

If the Shoe Fits: Footwear, Gender and Identity

Introduction

The 'If the shoe fits' project is a contribution to work on identity, particularly the processes of identification. It sets out to extend understanding of how identity is done, what identification involves, how it feels, how identities are recognised. The notion that identity is embodied is not new but what this means experientially or phenomenologically is less well understood. If we're looking at identity as process, this necessarily involves change, fluidity and transition – and this is where shoes come in. The first flicker of an idea derived from the myths, fairytales and contemporary popular culture which feature footwear as party to or even as an agent of change: Cinderella's slippers, Dorothy's red shoes, boys' comic Billy Dane and his magic football boots, Jimmy Choo's stilettos. All of them promise or deliver transformation of some kind. We're asking about the processes that may – or may not – bring about transformation, the transitions between states and statuses: from work to leisure; baby to toddler; schoolgirl to disco diva – and the part shoes play in these dynamics.

Today we're exploring the part played by shoes in the doing of one aspect of identity: gender. So we're asking what it means to say that shoes enable normative femininity – how do different women's thoughts, feelings and experiences around shoes mediate their engagement with normative femininity? We are drawing on data predominantly from female participants because it is so rich and nuanced. We're planning a complimentary paper using data from male participants, and another with a broader focus. Also, although we will mainly be talking about high heels today, they were by no means the main form of footwear that female participants wore. Indeed, several chose not to wear them or to wear them only rarely, whilst others were unable to wear them at all because of foot problems.

Project progression and methods

This is a three year project funded by the ESRC and we're currently just over a year in. At the moment I'm conducting the fieldwork. There are two stages to the fieldwork; focus groups and case studies. I've completed the twelve focus groups, working with 80

people from different socio-economic backgrounds and with different relationships to shoes. They were as follows:

1. Pilot
2. Older people (over 65)
3. Generic
4. Young women
5. Women who like shoes
6. Young men
7. Health/foot problems
8. Bereaved
9. Climbers
10. Men who like shoes
11. Parents
12. Muslim women

The design of the focus groups was fairly fluid. There were topics we wanted the participants to talk about but initially the discussion was fairly open-ended in order to allow the connections, ideas, emotions and experiences the participants associated with shoes to emerge. There were some visual prompts, which were pictures of shoes including different designs, representations of shoes in fairytales and popular culture, but I used these less and less as I became more attuned to facilitating the groups – they did not seem to change or prompt discussion that was significantly different to the discussion that came about without using them. High heels were one of a number of different areas that we wanted the participants to discuss, but I didn't emphasize them in the facilitation. Yet they were a hot topic of discussion, highly emotive and contested. Other topics covered included a range of different women's and men's shoes, consumption, maintenance, memories and foot health.

We are also conducting case studies with 15 participants, working with each in a very in-depth way over the course of a year. I have conducted 13 first interviews to date. In all each participant will complete:

1. Shoe Key – A record of all the shoes they own, with information regarding how long they've had them, where they were bought, the brand, where they are kept/stored and a brief description of the shoes.
2. First Interview – This involves beginning to get to know the participant, discussing the project with them, the participant photographing their shoes and being interviewed about them whilst being filmed.
3. Activity 1 – If the participant is likely to go shoe shopping in the coming year, as a 'go-along' method, the researcher will accompany them. Alternatively, if the participant does not buy any shoes in the year, the researcher will accompany them on two different activities (see 'Activity 2').
4. Scrapbook – Each participant has been asked to keep a scrapbook on the theme of 'Shoes and Identity'. This is a creative task in which they can choose how they express themselves, whether they want to write, draw, make collages etc. It has been shown that engaging participants' creativity, rather than solely through talk, can encourage thinking in 'non-standard' ways, leading to a more holistic narration of self.
5. Second Interview – The second interview will be based on the scrapbook content. We are interested in the participants' meaning-making processes and their understandings of the creative tasks they display in the scrapbook.
6. Shoe Log – Each participant has been asked to keep a 'shoe log' for 3 weeks. This is a daily record of when they change their shoes throughout the course of the day. Why, where they are going, how they are getting there (if travelling) and any comments in relation to each shoe change, including not wearing shoes, is also recorded.
7. Activity 2 – This is another go-along, part of which will be filmed. The participant can choose what the activity will be. This is about the 'doing' of everyday life and everyday or extraordinary shoes. Examples of activities that have been agreed so far

are a burlesque evening, going for a walk, participant observation in the workplace and going climbing.

8. Third Interview – The third interview will draw on data from the shoe log and the activities. This is a flexible open-ended interview appropriate to each individual case study and the topics and issues that have emerged over the course of the year.

Situating what we're doing

What we're offering today are preliminary thoughts about these data. The literature we're beginning to draw on derives from work around class, post-feminist and neo-liberal identities, heterosexualities, third-wave feminism, fashion theory, material culture studies, the sociology of the body and the emotions.

In relation to gender we find West & Zimmerman's (1987) conceptualisation of 'doing gender' a useful way of contrasting 'how gender is done with how gender is constructed to not only capture the fluidity of this construct but to provide critical insight that might confront commonly held assumptions of gendered practice' (Wickes and Emmison, 2007, 326). Whilst some of our methods do not fit into ethnomethodology in its purest sense, we are using situated observational methods, as well as focus groups and interviews, visual and creative methods. As part of the case studies we're recording life as it happens in different environments and different situational contexts. Unlike most ethnomethodologists, which we do not claim to be but do draw on, we regard interviews and focus groups as methods that can contribute to our understanding of the doing of gender. This reflects our belief that the interactional doing is entangled with meaning making processes, along with culture, and they cannot easily or coherently be separated out, hence our multi-modal approach.

We share the aims set out by West and Zimmerman (1987) in that we hope to "further an understanding of gender as actively created and sustained in interaction." We take gender to be a dynamic process, inescapably ongoing and embedded in everyday interaction. It is "the activity of managing situated conduct in the light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one's sex category."

Furthermore,

A person engaged in virtually any activity may be held accountable for performance of that activity as a woman or a man... to 'do' gender is not always to live up to normative conceptions of femininity or masculinity; it is to engage in behaviour *at the risk of gender assessment*. (West and Zimmerman, 1987, p.136)

Indeed, risk is a theme that is running through much of our data. How shoes are implicated in the doing and regulation of gender in people's everyday lives is pronounced. We welcome your thoughts and interpretations of the data we're going to show you today and we hope to have a fruitful discussion with you around how to take different ideas forward, particularly in relation to thinking about some of the contradictions and issues around structure/agency that emerge.

What our data tell us about 'doing gender'

We're interested in the regulatory processes of gender and how these are navigated and negotiated in the everyday doing of gender. We want to understand the expectations of normative femininity: Whether and how they have changed over time and how choices are made by individuals with regard to how they do gender in different everyday contexts. Our preliminary interpretation is that this seems to be a very precarious negotiation and, as might be expected, heterosexuality is absolutely central to the women's experiences of doing gender.

Heels and *feeling* feminine

Feeling feminine is certainly something that women from across the life course associated with wearing high heels.. So what does feeling feminine mean to them? Well, our participants talked about showing off their legs, changing the shape and appearance of their legs as well as general posture, so the stomach goes in, you walk differently, hold yourself straighter, more upright and become taller. Younger women said heels give them a swagger. Most said they helped to make an occasion and finished off an outfit. All said feeling feminine made them more confident. It's about feeling 'sexy', 'more attractive', 'womanish', 'looking like a lady', being 'elegant'(older women), 'glamorous' and feeling 'dressed-up'. There were lots of assertions that heels look 'nicer'. Here are a few examples of how the discussion would go and as you will see heterosexuality and

the male gaze are implicitly tied up with these feelings. The following section is from the bereaved focus group:

F6 Your legs, you looked better.

F2 You look, yeah, you look better in heels, definitely.

F5 High heeled shoes and all men used to say that, yeah, used to say get them heels on because it definitely altered all your leg didn't it.

This next one is from the luncheon club:

FAC So what is it about high heels that makes you feel dressed up?

...

F Feel more womanish don't you I think.

F Your stomach seems to go in when you stand, wear them ...

F They show your legs off as well.

F As well, you didn't have any stomach.

F No, look elegant.

F Made your legs look elegant.

And the young women:

F1 ...it does make you feel a bit more dressed up and smart wearing, just being taller, because I'm tall anyway but I just whack on the height but yeah, it makes you, yeah, it just makes you feel different I think in heels, it's weird, what that difference can do.

...

F5 Like sometimes if I'm wearing flats or something and I'm just kind of a bit more casual I'd kind of just be kind of like, okay, not slomp around like I'm like dragging my [feet].

[laughter]

F5 But I think that you do kind of, I don't know, I think you do kind of stand out, okay, maybe that's just me.

...

F4 No, I totally agree.

F6 I think it's a feminine image as well.

F3 Yeah.

F6 You just feel a bit more sexy.

[laughter]

F6 Like don't we.

But all of this is context and, in many respects, age specific. The middle-aged women would predominantly wear heels for special occasions, interviews, going out for dinner, to the theatre and parties (with the exception of the few who wore heels all the time). Most of the older women were unable to wear heels or only wore them for funerals and special occasions. When they were younger they wore them to dances and the cinema. The young women predominantly talked about wearing heels for clubbing, going to bars and gigs (with exceptions – Corps shoes, outdoor concerts and festivals). A young woman of 19 from the generic focus group explained:

F1 No, I can't dance, like I feel weird, and I can, I don't feel dressed up until I've got my high heels on... it makes me feel more confident because you're taller and it changes your posture and... it's like the kind of mentality because everyone else has got high heels on and, you know, when you go out and like all the other girls are like that, and when you see someone else in flats you're like oh she's wearing flats, you know, what's she doing? You know, and like, even if like, you know, your feet hurt and like but it's like you kind of share that, everyone else's feet hurt so you're all, you know, you go to sit down and all the other girls are sat like, you know, like wincing because their feet hurt, so but now I can't, wouldn't, couldn't go out on a night out without them, even if I take a pair of flat shoes in my bag to like get changed on the way home, like I wouldn't, I wouldn't go out without them, definitely wouldn't.

There were many such references to pain and discomfort littered through the discussions about high heels. The difficulty of walking in heels also came up. Disparaging assessments (by men and women) were sometimes made about those who couldn't quite get the walk 'right' and there were accounts of women practicing walking at home before putting their walk on public display, as well as friends advising each other how to do it. Far from heels automatically making the participants walk in a way that was viewed as somehow rewarding and confidence boosting – strutting, swaggering or displaying their figure in the desired way - there was a lot of work that went into learning how to strut or appear sexy and elegant; it was a skill to be taught and learnt. It certainly wasn't a straightforward case of putting on the heels and automatically getting the walk and the associated feelings of confidence and sexiness,. Indeed, you can now go to classes on how to walk in high heels, such as the six-week 'Sexy Heels In The City' course at South Thames College, London. (<http://www.metro.co.uk/news/830033-sexy-high-heels-lessons-for-teenage-girls#ixzz1dg6KhxPo>). Or learn via videos on YouTube (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=usrs6cm2vQg>)

For many of the women, foot pain had become associated with feeling dressed up and feminine, a normalised aspect of doing femininity, a sacrifice made to achieve an

aesthetic and a feeling, as well as being a bonding experience shared amongst peers. But not everyone shared this view. A young woman of 25 from the generic focus group explained:

Many of the nicer women's shoes tend to be very uncomfortable and I think quite a lot of people make a, a choice both for each individual pair of shoes and maybe also in general as to whether they're prepared to wear those very beautiful painful shoes, which is something I tend not to do.

She'd had leg and back pain as a child, which although reduced in adulthood, still influenced her choice of footwear. This curtailment of her choices was experienced as a frustrating 'compromise',

I think in particular skirts and dresses can look quite strange with big clunky comfortable shoes... if I wanted to wear a dress to work and I wanted to wear the shoes I thought went with the dress I'd have to be taking them off all day and rubbing my feet and that's not practical so I think it does, I have to compromise one way or the other, either not always wear what I would like to wear on my body or wear it but just be uncomfortable, [laughs] which doesn't seem to be the best really, it's quite annoying... I end up not looking as I would like to look and I look around me at other people who all seem perfectly happy in what they're wearing and I think they look really nice but I can't achieve the same look without a level of discomfort which I find unacceptable. It may well be that all my friends who look so lovely are also in agony and have feet covered in plasters and so on but I'm not going to ask them, [laughs] so I, I tend to find that yeah my, my choices of clothing can be restricted by my feet [laughs]... I do find matching shoes and clothes together can be quite tedious and it probably makes my selection of both a bit more tame.

Her suspicions were confirmed by those participants who described shoe agony – yet emphasised that removing them was not an option – as a 46 year old woman demonstrates,

I stood at Ascot last year... there was no way I were going to take my shoes off, they were killing me, they were absolutely killing me and this were with a contorted face I'd got but no way were I taking them off and all around me there were all women oh get these off, you know, and straight away the whole look, the hat, every, all that time and effort you'd put into... that outfit and it were just like, oh your look's totally, you look rubbish now without your shoes on, you just, you've rubbished it... I couldn't, I couldn't have took them off. Couldn't do it, and me feet were killing, couldn't take them off.

How can we make sense of these contradictions? And how might we understand issues of agency in these contexts? What about women who chose not to wear high heels or only wear them rarely? Have they stepped outside the aesthetic regulation of normative femininity? In the following excerpt, a 29-year-old woman explicitly relates her choice of footwear through early adulthood to her relationship status. Immediately preceding this extract she was saying that the last time she wore high heels was for her birthday and the next time will be to a concert, with a 4 month gap in-between,

F3 I've got heels, it's not that I don't but when I feel like wearing them I'll wear them with my outfit and I'll walk around, then I'll take them off, put my flats on then go out...

[laughter]

F5 Do the same.

F3 Yeah? You know, because I know that I'm not going to be comfortable and it's like you say when you wear flats or, you know, no shoes at all you feel this freedom and I just can't go out of the house without feeling that. So I'll, like for instance, you know, this, my birthday, we went out, it was a two hour thing, I know I had to put heels on, I walked to the car, from the car I walked to the restaurant, sat back in the car, took them off, got out,

put them back on, walked home, that was, that was it, that was my maximum exposure, do you know, and I've got nice heels and I find that when I'm single I, I, I go out and I buy shoes but since I've been married and even before, like in a relationship I, I just don't because I don't feel that need to, I don't know, it's just subconscious now that I'm thinking about it I, I can see myself doing it, do you know what I mean. Where you don't, you just think oh well now I'll go to a shop and I'll go to really nice shoe shops and I'll try them on and not even try them on, ask somebody to, you know, get me this size, I'll try one on and I'll look at myself and I'll lift up my, my trouser leg, [laughs] and I'll go oh they look pretty nice, you know, I've got nice, nice feet, you know... I'll look at myself in the mirror, I'll take them off and I'll put them back and my husband's like well why don't you buy them, they look really nice? No, I don't want to buy them, I just wanted to see how they look. [Laughter] Because I've got no intention of ever wearing them so why am I going to buy them. But it's just, I've, it's kind of that confirmation that okay I can do it and I, this is the way that I look in them but that's okay I don't want to look that way or I don't want to do that to myself because I, again I get this vision of manky feet and, you know, of the pain that I'm going to suffer by wearing heels, like I've got one interview shoes, pair of interview shoes which my husband forced me to go out and buy because when we first moved here, you know, I had to obviously look for work and I wear them to all my interviews, I've been to four or five so far, I've worn them to my interviews and that's all they'll, all they'll be good for, I'll never wear them until I need another job because they're just not comfortable, you know, I'm in a load of pain, if I see a blister on my foot I'll get really distressed and it'll upset me, I'll just think oh why have I put myself through this.

So women are 'doing' heels differently, making different choices whilst being aware of the expectation to adhere to normative notions of femininity. This woman feels the pressure to conform as she was 'forced' to buy her interview shoes by her husband (who she states elsewhere is far more interested in appearance and looking nice than she is) and 'had' to wear heels for her birthday. Clearly her shoe choice is related to

heterosexuality. When she is single and interested in meeting a new partner she will 'do' high heels, otherwise she's not particularly interested in doing gender along these assigned lines. But she does go to shops and check that she still has the ability to 'do' this kind of heterosexual femininity, perhaps as a form of reassurance to herself that she can still do it if she wanted or needed to.

While the woman suffering at Ascot seemed quite literally unable to step outside the aesthetic of normative femininity, other heel wearers did connect their shoe choices more critically with fitting into normative femininity and heterosexuality. When the women's shoe lover's focus group were expressing their dislike of trainers a woman of 27, who only wears pointy shoes with some kind of heel, pondered her choices,

F2 But my boyfriend said to me the other day why don't you ever wear trainers? And I said well I just don't, I just don't really like them, he said oh, because he showed me some Adidas shell toes, big round toe, I was like even, even my New Balance ones are a bit pointy and they're trainers. [laughter] And I was like Steve, there's no way that I could wear them, they've got a big round toe and he was like, [laughter] alright then, well have some more pointy ones, and I said well I don't want to wear them, he said well I think girls look cute in trainers.

F1 Oh.

F3 Oh no.

F4 Ooh.

F2 And I thought, maybe I'll buy some trainers, that's a bit sad isn't it?

F3 Yeah.

F1 Oh so that would be to please him wouldn't it?

F2 So then it did make me think, yeah. Do I just dress for other people? I don't know.

F4 Well my.

F1 This is always the question isn't it.

Other young women had a different take on this 'question' and seemed to deny the interactional element of their identities by drawing on the slogans of 'girl power' as one young woman of 19 said "let women want to look pretty if they want to be, as long as they're doing it for themselves and not anyone else". Another said,

... you can kind of use that [femininity] in a positive way to sort of like be more, I don't know, don't know how to describe it, like, bit more powerful against the men kind of thing, so you can use it, like you can get, if you act dumb or whatever, not that I do, you can get the man to do something for you, so you can kind of use it in a positive way, it's not necessarily that we're sort of like belittling ourselves.

Are these young women enacting a neo-liberal post-feminist identity or what McRobbie has called the post-feminist masquerade? McRobbie argues that a post-feminist masquerade exists because of the sexual antagonism that the changes in work and employment have brought about. The promise of upward mobility for women through access to education and employment has supposedly provided an escape from traditional familial and domestic arrangements. Under neo-liberalism, women's greater access to independent financial resources has created an intensification of the feminine as a site (both subject and object) of commodification and consumption.

The question of choices therefore surfaces repeatedly, both within debates around post-feminist empowerment discourse and among women themselves. In both cases the costliness of particular choices is evident, whether it is the demanding requirement still to do normative femininity, even if in ironic form, or the pain and long term damage wrought by heels. Yet among women themselves a belief in the existence of choice

repeatedly undermined worries about a loss of agency – or a recognition of the very limited field in which those choices are being made. This might be expressed as the idea that one wears heels through choice, for pleasure – or that one *could* wear heels if one wanted.

Exclusions from doing normative femininity

A number of exclusions from doing normative femininity were also evident. We don't have time to go into them all today, suffice to say there are issues around class, disability, sexuality and age. For at least one participant, the sense of lacking choice was experienced as a painful exclusion from normative femininity. From this position, she was able to reflect on how, exactly, shoes and feet enable the doing of gender. She has a foot and lower-leg deformity and arthritis but does not consider herself to be disabled. She has difficulty walking any significant distance, has had multiple operations, suffers on-going pain, wore callipers on her right leg as a child and now wears a prosthetic right foot. She is 48 and only just beginning to “become a bit more of a normal girl” as she put it.

F3 But, but I think it, for me as well I always wore trousers obviously.

F4 That's right, because of your leg.

F3 Because I never wore skirts and that's really had an impact, impact on my life because if you don't wear skirts there's certain jobs you wouldn't go into, you know, you wouldn't be an air hostess for example. [laughs]

F4 No, no.

F3 You know, and, you know, and social situations that you don't go to and it affects your clothes as well so I've never been a very glamorous person, always been a bit tomboyish... You know, I look at you over there with your glasses on your head and scarf, because I always wore trousers and things and had horrible shoes I've, I've never really developed, I don't, I

don't even wear make-up or and I think it's been in, the impact of my shoes and how I think that my shoes work.

F4 Yes.

F3 And I'm sure that's, you know, that's, that's, I'm not saying I'm, I'm unhappy.

F1 No.

F3 And, but I've got ... down.

F4 No, no.

F3 But it, but it's meant yeah, I've not been that kind of girly girl, I've grown up and wore the sort of tomboyish person who wears jeans and trousers and, and that sort of thing, so.... I noticed when the cards went round that, those sort of Cinderella pictures and the princess and things, I was attracted to that, I'd like to wear clothes like that [laughs] but yeah, no, I haven't, I've always worn, worn the trousers.

Conclusion

These data take us into a world that might feel very close to home, regardless of our footwear choices. Yet for all its familiarity it is an under-scrutinised field, sociologically. Shoes are a profoundly cultural and functional item: putting children's feet into shoes causes the sole's facility to mould itself around uneven ground to atrophy. What footwear does is position us, socially and culturally. As sociologists, we might imagine that foot pain would make us more aware of this, along with the need to actively learn how to walk in some forms of footwear. Yet, as our data indicate, it is precisely those most challenging shoes which, for some women, can induce a closer sense of fit with a 'natural' state of femininity. Indeed, as Gill (2007) has argued, a return to ideas about natural sex differences is a characteristic of a post-feminist world view.

This project's broader concern with identity as an embodied process led us to make transitions a key focus. Many shoe designers sell their products on a promise of transformation, a transition from one state or status to another that involves a marked change of some kind, as well as movement. As we described, our case study participants are being asked to record the points at which they put on different shoes and what each transition between pairs signifies. Within a broader cultural and social context of clothing choices and occasions, putting on heels meant a fuller identification with normative femininity for many of our female participants. For some there was no alternative to heels, either for work or leisure, for others they were a kind of treat, albeit a potentially costly one. However, for women with foot deformities, they can represent a longed-for transition from which they feel debarred.

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