

The Gendered Body (Kimmel, chapter 11)

Beauty standards are gendered. “While women are concerned with breast size and weight, men are concerned with muscularity—that is, both are preoccupied with those aspects of the male and female body that suggest and exaggerate innate biological differences between the sexes. It would appear that the more equal women and men become in the public sphere, the more standards of beauty would emphasize those aspects that are biologically difference.”

Both men and women change their bodies, such as by plastic surgery, to be seen by men.

“As friendship and love have become ‘feminized’—that is, as the model of appropriate behavior has come to resemble what we labeled as traditionally ‘feminine’ models of intimacy—sexuality has become increasingly ‘masculinized.’ The ‘masculinization of sex’—including the pursuit of pleasure for its own sake, the increased attention to orgasm, the multiplication of sexual partners, the universal interest in sexual experimentation, and the separation of sexual behavior from love—is partly the result of the technological transformation of sexuality (from birth control to the Internet) and partly the result of the sexual revolution’s promise of greater sexual freedom with fewer emotional and physical consequences” (p. 286).

The sexual revolution rejected the double standard, but it still shapes the way we think about sex. “Men still stand to gain status and women to lose it from sexual experience” (p. 287). As a result, there are significant gender differences regarding sex.

Men and women have different conceptions of sex, understandings of sexual encounters, and sexual fantasies. “[W]omen’s *sexual* imaginations are impoverished at the expense of highly developed *sensual* imaginations; by contrast, men’s sensual imaginations are impoverished by their highly developed sexual imaginations” (p. 290).

Pornography, which exaggerates the masculinization of sex, plays a major role in developing men’s sexuality.

Gendered sexual socialization takes place as adolescent boys and girls negotiate the extent of sexual contact. Neither is able to enjoy the pleasure of each other’s bodies since both are “plotting their next move.” He is planning to go further; she is wondering how to stop him. Both have in mind the expectations of their peers. Men learn to focus on performance rather than pleasure.

Despite these differences between men and women, the gap between them has been closing.

Kimmel argues that homosexuality is a form of “gender conformity.” “Gay men have the lowest rates of long-term committed relationships, while lesbians have the highest, and lesbians place much greater emphasis on emotional relationships than gay men. Thus, it appears that men—gay and straight—place sexuality at the center of their lives, and that women—straight or lesbian—are more interested in affection and caring in the context of a love relationship” (p. 308). Both heterosexuality and homosexuality are shaped by homophobia.

The difference in “sexual peaks” between men and women is commonly thought to be biological, but Kimmel argues that it reflects the social organization of marriage. By domesticating sex and making it less “dangerous,” marriage makes sex less interesting for men and safer for women to express themselves sexually.