Girl Groups

Activity 61: "Act Like a Lady!" The Girl Box

Length of Activity: 60 minutes

Paechter, Carrie. (2018) "Rethinking the Possibilities for Hegemonic Femininity: Exploring a Gramscian Framework." Women's Studies International Forum 68 121-28.

Schippers, Mimi. (2007) "Recovering the Feminine Other: Masculinity, Femininity, and Gender Hegemony." *Theory and Society* 36, no.1, 85-102.

Materials:

- Box
- 10 flashcards per Participant – 2 different color sets of flash cards (i.e. 5 yellow and 5 green). This will help the Facilitator differentiate responses from 2 different questions.
- Writing Utensils
- Red Marker

"When a man gives his opinion, he's a man. When a woman gives her opinion, she's a bitch." Bette Davis

Gender is a socially constructed concept that dictates behavior of people based on their sex. If you are a man, society expects you to exhibit more masculine characteristics. If you are a woman, society expects you to exhibit more feminine characteristics. Society constantly reinforces gender by ensuring that men and women both conform to gender roles. If men or women deviate from these roles, they are likely to suffer verbal abuse and become ostracized until they re-conform to the norms of society. Femininity is conceived in strongly essentialist and stereotypical terms leaving no possibility of variation.[172]

The term that researchers use to describe the dominant form of femininity in the United States is known as hegemonic femininity. Hegemonic femininity consists of characteristics defined as womanly that establish and legitimize a hierarchal and complementary relationship to hegemonic masculinity and by doing so guarantees the dominant position of men and the subordination of women.[173] If hegemonic femininity is prevalent in the United States, what does this say about a woman's role and their potential in our society?

[172] Schippers, Mimi. (2007) "Recovering the Feminine Other: Masculinity, Femininity, and Gender Hegemony." *Theory and Society* 36, no.1, 85-102

[173] Schippers, Mimi. (2007) "Recovering the Feminine Other: Masculinity, Femininity, and Gender Hegemony." *Theory and Society* 36, no.1, 85-102

Discussion Questions:

- What are some of the qualities that women are expected to have?
- What does it mean to 'act like a lady?'
- What are the expectations of 'acting like a lady?'
- How does the "girl box" effect you?

For groups of Participants that may have a difficult time writing, you can always have them draw their answers or you may choose to have Participants share one at a time as you record their responses on a flashcard and place them in the "girl box."

Activity:

1) Hand each Participant 10 flashcards (2 different colors i.e. 5 yellow and 5 green) and instruct them not to write down their names on the cards. Explain to Participants that they will be answering two different questions, and they will be answering the first question on the same colored flash card. If they need more flash cards they may ask for more.

2) First question: Ask the group about the benefits of being a girl. Have Participants record their responses on the same colored flashcards. If they need more flashcards they may ask for more. Have them fill in the blank to the following statement:

"I like being a girl because_____"

Inform the group that they may include any response that relates to them personally and to be honest in their responses. There is no right or wrong answer. Refrain from providing more than 1-2 examples to the group so that their responses are not influenced in any direction.

Examples may include:
"I like being a girl because I can wear make-up and dress up."
"I like being a girl because I can play softball."
"I like being a girl because I can play with Barbies."
"I like being a girl because I like boys."

3) Second question: Now ask the group to think about how being a girl restricts or limits them. Have Participants record their responses on the same colored flashcards. If they need more flashcards they may ask for more. Have them fill in the blank to the following statement:

"Being a girl means that I can't_____"

Examples may include:
"Being a girl means that I can't be 'fat.'"
"Being a girl means I have to wear make-up."
"Being a girl means I have to cook."
"Being a girl means I can't protect myself."

4) Once Participants have filled out their cards have them place both sets of cards in the "girl box."

5) Invite Participants to gather in a circle around the "girl box." Pass the box around in the circle and have each Participant read one card aloud.

6) As Participants read them aloud begin to separate responses into categories that begin to emerge within the group; such as:

- Appearance
- Emotion
- Intelligence
- Sport/Physical Ability
- Arts/Music

7) Once all the flashcards have been read, engage the group in a Facilitator-led discussion about whether or not there are more cards in any one specific category and why this may be.

8) Ask the group what society thinks of a girl or woman who is not "pretty" or skinny. Has anyone in the group ever been told to "act like a lady" or "act like a girl"?

9) Discuss with the group how today they will all participate in changing the "girl box" to include anything they want it to mean and that they will change the negative or restricting aspects of being a girl into positives.

10) With the group's active input, the Facilitator will then take all the responses in step 3 and rewrite them onto new cards to positive and inclusive qualities. For example:

"Being a girl means that I can't be 'fat.'"	"Being a girl means that I do not have to be skinny because every girl has a different body type."
"Being a girl means I have to wear make-up."	"Being a girl means I do not have to wear make-up because I don't need it. I don't have to look like someone else to be pretty."
"Being a girl means I have to cook."	"Being a girl means I do not have to cook."
"Being a girl means I can't protect myself."	"Being a girl means I do not need a boy to protect me. I can protect myself."

11) If Participants begin to laugh or seem uncomfortable about positive or inclusive statements, the Facilitator should address this in a constructive manner. Do no ignore the group's reaction to step 10 as this will only reinforce the notion that girls and women are required to act within the "girl box". The Facilitator should ask the group why they are laughing and challenge their way of thinking.

12) With the group's active input, the Facilitator will then take the responses in step 2 and ensure they are also inclusive. For example:

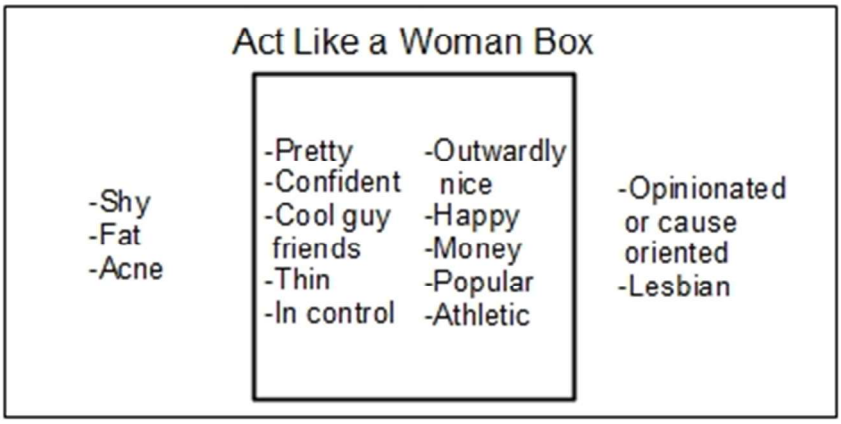
Examples from step 2	Possible Responses
"I like being a girl because I can wear make-up and dress up."	"I like being a girl because I can wear make-up and dress up, but this does not mean that I have to look perfect all of the time."
"I like being a girl because I can play soft-ball."	"I like being a girl because I can play soft-ball but being a girl doesn't mean I have to like 'girlie' sports."
"I like being a girl because I can play with Barbies."	"I like being a girl because I can play with Barbies but that does not mean I can't play with "boy" toys."
"I like being a girl because I like boys."	"I like being a girl because I like boys, but it is okay if I do not like boys."

13) Now have Participants place the new cards from step 10 and step 12 into the "girl box. Remind them that all the negative and non-inclusive qualities about being a girl will remain outside of the box because they do not define what it means to be a girl or a woman.

14) Finally, ask Participants to think through what happens when girls do not act within this box and break traditional norms. What are some of the names they get called? i.e. bossy, tomboy, lesbian. For this step, the Facilitator will write (with a marker) directly on the outside of the "girl box" all the terms identified by the group.

15) After discussing those terms or sayings, remind the group of the power of words! Now literally **cross out the words from step 14** and stress to the group that today you are breaking free from the girl box! That means not calling others those names nor thinking of ourselves as "less than" if we break free from the box. It takes more courage to speak against something than to conform.

The image below is an example of the qualities found in or outside the "girl box."



16) Encourage Participants to ask questions and let them know you are always available should they have any concerns or other questions.

174

[174] Freedman, Alex L., and Kerri Niblett. *Popularity Explained: The Social Psychology of Grade School*. Edmonton, Canada: Ravi Seye Mahmoud, 2014.

This activity may be facilitated jointly with both girl and boy groups and it is continued in Section 4 – Group Collaboration. Keep the materials from this activity as you will need to reference them for *The Boy Box vs. The Girl Box* activity in Section 4.