How genuine and honest are women in their friendships if they view each other as rivals for male attention? As it currently stands, the literature has not answered these questions. Much more research is needed to understand just how affected women's friendships are by the patriarchal nature of our society.

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