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96

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Gender codes in women's advice books

Arlie Russell Hochschild

In his book *Gender Advertisements* (1976), Erving Goffman shows us the 'look' of women in modern American advertising.¹ Through his five hundred or so photos of women and men in advertisements, Goffman shows us how women, like children, are often pictured on or near the floor, or in whining or begging postures. He shows us women in clowning or pouting poses and men not in such poses. He shows us how, like children, female models hold a man's hand from behind. He points out how women models show more emotion than male models ('flood out', as Goffman puts it), expressing emotion since they are not expected to be in charge of anything. He shows how women are depicted listening intently to men talk, or how women look at men who point authoritatively to some distant object. He shows a female model, winsome and wide-eyed, revealing a bashful knee-bend, choreographed with a strong, protective male. In the details of such looks and scenes, Goffman shows us latent rules for how to 'look feminine'. And these rules suggest to Goffman an analogy: man is to woman as parent is to child. Men and women are implicitly unequal in the apparently 'natural' way that parents and children are unequal. From these looks and scenes, Goffman teases out an underlying social principle, a paternalistic version of patriarchy. Goffman suggests that this simple, apparently non-ideological 'look' is a sly way of reaffirming this principle. *Gender Advertisements* thus concerns what a gender display displays, and it is about how a display reaffirms whatever it reaffirms. In his articulation of these points, I believe Goffman is our most brilliant observer.

His observations seem to reflect four premises. First, as Goffman talks about them, the models portrayed in *Gender Advertisements* do not seem to consider and decide how to pose; they intuitively know, and passively fall into conformity with them. The woman in the little-girl-bashful-knee-bend pose in *Gender Advertisements* thus differs from Goffman's description of Preedy at the beach, a fictional character in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*

(1959:5). The female model just knows what to do, it would seem; she does not consciously choose. On the other hand, Preedy, a vacationing Englishman on a summer beach in Spain is a conscious and strategic actor. As Goffman describes:

By devious handlings he gave any who wanted to look a chance to see the title of his book – a Spanish translation of Homer, classic, thus but not daring, cosmopolitan too – and then gathered together his beach-wrap and bag into a neat sand resistant pile (Methodical and Sensible Preedy), rose slowly to stretch at ease his huge frame (Big Cat Preedy) and tossed aside his sandals (Carefree Preedy after all) (1959:5).

The image of the bashful-knee-bend model differs from the image of the actor in Goffman's other writings. In his other writings, Goffman offers us a world of rules, unbudgeably there, and he asks 'how do situations use people to keep rules in place'? Mockingly, he seems to take the rule's point of view, while at the same time offering us an actor who works tirelessly at getting around these rules. Curiously, in his analysis of gender Goffman did not use all of 'Goffman'. He had in his conceptual workshop many important tools that he nowhere applies to gender (Goffman 1977). But we might start by applying the Goffman-on-everything-else to the topic of gender as seen in advice books. For some of these books presume an actor like Preedy at the beach.

Second, in posing as they pose, Goffman's models are following one body of tacit social rules about gender, not two or three, or some mix. He assumes the cultural hegemony of a certain version of patriarchy, and he takes it as his task to reveal this code to us through his analysis of display. His choice of topic – ads – makes it hard to discuss real people's doubt about or conflict over or estrangement from a code. Though *Gender Advertisements* was published in 1976 it seems to reflect the social quietude of an earlier era. But as women move into paid work in both the Western and non-Western worlds, the main story is not ritual affirmation and cultural reproduction, but rather one of cultural diversity, upheaval and challenge. The question becomes 'how do women choose from among many *competing* codes'? (See West and Zimmerman 1987).

In *Gender Advertisements*, Goffman also confines himself to describing rules that apply to the actor's outer appearance. He sets aside the task of describing rules that apply to inner feeling. Though many illustrations in his other works reflect 'feeling rules', as I call them, perhaps because Goffman resisted the idea of a 'self', the concept

of feeling rules remained under-theorized (see Hochschild 1983:201-222). But if we do presume a self with an interior life, we are led to explore gender codes which regulate the emotional 'bottom' of life fully as much as the interactional 'surface'.

Finally, although Goffman was often drawn to study the strain between strong rules and fragile selves, he doesn't look for that strain here, though by following in Goffman's tracks, we may do so.

Drawing ideas from Goffman's other works (1977, 1959) then, and from Ann Swidler (1986), in this essay I try to look at popular advice books for women in some of the ways that Goffman looks at ads. I describe the body of social rules, or gender codes as I call them, which these advice books offer readers as solutions to their problems. I suggest that these codes apply to deep as well as surface aspects of the self, and that they are often at odds with the 'real self'. But just as Goffman found in common advertisements a window on the rules governing the outer display of gender – rules about how to appear 'as a man' and 'as a woman' – so in advice books we may discover, among other things, rules that govern feeling. And we find meta-rules about how to feel about following the rule, and how to feel about oneself as one follows the rule. If a woman is to use wiles, should she do so enthusiastically? Squeamishly? Apologetically? Coolly? Tongue-in-cheek? Advice books often answer the question Goffman would ask, 'what frame should the actor place on a particular interaction, the particular use of a rule'? And in answering this question, advice books seem to suggest that more than an act or a script is at issue, and that life is, after all, more than theatre.

Two female gender codes

A gender code is a body of rules about how to look, behave and feel 'as a woman' and 'as a man'. Here I focus on female codes. Each code establishes a permissible range of looks, behaviors and feelings beyond which a woman is 'too' feminine or 'not feminine enough'. Each code links a group of rules to the woman's inner sense of femininity. Since in American culture most women need to feel a positive sense of femininity to feel good about themselves as human beings, gender codes matter to them.

The modern advice books I have read seem to draw from one of two codes – the traditional and the egalitarian.² The traditional books draw on the cultural resources of the late 18th century parlor life of the American urban upper class, and fit with, even as they express, the economic dependence of women on men. (It is this code which is visually reflected in *Gender Advertisements*.) The traditional code provides the social guidelines for the establishment of male superiority. It exaggerates differences in the appearance of men and women, and establishes asymmetrical rules of interaction; women should listen more attentively, and defer to the judgement and authority of men, and in general enhance the self esteem of men more than men do for women. The traditional code prescribes asymmetrical rules of deference and makes it proper for women to have less power than men. What power they do have, they also attain not through a position in the larger social order but through personal relations, especially within the family.

The second code is egalitarian, and is associated with the entrance of women into the wage economy, the cultural ideals of the feminist movement and it extends to women some of the social rules of the contemporary male culture of work. It provides the social guidelines for establishing equality between the sexes, and thus calls for symmetrical rules of deference. Women are expected to listen and enhance the status of men as much as they expect to be listened to and complimented by them. According to this second code, women should have equal power, and their power should be based in the same way as that of men. These symmetrical rules of interaction often go with appearance rules de-emphasizing gender differences. The egalitarian code has two versions, one extending the traditionally feminine rules of appearance and interaction to men, and one extending the traditionally masculine rules to women, although I will not deal with these variations here.

A rough sketch of the two codes might look like this:

	Traditional	Modern Egalitarian
Look	highly gender differentiated female dress pastel colors small patterns smooth materials, silk lace, ruffles, frills (sweet 16 look, upper class lady look) high heeled shoes long finger nails long hair	less gender differentiated subdued 'male' colors bold patterns rough materials no frills (career-woman look) business suits for work, 'upper class ladylike' look for parties low heels short, plain nails short hair
Interactional Style	dissimulation, wiles, 'getting around men' through indirect means, crying, playing on male sympathy	direct dealing, no wiles, wiles considered beneath modern woman, 'sneaky'
Face	deferential to men, bashful, blush easily, downward glance face used as instrument for emotional expression, uses 'eyes'	direct look, no blushing, open 'assertive expression' masked and open emotional expression
Body	take up as little room as possible, leaning posture, bashful knee bend, head tilt	assume full size, erect posture, weight on both legs
Hand	'fish' handshake, modified version of presenting hand for ritual kiss	direct, businesslike
Speech	hospitable to interruption, use of 'female' vocabulary, e.g., 'lovely'	discourages interruption, male vocabulary

Chart 1. Gender codes

(to be cont'd)

Chart 1. Gender codes (cont'd)

Traditional	Modern Egalitarian
Feeling Rules	
gender asymmetry in love, put love of man first; cultivate love, subordinate ambition	gender symmetry in love; both sexes rank love in same way
suppress anger, or deal with it indirectly	not good to be 'clinging vine'
don't be 'too' aggressive, active or independent	don't be 'too' passive, dependent
Emotion Management	
suppress initiative, try to fit 'code' personality	suppress passivity, try to be assertive

I have drawn most of my illustrations of the traditional code from Marabel Morgan's *The Total Woman*, most illustrations of the modern code from Gloria Steinem's *Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions*, (which is not an advice book but does have advice). To show a code 'between' these two (modified traditional), I draw from Helen Gurley Brown's *Having it All*.

Mixing codes

In daily life, the individual actor mixes one look with another, one interactional style or emotional ideal with another. Half-wittingly, she blends parts of the two codes, or alternates between them depending on the situation at hand.

Often advice books also mix selected parts of these codes, and occasionally add other cultural elements as well. For example, Marabel Morgan's *The Total Woman* draws from the traditional code, having much in common with Jessie Pecks's *The True Woman: Life and Happiness at Home and Abroad* published in 1857. In both books, wives are advised to defer to their husband's authority with good grace, and to cultivate a separate domestic role at home, as the 'sunshine of one's home'. At the same time, writing in 1973, as a

right-wing Christian 'answer' to the sexual revolution of the 1960s, Marabel Morgan's *Total Woman* leavens this traditional advice with a notion of female allure drawn from Hollywood and Playboy Magazine. For example, Marabel Morgan advises a woman on how to look and act as she greets her husband at the front door as he returns from work. The wife is advised to prepare for the 'homecoming kiss' each evening well in advance; she should floss her teeth, brush them twice and 'close with a good mouth wash' (1973:115). Beyond this, Morgan gained notoriety for advising women to greet their husbands at the front door in a series of costumes. Morgan says:

I have heard women complain, 'my husband isn't satisfied with just me. He wants lots of women. What can I do?' You can be lots of different women to him. Costumes provide variety without him ever leaving home. I believe that every man needs excitement and high adventure at home. Never let him know what to expect when he opens the front door, make it a surprise package. You may be a smoldering sexpot or an All American fresh beauty. Be a pixie or a pirate, a cowgirl or a show girl. Keep him off guard (1973:117).

In harnessing the notion of sexual variety from the 1960s to monogamous Christian marriage, Morgan ironically concedes more cultural territory than she intends. By fighting fire with fire, she accepts the otherwise inhospitable 'ideal' of sexual variety into the Christian home, creating with it a new 'job' and series of looks for the Christian wife. Morgan marketed *The Total Woman* along with a program of Total Woman classes which were conducted throughout the nation in the 1970s. She mixed codes, and proposed this hybrid code (the sexy patriarchal marriage) as a remedy for a marriage gone stale in the dawning age of easy divorce.

In turn, important aspects of Morgan's 'mix' appear in Helen Gurley Brown's 1983 *Having It All*. Brown reduces the range of contexts in which Morgan's rules of female deference to males apply and expands the range of contexts in which egalitarian ones do. She advises women on the match of context to code. For example, in *Having It All*, a woman should be flattering, wily and submissive with her new love or husband, but assertive and 'unafraid to be defeminized' at work. Just as Morgan created a hybrid code out of the Bible and Hollywood, so Brown made a hybrid out of Morgan and the egalitarian code.