

Phases of womanhood?

University study shows 4 stages to feminine identity

"It is within a significant love relationship with a man that a woman achieves a true sense of herself as a woman," according to University of Michigan psychologist Carol G. Barbour.

"This feminine gender identity does not emerge around the end of adolescence as has been traditionally thought, but more likely in a woman's 20s or later," she says. Her conclusions are based on more than 60 hours of focused in-depth interviews with 10 women, aged 24-28, five single and five married.

"This is not intended as a true cross-section of the population; the sample includes relatively well-educated middle-class women," Barbour notes. They were selected from a field of 55 volunteers to represent a sample of "normal" young women with no history of major psychological disturbance, physical illness or serious difficulties in relationships with men.

"Other criteria were that they had never been pregnant, had not ended a significant love relationship within the previous six months, and that they were engaged in some meaningful pursuit by their own definition," she adds.

"ALTHOUGH the sample is small, the findings take on added significance because of their remarkable homogeneity," she observes. "All 10 participants went through similar phases leading them to distinguish this sense of feminine identity. They experienced similar issues, resolved them in roughly the same order and reached parallel conclusions."

Phase one is marked by the first love relationship, usually occurring in the middle to late teens,

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she says. "Each of the women described 'feeling attractive' for the first time, of overcoming adolescent inferiority feeling of being ugly, gawky or mousey through the experience of having a boyfriend," she continued. "It had to be a boy whom they liked in return."

As one woman explained, "If only people who I think are creeps like me, then it must mean I am a horrible creep as well." Winning affection of a boy with whom they were mutually attracted gave them a new status and equality with their peers.

Phase two in feminine gender identity development, Barbour says, is "establishing sexual womanhood." Most of the women she interviewed had their first sexual experience around age 20, and it represented a new "coming of age." They described new feelings of maturity and confidence. One participant stated, "It completed a picture I had of myself."

In time, however, the women to feel the relationship emphasis on sexuality was limiting. In phase three, they looked for a man who would view them as competent equals, who would appreciate their

intelligence and independence, Barbour reports.

"INTERESTINGLY, the interviews did not focus on education or career goals, yet each woman spontaneously brought them into the discussion. They also described failed relationships with men who belittled their career interests or treated them as inferior. They began seeking men who were an 'intellectual match,' who were secure enough personally to support them in their pursuits."

"These intellectual relationships, by their relative neglect of romance and sexuality, also came to feel limited and limiting to these subjects," she explains.

In phase four, a woman integrated sexuality and competence into full womanhood, Barbour finds. "When a woman found a man who appreciated and confirmed both aspects of her feminine identity, she married or planned to marry him. In this study, seven of the women had found such a 'right man' and the other three were seeking one. It is only in this fourth phase that a woman speaks of having this particular man's children."

Barbour's doctoral research shows that during the four phases, women also experience shifts in their relationships with other adults, particularly their mothers, but also with men and women peers. "There is at first an attempt to gain autonomy from the mother partly through sexual experiences or to establish superiority to her through pursuing a career."

"But as these women matured and committed themselves to marriage and potential motherhood, they experienced a common bond with mother, providing the basis for greater closeness and mutual respect."

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Michigan State University President Cecil Mackey announced recently that the university had received a \$10 million grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation to launch a major new teaching and public demonstration project on rural resources.

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