Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.
Negotiating Gender Relations in the Context of Heterosexual Intimate Partner Relationships

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Psychology

at Massey University, Manawatū, New Zealand.

Debra Campbell

2017
Abstract

Contemporary neoliberal postfeminism portrays women as empowered and existing in heterosexual relationships where equality is negotiated between two equal beings. The current study is a feminist project seeking to understand how men and women negotiate gendered relations in the context of heterosexual intimate partner relationships. The research draws on individual semi-structured interviews conducted with six men and six women aged between 25 and 40, who had been in a heterosexual intimate relationship for at least two years, thus having experience in the area of interest. A feminist poststructural discourse analysis was used to attend to the gendered power relations and dominant discourses that enabled and constrained subjectivities and positioning for the men and women. This research indicates that whilst equality and women’s empowerment are popularised ideals, the lived reality is quite different. In both their own gendered subjectivities and gendered performances in their intimate heterosexual relationships, men and women are navigating the positions/roles on offer in hegemonic masculinity, emphasised femininity and neoliberal postfeminist ‘choice’ femininity that are both enabled and constrained by heteronormativity. Heteronormativity produces discourses, subjectivities and positioning that are so dominant they are invisible, and are taken up as one’s own individualised choices. Social sanctions make resisting or developing new positions difficult. The result is the continuing enactment of traditional gendered roles in intimate heterosexual relationships, rather than negotiating new positioning, which is reproducing inequality and the continued subordination of women.
Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to express my gratitude to Dr Mandy Morgan, my academic supervisor. You encouraged, questioned, inspired and understood me throughout this challenging process. Your generosity with your time and knowledge, and your unwavering support in so many ways made this project happen. I feel incredibly fortunate, honoured and grateful to have had the opportunity to work with you.

I am grateful to all the research participants who shared their stories, thoughts and time with me and for helping me learn about the complexities of gendered relations in intimate relationships. Without their willingness to partake in this research, this study would not have been possible. Their openness and trust they placed in me by sharing their lived experiences enriched my life. I am hopeful that the analysis did justice to the trust they showed me and I also hope it will contribute to an expanded understanding of the complexity and dilemmas they face in the contemporary discursive field of gendered intimate heterosexual relationships.

Thank you to my friends and fellow students, for the Skypes, the coffees and support through the highs and lows of writing a thesis.

A big thank you to my colleagues and management at the Department of Corrections for the support, allowing me a year of part-time work, study leave and annual leave when I needed it.

Finally, I would like to dedicate this thesis to my husband and partner Phil and daughters Amy and Brooke. Your willingness to offer unwavering support and listen endlessly to my struggles, fears and excitement as well as hear the word ‘thesis’ thousands of times gave me what I needed to get this project done. It has been a long road and I would not have written this thesis without your faith in me and support. I love you.
# Table of Contents

Title Page .......................................................................................................................... i  
Abstract ............................................................................................................................. ii  
Acknowledgements ........................................................................................................... iii  
Table of Contents .............................................................................................................. iv  
Chapter One: Introduction ............................................................................................... 1  
Chapter two: Theoretical Framework and Literature Review ...................................... 5  
    Sex Roles ..................................................................................................................... 5  
    Feminist Standpoint .................................................................................................. 7  
    Heterosexual Relationships and Heteronormativity ..................................................... 8  
    Doing Gender ........................................................................................................... 14  
    Positioning ................................................................................................................ 16  
    Disciplinary Power and its Productivity ..................................................................... 17  
    Agency ....................................................................................................................... 18  
    Recent Feminist Poststructural Research .................................................................. 21  
        Sex, sexuality and sexualisation ............................................................................ 21  
        Violence .............................................................................................................. 28  
Chapter Three: Method ................................................................................................. 36  
    Ethical Considerations ............................................................................................. 37  
        Recruiting participants: Informed and voluntary consent .................................... 37  
        Respect for privacy and confidentiality ............................................................... 38  
        Avoidance of conflict of role/interest ................................................................. 39  
        Researcher safety ............................................................................................... 39  
        Cultural safety and sensitivity ............................................................................ 39  
    Participants ............................................................................................................... 39  
    Interviews .................................................................................................................. 40  
    Transcription ............................................................................................................ 41  
    Self-Care ................................................................................................................... 42  
    Data Analysis ........................................................................................................... 43
Chapter Four: Analysis and Discussion: Masculinity, Femininity and Contemporary Choices ......................................................... 45
Invisibility ................................................................................. 45
Masculinity: Navigating Hegemonic Masculinity ......................... 46
‘Boys will be boys’: The irresponsible man ................................ 50
‘Grown up’: The responsible man ........................................... 53
Femininity and Contemporary Choices ..................................... 55
Emphasised femininity: Womanly ........................................... 56
Contemporary choices: Neoliberal ideals ................................. 58
The Tension ................................................................................ 61
Chapter Five: Analysis and Discussion: Romance and After .......... 64
Romance: Attraction and ‘The Dream’ ....................................... 64
Attraction ................................................................................... 64
‘The dream’: Hopes for living ‘happily ever after’ ......................... 70
‘Happily Ever After’: The First Unwritten Chapter .................... 75
From romance to coupledom .................................................. 76
Choosing beauty ........................................................................ 79
Conceding to coupledom ....................................................... 81
Dungeons and Drudgery: The Second Unwritten Chapter ............. 83
Postfeminist expectations ....................................................... 84
Postfeminist performances ...................................................... 87
Meeting expectations ............................................................. 95
Chapter Six: Conclusion .......................................................... 100
References ................................................................................. 109
Appendix A .............................................................................. 121
Appendix B ............................................................................... 123
Appendix C ............................................................................... 124
Appendix D ............................................................................... 125
Appendix E ............................................................................... 126