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Negotiating Gender Relations in the Context of Heterosexual Intimate Partner Relationships

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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.

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