

# **GENDER, BODY, AND BEAUTIFICATION: GIRLS LEARNING FEMININITY IN BRAZIL**

## **GÊNERO, CORPO E EMBELEZAMENTO: MENINAS APRENDENDO FEMINILIDADES NO BRASIL**

### **Abstract**

In contemporary society, appearance is recognized as a central element in the process of identity construction. The main objective of the present article is to show how public school children engage in specific bodily practices in order to be considered beautiful, and to fit within the hegemonic models of their everyday lives. Boys and girls are naturally concerned about their appearance, yet these concerns have been constructed under the influence of both discourse and images of every day television, magazines, internet, etc. Children are encouraged by this intense presence to place the construction of an ideal body at the center of their identities. Girls are concerned about their appearance, they want the “perfect body”, and engage in various practices to “seem” like a fashion model. In order to carry out the analysis, I have used as a reference basis the fields of both gender and cultural studies (and in particular post-structuralist associations) for the theoretical and methodological approach.

**Key words:** Childhood. Gender. Body. Beautification.

### **Resumo**

Nas sociedades contemporâneas, questões relacionadas à aparência são reconhecidas como centrais nos processos de construção de identidades infantis. O principal objetivo desse artigo é apresentar como crianças de uma escola pública se valem de algumas práticas corporais com o propósito de tornarem-se belas e de acordo com os padrões hegemônicos estabelecidos em seus cotidianos. Meninas e meninas preocupam-se com suas aparências e essas preocupações são constituídas sob a influência de discursos e imagens aos quais têm acesso através da mídia. Por meio dessa intensa presença de discursos e imagens, crianças são encorajadas a investir na construção de um corpo tido como ideal. No entanto, apesar de meninos e meninas preocuparem-se com suas aparências, meninas almejam ter um corpo perfeito como manequins e modelos e elas investem em práticas para serem ou parecerem-se com uma. Para as problematizações aqui realizadas, utilizo como referências os Estudos Culturais e de Gênero, em especial aqueles que se aproximam da perspectiva pós-estruturalista de análise.

**Palavras-chave:** Infância. Gênero. Corpo. Embelezamento

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## Introduction

Children learn what it means to be a boy or a girl in contemporary Brazilian society at a very early age. Through a myriad of activities, opportunities, forms of encouragement (and discouragement), overt behavior, covert suggestions and various forms of guidance children experience the process of gender role socialization. Children often internalize gender role representation from books, songs, television, and movies. In Brazil, television is probably the most influential form of media, since almost every child has access to it.

Studies show preschoolers in Brazil spend an average of nearly three hours a day watching television; and some spend more time watching television than anything else except sleeping (Veiga, 2003). Children's ideas about how the world works come from their experiences, and from the attitudes and behaviors of those around them. At home, at school, and from television, they learn which types of people are educated, beautiful, healthy, perfect, etc. In addition, they want to be like these people.

The main objective of the present article is to show how public schoolchildren (5 to 6 years old) in *Esteio/RS* engage in particular, body-associated practices in order to be considered beautiful and to fit within the hegemonic models of their everyday lives. These children learn many things about gender. Boys and girls have been shaped in many diverse ways. Male children are subject to stronger regulations that attempt to shape them according to the hegemonic male model, with an explicit concern for sexuality (See Guizzo, 2005). They learn about ideal bodies as well. Again, questions of appearance and body image are recognized as central elements in the process of identity construction for children.

Although both boys and girls are concerned about their appearance, girls (little women) as well as wanting to have the "perfect body" of a fashion model engage in practices to seem like one. This needs to

be understood as part of a historical system of social and cultural relations. In this article, I will argue that the child's incorporation of postures, norms, and languages is intimately linked to the dominant and hegemonic discourses and practices.

In recent years, various fields have recognized the centrality of constructions of the body to subjectivity and identities construction. In this article, I will use contributions from two of these fields: Cultural Studies and Gender Studies, which hold the view that our identities are forged and formed in the culture. In particular, I will use currents associated with post-structuralist approaches to discuss to what extent the representations of beauty and ugliness (as understood by children of an early childhood in public school in the municipality of Esteio/RS/Brazil) affect the way girls deal with and invest in their bodies, and thus outline their femininity. The main focuses are: 1) to present how representations of gender, body, and beautification, (repeated daily through the variety of cultural and visual pedagogies), reflect and circulate as almost absolute truths in the children's educational environment; 2) to show how the girls get involved in specific bodily practices for attaining beauty, from representations spread across contemporary cultural and social media.

A central purpose of Cultural Studies is to translate the world we live in, to understand culture in all its complex forms, and to analyze the social and political context in which cultures manifest themselves. Cultural study also examines the subject in terms of cultural practices and their relation to power.

Gender Studies is a field of interdisciplinary study that analyzes the phenomenon of gender. Gender Studies are sometimes related to studies involving class, race, ethnicity, and sexuality. Butler (1990) is a world-renowned gender scholar. She locates the construction of the "gendered, sexed, desiring subject" in "regulatory discourses". A part of Butler's argument concerns the role of sex in the construction of a "natural" or coherent gender and sexuality.

For her, gender and heterosexuality are constructed as natural because a male/female opposition is constructed as such.

Scholars such as Scott (1995) and Louro (1997) have understood the concept of gender as a relational category. This means a logic that includes both female and male, and therefore to understand the construction of the female, we have to take into account the cultural, social, and historical conditions/aspects that are involved in the formation of the male, and vice versa. In addition to the emphasis on relational aspects in gender studies, recent research has dealt with its intersections with other categories such as generation, race, ethnicity, and social class.

Scott (1986) emphasizes the importance of emerging relations between women and men. According to her:

“Gender” as a substitute for “women” is also used to suggest that information about women is necessarily information about men, that one implies the study of the other. This usage insists that the world of women is part of the world of men, created in and by it. This usage rejects the interpretive utility of the idea of separate spheres, maintaining that to study women in isolation perpetuates the fiction that one sphere, the experience of one sex, has little or nothing to do with the other. (Scott, 1986, p. 1056).

Louro (1997) argues that the biological aspects should not be denied, and the social construction and historical shaping of the biological characteristics of men and women should be emphasized.

Currently, Hall (2000) has included Gender Studies as among those movements that have had major impact on academic and social spheres, allowing for changes in the theorizing of social and human sciences. In Gender Studies, concepts used as universals are problematized, in particular those that define what is “proper” for men and women.

### **Beginning our discussion**

For Hall (2000) there are at least two different

ways of thinking about “identity”. The first one is an essentialist view of identity as an inherent quality, which people are born with, in their blood. The second one articulates the cultural and social positioning of the subjects, and is the more important. Cultural identity is a matter of “becoming” as well as of “being”. This view sees cultural identities as historical but recognizes that they are also under constant transformation, that they are subject to the continuous “play” of history, culture and power (Hall, 1997).

Actually, one of the components included in the construction of identities is concern for bodily appearance. Today, perhaps more than ever, physical appearance has been the subject of intense focus, by various segments of society and in different cultures. The body has been widely postulated, questioned, discussed, researched, produced and constructed (Louro, 2000; Sant’anna, 2000, 2001; Couto, 2001; Silva, 2001; Felipe, 2003).

Currently, “representations of ideal beauty and body” are shown through a much wider range of devices that we see every day on the streets, such as the billboards, the pages of magazines and newspapers, advertisements, and the television programs we watch, etc. Today there is an intense repetition of the hegemonic discourse about beauty, which makes a thin, white, and young body a synonym for beauty and health. Obesity and fat (having different meanings) are opposed to the ideas of beauty and health, and are placed among the biggest evils of modern societies.

In contemporary Western societies, concern with beauty is strongly tied to the feminine universe. Sant’Anna (1995) reminds us that this close association of beauty to femininity is not new; the notion that beauty is to female as strength is to male has persisted over the centuries and throughout different cultures. According to Vigarello (2006), in the classical world, beauty was primarily seen as female, and women’s beauty far outshined that of men.

Regarding the investments that people in different cultures make in their bodies, Sant'Anna (1995) notes that since the beginning of the last century, Brazil has seen heavy personal investments in both the health and the beauty of the female body. He emphasizes that such production of female bodies is carried out primarily to please men.

Meyer (2003) says that masculinity and femininity are socially and culturally produced rather than naturally given. This implies that gender and body production involves cultural knowledge, and lifelong learning to become men and women of specific types, and to live then as such in the various institutions and social environments in which we engage.

Concern with appearance does not pertain only to adults, but has extended also to children. As I stated previously, although boys and girls are concerned about their appearance, girls, as little women, soon become obsessed with having a "perfect" body. Girls engage in practices meant to hide their "flaws". However, these concerns should not be seen as simply a woman's natural way of thinking. They need to be understood as part of a historical, social, and cultural system of relations.

We conducted semi-structured interviews with children and their parents, in a public school in order to collect data. Written observations were also made during the children's free moments at school over a period of approximately one year in 2007. It is important to clarify that I was a teacher at this school and – at the same time – I was a researcher. From the data collected, I organized a notebook of field notes. At the public school where I worked, one of the aspects that caught my attention was the constant concern that children (especially the girls) demonstrated in relation to beautifying themselves. Often the girls, who were only 5-6 years old, came to school wearing make-up, or dressed in clothes and shoes very similar to those adolescents and adult women wear. If one (or more) of them showed up without make up, their main free time activity was playing "Beauty Salon". Many

of them brought lipsticks, makeup kits, blushes, etc. from home.

Another issue that drew my attention was that the little girls wore high heels to school. Twice a week, in early childhood education classes, there were periods of recreation. As such, I sent messages to the parents saying that it was important for the children to come school with comfortable shoes, preferably sneakers.

However,

[...] a girl, even after the message being sent, kept coming with sandals or shoes "unsuitable" for physical activity. I spoke with her mother, who informed me that her daughter refused to wear tennis shoes, saying that she would be too short with them on, and she liked to seem taller. (Field notes 15.03.2007).

Nevertheless, issues relating to beautification go far beyond the simple use of accessories, clothes and make up. They are closely related to gender, race, ethnicity, and social class, as I will try to show in this article.

In contemporary Western societies, the concern that individuals have with their body is visible. Men, women, children, and young people are engaged in building bodies that come as close to the hegemonic standard as possible. They incorporate postures, practices, norms, and languages that are intimately linked to the dominant views on appearance.

In Brazilian society, this concern is more evident, as even our own representations of Brazil tend to place particular emphasis on its allegedly beautiful and sexy women. Moreover, living in a tropical country, the body is more exposed, and more visible year round.

As mentioned previously, the girls with whom I work carried these concerns. Although being very young, they are already concerned about their appearance and they engage in practices meant to hide their flaws. *Sabrina*<sup>1</sup>, for example, thought she

<sup>1</sup> All names used in this article are fictitious to protect the identity of children involved.

had protruding ears. Thus, in order to hide her ears, she never pulled her hair back. *Fernanda* wouldn't wear a midriff shirt because she was ashamed of her belly, which she said was too big. *Karen* never wore her hair down unless her mother had pre-treated it (straightening). Not only do they hide their defects, but they also engage in practices for becoming more beautiful, the usual techniques to improve their appearance:

During recess, Talita, Gabriele and Tainá were putting on makeup and lipstick. As I was talking with them, Gabriele mentioned; "I never come to school without lipstick". When I asked why, she replied, "because I'm beautiful and all women when they go out... have to use lipstick to make themselves more beautiful" (Field Notes, 09.04.07).

In many classes, they played "celebrity", pretending to be people who appear on Brazilian television (such as the participants of "Big Brother Brazil", singers, actresses and fashion models). Just as many boys in Brazil dream of one day becoming a soccer player, many girls dream of being a famous fashion models or actress. The children I worked with were the same.

Perhaps, these girls want to be beautiful (investing in it) is related to the idea that through beauty they can move up both socially and financially, and very quickly. Many of them do not have easy access to the opportunities needed to build a career, many of them dream of becoming celebrities or models.

Adelman and Ruggi (2008: 561) argue:

[...] many women, and even many young girls, may find powerful reasons to invest in a body/beauty project. For many poor girls and women, their bodies may very well be their only source of 'symbolic (and social) capital', providing them a desperately needed route of escape from poverty.

That the girls want to look beautiful is often related to these ideas and in this sense, when referring

to the strong effects that the cult of the body has on little girls and women, Susan Board (1997) suggests that this aspect may be gaining strength over other aspects of life, such as involvement with studies. The author argues that the body seems to be one of the only things over which they have control, and that it can guarantee at least some social status, value or recognition. The body is seen, as a "body business".

Goldenberg (2009) is another scholar who helps to understand the idea of the body as capital. According to her, this is particularly pertinent to North and Latin American countries. Yet in some European countries, women are free from such concerns and pressures. Wearing baggy clothes, not high heels with makeup every day, or not dyeing their hair has less effect on the respect they gain. In Europe, women tend to be respected more because of their ideas, their personality, and charisma, rather than through the value of their bodily appearance. In Germany, for example, if a woman is seen as investing too much in "body capital", it counts as a negative point for her. It is as if she were lacking in seriousness, and spending too much time on her body, time with which she could be doing much more important things: like studying, reading or working.

Goldenberg argues that in Brazil values are significantly different from those of European societies. It is practically unacceptable for a woman to have gray hair and not dye it. In the particular context of Brazilian culture, elements of the body are very important, i.e., both image and appearance are worth a lot. This idea affects not only women but girls who are quite young.

### **In Brazilian childhood, is beauty everything?**

In Brazil, beginning in the early 1980s, children were more strongly recognized as potential consumers. Initially, the products manufactured for them were tied to popular toys, games, and dolls, etc. In the final years of the decade, children's television



shows began to be conducted by young and beautiful hosts whose tasks included promotion of shoes, clothes, and beauty products, etc. (Guizzo, 2005). At the same time, cosmetics companies like *Avon* and *Nivea* (and later *Natura*, and *O Boticário*) started to produce cosmetics specifically for babies and children. As children began to be seen as important consumers, they also began to demonstrate concern about their appearance.

From childhood, young people engage in self-scrutiny and surveillance, the media encourages them as well to think of themselves as somewhat ugly, and to feel ashamed of their bodies. Louro (2000: 69) claims that “[...] surveillance is carried out not only from the outside, as obedience to rules, ordinances or codes, but [...] it is exercised by individuals who precociously learn to examine, control, and govern themselves” (*Freely translated*)<sup>2</sup>.

As noted previously, from an early age on, girls use makeup, and recently they have begun to use other techniques such as coloring their hair to make themselves feel even more beautiful.

There are two girls, who already use some type of chemical to change the color of their hair. One of them, since the beginning of the year, has blond highlights in her hair that is naturally dark brown. The other one, on a Monday, arrived happily at school, showing the red highlights that her mother had put in her hair, that is naturally brown (Field Notes, 24.05.07).

Parents have a vital role in constructing their children’s identities. Often parents project their own desires and wishes on their children: how to dress, how to be, how to fix themselves up, the kind of hair that they consider appropriate, or not, etc. Such attitudes encourage smaller children to concern themselves excessively with their appearance and beauty.

<sup>2</sup> “vigilância [...] é exercida não somente a partir do exterior, da obediência às regras, aos preceitos ou aos códigos, mas [...] é exercida pelo próprio indivíduo que, precocemente, aprende a se examinar, controlar e governar”

Because little girls have shown this growing concern with respect to appearance, the cosmetic market (that specifically targets this age group) has grown sharply. In the case of older girls, coming especially from higher social classes, there are longer-term strategies, such as hair straightening treatments and plastic surgery. According to the Brazilian Society of Plastic Surgery, 1200 plastic surgeries are performed every day in Brazil. In 2008, there were 457 thousand of them. In this relentless pursuit of beauty, many girls and young women aspire for acceptance in social groups, according to their physical characteristics, and this is directly reflected in the number of plastic surgeries done on children and adolescents in Brazil. They already account for 21% of total surgeries.

Mulvey<sup>3</sup> (2005) helps us to understand the behavior; that includes not only women but also young girls, who have been attempting to enhance their appearance according to hegemonic standards:

[...] the image of woman, that circulates in the media is central not only to the male gaze, but to the process of women’s construction [...] as subjects. As such, we live in a new system of the body, bodybuilding, women trying to adapt to these powerful images of beauty (Maluf et al., 2005, p. 359/*Free translation*)<sup>4</sup>.

Another concern among girls is the issue of being fat. Whenever representations are created (and recreated) to fix identities as desirable and “normal”, being “fat” is specifically undesirable. The representations of what it is to be beautiful are understood and incorporated by children. They try to bring themselves as close as they can to fulfilling these representations. Failure brings feelings of frustration.

<sup>3</sup> Laura Mulvey is an important British feminist film theorist and Professor at University of London.

<sup>4</sup> [...] a imagem da mulher que circula na mídia, tornou-se um significante central, não apenas para o olhar masculino, mas para o processo de subjetivação e construção das mulheres [crianças, jovens e adultas] como sujeitos. Assim, nós vivemos um novo regime do corpo, de construção corporal, mulheres tentando se adaptar a essas imagens poderosas de beleza.

Fernanda is chubby and she knows it. Today, at lunch time, when I was at her table, she told me: “Teacher, my sister told me I was fat and she said I should stop eating ... but I like to eat, I can’t stop ...” (Field Notes, 19.10.2007)

What makes a girl of only 5 years old pronounce sentences like these? Many children in Brazil today have lives that are relatively free of other major concerns, and yet they have begun to be burdened with responsibilities regarding the body. Bodies that could be free to run, and play, and express themselves, have for some children become synonyms of shame.

The situation is very worrisome. While, at this early stage of life it is important to have a good, balanced diet and to practice physical activities, obsession with appearance and concern about one’s body is quite different. Currently, there exists a powerful discourse linking fatness to a lack of self-esteem, lack of caring for oneself. However, it has not always been so.

The thoughts, feelings, and actions that we have in relation to our fat bodies are not products of nature, but the operation of a device in which thinness is incorporated subjectively. According to Martins (2006: 87):

[...] the media participates in a thinness device, understood here as a form of intelligibility placed on the fat subject. This device intends to produce slim bodies - in terms of a supposed quality of life, lower government spending considering problems of obesity, and the imperatives of fashion - and operates [...] against the fat person, showing, and often repudiating the evil that is ascribed to such a condition (*Free translation*)<sup>5</sup>.

Disgust and disapproval of fat bodies are a result of representations that circulate in many social and cultural spaces, positing fat bodies as unsightly, ugly,

5 [...] a mídia participa de um dispositivo da magreza, tomado aqui como uma rede de inteligibilidade lançada sobre o sujeito gordo. Esse dispositivo tem como finalidade a produção de corpos magros – em função de uma suposta qualidade de vida, de menores gastos governamentais com problemas decorridos da obesidade, de imperativos da moda ... – e opera, dessa forma, contra o gordo, mostrado, e muitas vezes denunciando, os males de estar nessa condição.

and sick. Such representations not only propagate ideas about the way a fat body looks, but associate fatness with other characteristics such as laziness, carelessness, and lack of self-control that end up being “stuck” to the identities of people who are overweight. (Idem).

According to Felipe (2005), the constant appeal to beauty has not only found acceptance among more mature women, but also among young women, and little girls who at an increasingly young age go to gyms, or exercise other forms of control over their bodies, such as dieting. From her research, she provides an example of a six-year-old child, who asked her mother if she could restrict her meals to lettuce, because she was afraid of getting fat. The discourse and images present in our daily lives produce a surveillance that is carried out not only from the outside, but that is exercised by individuals [over] themselves (Louro, 2000).

The North American film “Little Miss Sunshine” (2006) addresses the concern over who is targeting little girls. A little girl, Olive, seven years old mistakenly receives an invitation to participate in a child beauty contest. Arriving at the competition, her opponents are extremely done up for the occasion: make up, produced hair, and fancy clothes. Olive, unlike the other candidates, wears glasses, is a little plump and she doesn’t wear makeup, which makes her an oddity in the eyes of the audience, organizers and other participants.

In “real life”, we have the example of a little Brazilian girl, 6 years old, who has won the *Little Miss World 2009*, a child beauty pageant held in Ecuador for the second consecutive year. To be “perfect”, the girl used two false teeth, glued in the place where her baby teeth had fallen out. According to her mother, these “new” teeth also improved her diction. Moreover, the girl has highlights in her hair. The girl’s mother reported that she consulted a dermatologist, and the “*Little Miss World*” only uses high quality products. She reported that her daughter

already knows how to put makeup on by herself, and proudly added that she uses the eye pencil perfectly<sup>6</sup>.

From these examples, I asked myself, “What representations of beauty and childhood are being cultivated and spread?” The adults, movies, television programs, and personalities that are part of a child’s daily life encourage certain dreams and desires that place bodily appearance at the top of the priority list. Under family, social and cultural influence, girls are led to invest in body appearance and beauty from an early age.

As mentioned previously, in Brazil, boys and men also have been concerned with their appearance. Although since the 1960s, there has been an important societal tendency to ‘liberate the body’ from repressive social codes and taboos, it is still women who are expected or required to invest in a “body project” (Sant’anna, 2000), a body that must reproduce hegemonic standards of beauty. If we women are not born already endowed with beauty, we have to go searching for it. Otherwise, we risk the

social stigmatization of being branded as lazy, sloppy, and lacking in self-control.

A few decades ago, female imprisonment was due to domestic-related tasks and maternity. Today, one can say that there exists a “self- imprisonment” that occurs due to the beautifying procedures to which women submit, in the endless search for the ideal beauty, image, and appearance, to be materialized in our own body that needs to conform to hegemonic norms of beauty. Such worries can be destabilizing for the teacher. However, one of the biggest challenges for educators today is to keep up with a childhood that continues to scare us, escape from our hands, and that distrusts us, for both our knowledge and position.

6 Informações obtidas no site: <<http://g1.globo.com/Noticias/Brasil/0,,MUL1263047-5598,00-MAE+DE+GAUCHA+ELEITA+MINI+MISS+MUNDO+DUAS+VEZES+QUER+DAR+UM+TEMPO.html>>, acessado em 10 de dezembro de 2010.

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