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„— If we twirl too much will our panties be seen?” – the social construction of intimacy and bodily privacy among girls in a kindergarten

Summary

Drawing on the Sociology of Childhood, this paper aims to show how children during their play in kindergarten ascribe symbolic meanings to their own actions and to certain objects reproducing interpretatively certain taboos. Ethnographic descriptive analysis about the uses around a pleated skirt by a group of girls aims to show the emerging tensions between its playful use and the moral events generated. The ways girls coped with them, allows one to identify i) the social construction of their identity as both children and girls in the kindergarten; ii) the interpretation of reproductive taboos concerning the behaviour and morality of the female gender, and iii) the importance of taboos for a consciousness of the intimacy and privacy of the infant body.

Keywords: girls, play, body, taboo, reproductive interpretation, intimacy, privacy

Introduction

“Today I took a round skirt. At one point, when the girls are together doing twirls, I get into the game and start to spin too. Rita, Gabi and Ana stop and stare. – Oh, do it again! – Rita tells me. I twirl and she asks: „— If we twirl too much will our panties be seen?”. (May 25th, 1999)

This episode, taken from an ethnographical study of children¹ in a public kindergarten located in a semi-rural region of Portugal (cf. Ferreira 2004), is taken as the starting point for revisiting children’s relationships with their bodies and objects when playing at make-believe, particularly when, in the group of girls, one of the leaders introduces taboos regarding sexual behaviour and morality in the female gender.

It was the unusual nature of that question, so much so as to interrupt the course of what had become one of the most popular routines of the group of girls – twirling – that somehow

¹ The ethnography was realized during all the school year of 1998-1999 with a group of children predominantly female (11 girls, 7 boys), older (1 boy aged 6 years; 5 girls and 3 boys, aged 5 years; 5 children aged 4 and 3 years old each; in a ratio of 3 girls for 2 boys), newcomers (11 newcomers for 7 established pupils). Family backgrounds are organized in social groups of peasants, unskilled workers and housewives (9) contrasting with those of intermediate social groups of small owners in industry, trade and agriculture (6) and a small group from the upper middle class (3) of liberal professions.
alerted me to the fact that something was “out of place” (Douglas 1991). The scrutiny with which I was targeted, with the use of the prosaic word “panties”, this piece of clothing that one uses and that actually serves to cover sex, but which one rarely speaks of in public, and much less, displays; the construction of the question between a doubt and a request for confirmation; its latent content, denoting a sense of concern for the privacy and intimacy of the body towards the possibility of making conspicuous a body part associated with sex – all these indicators showed me how the girls perceived the relationship between nudity and sexuality and the boundaries between the public and the private domains of the body. Within these causalities we infer a work of self-awareness and self-restraint rather than anticipated action, according to a disciplining of bodies and minds preventing an exposure to pejorative connotations. Finally, the density of social significance of the question “– If we twirl too much will our panties be seen?” I saw myself launched into the face of a child who showed awareness of taboos relating to woman’s nudity and seemed to be testing to what point we were playing in a respectable way.

Echoing the voices and feelings of the older girls, “– If we twirl too much can our panties be seen?” is the motif around which this article is based, aiming to understand some of the ways in which, through the course of one of the most remarkable and distinctive experiences of life as children among children – playing – they themselves socially construct their condition and identity as girls with a specific pattern of behaviour and morality. The analysis of ethnographic episodes focuses on the social uses of a dark blue skirt, rounded, long and out of fashion, and the taboos associated with it, to show the processes used by girls i) in the symbolic reframing of objects and usual action routines at “home” (re)producing a ritual which is exclusively female, ii) in the performative and social use of their body and its playful relationship with objects, iii) in their social skills to match conflicting interests between being a child and being “a grown up woman”, controlling tensions that emerge from playfulness, from the management of the body and from morality and iv) in the interpretive reproduction of taboos in the social construction of intimacy and bodily privacy of girls and of a women’s reputation that is socially credible. So, the re-visitiation of the ethnographic episodes observed around the social uses of the dark blue skirt seeks to go beyond of its superficial understanding just as a mere usual play of twirls and/or of pretend play „to get big”, very ordinary among girls. Its reinterpretation within the network where children’s culture, gender and sexuality are woven, aims to illuminate other facets of the daily social construction of being and becoming children among children, most often imperceptible to the adult gaze.

Children as social actors: body, gender and sexuality – theoretical coordinates

By revealing another agenda involving the relationships between body, gender and sexuality while the girls played at twirling, the ethnographic episode with which this text began describes them as social actors with a particular agency. That is to say that by exploring and giving new meaning to relations of interdependence between bodies-artefacts that the twirl gathers, the girls did not accept acritically social reality as it was presented to them by adults in the kindergarten, keeping it intact and limiting it to play. Rather, through interpretations, social uses, negotiations and reflections that they themselves made about themselves and their bodies, they were continuously telling how they were actively
seeking to give meaning to life, how they were defying the constraints that they faced, and how they were “learning from ignorance” (Louro 2004: 69) while taking their place and experiencing themselves in that same world. Understanding children as social actors implies considering that they are influenced by, but also influence their social conditions of existence by producing their own social space of childhood - childhood cultures and their organization as a social group (Ferreira 2004) - there constructing their identity as children and their subjectivities as children amongst children (James 1993).

In the otherness of childhood that distinguishes them from the Other-adult, cultures of infant peers are set up claiming specific types of interpretations and representations of the world, generationally built (Corsaro 1997), and where role-playing is one of the ingredients of the playing culture of children. By playing at make-believe, children are creating a sense of familiarity with the adult social world by exploring adult themes, but remaining children because they reinterpet, reframe and rebuild individual and collective concerns and desires according to their interests. Then they show that with reference to the adult world, they are able to use the knowledge and social skills needed to participate in it, but at the same time to assert themselves differently before it. It is a process of “interpretive reproduction” of the adult social world by children (Corsaro 1997), in which they also (re)produce reflexively their children’s culture with/among their peers. Infant peer culture is understood as intercultural contexts of action in which children construct and attribute meanings and senses to their relationships and sociability, negotiating the boundaries between their membership and their differentiation in groups. From this perspective, playing is understood as a "context" of negotiation and action that is playing to make-believe” and “a text”, and that in doing so, children tell stories about themselves to themselves (Schwartzman 1978: 246 cit in Ferreira 2004: 201).

An unavoidable reference in the game sameness/otherness with adults and among children is the children’s physiques, whether in classifications and hierarchies based on evaluations of their physical appearances by certain standards, norms, values and cultural ideals, or in the production and contesting of identities by children themselves within their peer groups. It is here that they learn how to use and mark out their bodies; to handle impressions and manage expressions in order to equalise themselves with and/or differentiate themselves from the others, and to manage generated tensions. James (1993) considers that different physical appearances are significant in terms of social identity among children: height (including physical size and complexion), form, appearance, gender (all of them based on adult notions of heterosexuality, desirability and morality issues) and performance (including dynamic and expressive aspects in the performance of social roles) (cf. Prout 2000; Valentine 2010). Nevertheless, more than physical size itself, it is important to be acknowledged in the peer group, and this implies being socially competent, i.e.: being original and creative, knowledgeable and a good interpreter of children’s tastes and cultural interests, but also being able to sustain dialogue, coordination and harmonisation of actions; monitoring and adapting to the point of view of others, respecting cues and rules provided in the flow of the action, namely to be accepted and to be respected in accordance with group values. Therefore, children’s bodies and identities are intrinsic to the networks of social relations and their powers, which in turn promote, hinder, or forbid certain relationships of elective affinity and their sociability; these socio-affective supports are essential to the building of the identification processes.
In this follow-up, and unlike the institutional criteria of age that are used by adults to add/segregate children in social groups supposedly homogeneous in terms of their physical and psychological development, gender seems to be one of the most important bases of identification to build their social groups. Gender opposition is visualized in the kindergarten by a gender appropriation of spaces, objects and activities within a segregated organization of the peer group around their own gender, revealing that the adoption of a gender identity in children occurs early and that girls and boys have a similar knowledge of the resources available for the expression of those identities (Ferreira 2004; Corsaro 1997; Thorne 1993). This gender dichotomy and opposition is usually explained based on the model of the socialization of gender roles normatively constructed and learned through family socialization and/or through the products of culture for children in which fashion, toys or media show as some of the most popular; both intended to reflect the dominant conceptions of society, in their stereotypes and idealizations.

However, this does not mean that children, boys and girls, are aware of what counts as “appropriate” gender conceptions, values or behaviours; especially those that are helpful in becoming members of that group, or aware of what kind of behaviours membership requires of them to be accepted as such. It is therefore important to distinguish between the adoption of masculine and feminine roles and identity. In the first case, the roles would be basically arbitrary patterns or rules established by society, defining ways of conduct, and learning them would allow each member to know what is considered (un)suitable for a man or woman of that society and to fulfil those expectations. In the second case, the identity of the subjects transcends the mere performance of roles, and their sense of belonging is constructed by reference to multiple social dimensions such as gender, social class, sex and age, but also to their status as peers and as “students” from the kindergarten. Thus, gender as “a significant difference, but also as a reflective device for distinguishing Self and Other” (James 1993: 190), is a powerful analytical tool for understanding what children know/learn about it when playing in kindergarten and what social uses to give this knowledge as forms, strategies and effects of power and also of subversion and resistance. It is of interest to appreciate in the social practices children recreate when playing, how boys and girls, by interpreting the world in terms of gendered knowledge, are able to position themselves in various ways within a set of discourses and practices and then develop subjectivities that meet the aspects that distinguish them from the Other-children, or are similar to them because they all share the same condition of children and pre-schoolers.

Understanding childhood as an age of innocence, ignorance and vulnerability (Gittins 1998; Kehily 2004) has implications for the fostering of children and of the social institutions which are designed for them, such as kindergartens. Presenting a front consistent with the ideal of universally neutral and therefore desexualized beings, these institutional worlds reflect a design of children’s bodies as asexual. But what goes on behind the scenes is a busy social life in which sex and sexuality are inseparable gender interactions that underpin a culture’s and children’s sociability, since heterosexual adult cultures are

\[footnote{In the context of the relationship between gender and sexuality and of the construction of gender and sexual identities, it is important not to make them synonyms since men and women can be heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual (Louro 2004).} \]
refracted there. It so happens that both within and between gendered groups of boys and girls, children are subject to surveillance, pressures, rituals and public trials of confirmation, as well as supervision to build their bodies, gestures, tastes, and appearances, according to certain models of femininity and masculinity and of heterosexuality (Ferreira 2004). And, often attendant in this context are the interpretive reproduction of adult’s taboos by children themselves to control and legitimize gender identities and hegemonic (hetero)sexuality.

Whereas the original meaning of taboo describes something sacred and forbidden and at the same time pure and impure (Douglas 1991), it can also mean, more commonly, a subject of which one cannot or should not speak because it is secluded and intimate, its intended area of influence being issues associated with the regulation of body and sexuality. Once a threat to the social values and interests of the group(s) is detected, or to its prediction and possible consequences, the use of taboos can have the function of calling to attention, denouncing, embarrassing or applying pressure for compliance; identifying and portraying the target and situation and defining them as out of place (Douglas 1991), atypical and abnormal and problematic; justifying its exposure to penalties as social exclusion, stigmatization, or ostracism. On behalf of the idealization of values and the preservation of interests and a given consensus and social conscience, producing moral speeches polarized between good and evil, honour and shame, clean and dirty, and warning of the consequences for the individual are contexts in which the use of taboos latent or explicit, act as a kind of socio-moral educational work aimed at rationalization and sublimation of emotions, intimacy, and the growing privatization of bodily functions and the disciplining of bodies and minds.

Despite Freud’s insistence that children are sexual beings, with the specific styles in which they live their childhoods continually attesting to the fact that they know more than adults are willing to acknowledge, including matters regarded as taboo, as is the case with gender markers and sexuality that intertwine their experiences in play, they are rarely seen as such or it is taken to be in a peaceful way. The prevalence of this adult-centrism practised by adults implies a social taboo around the relationship between infancy, body, and sexuality that is seen as threatening to the concept of children as innocent and ignorant, which extends to sexual ignorance (cf. Gittins 1998; Kehily 2004). And yet, they are knowledgeable, and experience the regulation of sexuality and challenge it, questioning childhood as this immaculate symbol of innocence, as we seek to demonstrate below.

The social construction of intimacy and privacy for the girl’s body

Nothing accentuates sexual dimorphism with greater clarity and toughness than clothing. It is especially noticeable in the disputes and conflicts that occur over their possession that “clothes” are not equal, nor used indiscriminately, which is clear from the clothes identified by me at the beginning of this survey. Over time, I have watched the passing of this notion as a construction veste vulgus to a construction as veste economicus – where the various features and techniques manipulated in an extravagant and unique way, and used directly or mediated, are maximized so as to extract the most effects and personal and social dividends - and thus, to the veste sociologicus - in which, according to the social function they fulfil, each piece of clothing can be placed in a classification system that reflects relations, operations and feelings describing “the terms of the context in which they are
used and the expressions of identity that are theirs” (Carvalho 1999: 202 cit. in Ferreira 2004: 218).

_Dressing and embellishing „to get big”: social uses of clothes for girls_

Entering „home” and going to the „bedroom” to dress and adorn was one of the first sequence of actions that girls performed as soon as the teacher announced “— _Now you can go wherever you want to play…_”, and that they repeated throughout the day, every day. There they had a variety of clothing, footwear, and props that enabled them to compose, always renewed, images of “being grown-up women”. “Dressing and garnishing” quickly becomes a routine hugely popular among girls and a kind of rule to which, deliberately and willingly, they adhere, gaining traits of a ritual of femininity, paradigmatic of the process of social construction of women’s identities. Wearing clothes typically feminine as a restoration of traits defeminized by the use of the school pinafore and tubular, to be/represent themselves as if they were “adult women” has become synonymous with experiencing a new “skin” that exalts femininity by defining lines and shapes that carved a body sculpture. New silhouettes and volumes are formalized in rituals controlled and coded in certain ways of dressing and in a pedagogy of gestures, postures and tastes that endows in the bodies of children a kind of discourse of new fashion consistent with social choices deemed central to celebrating the value of becoming a woman, large and showy. Its resulting content and social effects denote a strong symbolic and identity factor for the actors and their audience, and a moral substance particular to their cultural logic that identifies and distinguishes them as feminine beings. That is what happens with one of the three pieces of clothing selected by the girls: a dark blue skirt, rounded, apparently tubular, and completely out of fashion.

_Skirts that “dance”: the twirls as part of the shared culture of young girls_

If wearing any adult woman’s garment makes possible the building of bodies of women in the bodies of little girls, what gives them the nature of special objects within the cultural routines among the girls and makes them the most feminine pieces of women’s clothing is their use according to the game that allows time transition between their future condition and their present condition as children: a management of the illusion between the distance of real body and ideal body, and also the enhancement that the accumulation of plastic, aesthetic and recreational predicates, contained in each one of them, symbolically represents.

In the case of the “blue skirt” that was used for the composition of a body as that of a woman-mother-housewife, other possibilities for images of femininity were revealed by the excitement aroused by the discovery and exploitation of its plastic and playful qualities. There was then, _in actu_, the abrupt interruption of the ongoing actions and, in a game of vertigo, the repeated display of twirling: supported on one leg, girls imparted speed and movement to their body causing it to rotate around itself, which made the “blue skirt” pleat, inflate and puff, expanding it into a large circle, thus swelling the child’s body. The visual show which was therefore generated, and which the girls cultivated in a prodigious aesthetic and performative record, became one of the leading brands of individualization and one of the most perfect images of pleasure, creating excitement and the illusion of being able to do until exhaustion that which physical limits and gravity prevent – the simulation
of a body whose greatness suggests, paradoxically, its elevation/levitation - and what social conventions seek to curb at all costs – reveling in pleasure for pleasure's sake:

“(…) After Gabi, Rita, Inês, Ilda, Lola and Rute have painted her nails in the “library”, Inês enters the “room” and begins to twirl, with her arms and fingers open, fluttering the blue skirt. – My skirt also dances! – says Rita, newly arrived, lifting her pinafore and swirling, fluttering her own skirt. Both girls twirl. Then Rita stops and announces: – It’s time to start packing! (…) But Inês goes to the “door” to twirl some more”. (November 23rd, 1998).

The aesthetic effect that combines image, speed and movement, condensed in the spiral that draws concentrically around the individual, expanding him or her ostensibly, makes the gaze of others converge upon the self. The spell of the “blue skirt” then lies within the arbitrary power of its user to make herself noticed individually in the way she makes it spin at any time, and thus, in doing so, establishes a “spin style” that tends to be reproduced by other girls present and with any outfit. Hence, what begins as an act and individual performance becomes eminently social and in one of the marks of originality in the collective of girls:

“Lola shows me her skirt billowing, twirling. Rita and Inês, who are also wearing skirts, exhibit themselves swirling. They twirl and compare with each other to see which skirt twirls more. Ilda, who was walking around the room (…) stops to look at Rita and says – Oh, Rita’s skirt twirls well! Rita begins to swirl with more speed and Inês too. (…) Ana joins them, raising her pinafore to make the skirt swirl more.
– Yours doesn’t twirl much! – says Rita
– I know how to dance on one foot! – Inês says to me, while swirling with one foot, but she unbalances, falls and… laughs. The other girls follow her laughing.” (November 27th, 1998)

As if it were some kind of “spontaneous” choreography in which each girl indulges herself, more important than the „blue skirt” itself is to spin the clothes because it becomes an inspirational source of reciprocity in sharing the same interest, the same formalism of action (lines 1-3) and the assignment of meanings, fooled by collective emotions generated in the vertigo and by the outbreak of laughter, decompressor of forms of individualization and tension (lines 8-9): a laughter that repairs complicity overshadowed by the critical and comparative evaluation of individual performance (lines 1-3, 4-7).

The relevance of the “spin style” as one of the key elements of feminine peer culture in everyday kindergarten was visible when the girls sketched informally, as a criteria, the rule of preference/selection for choosing “clothing that twirls”:

“By departure time, Ilda no longer twirls with her pinafore. – Do you want to see mine? – Rita asks Ilda, and twirls with her skirt flowing, Ilda looks and they both twirl.” (November 23rd, 1998)

“After the morning snack, when children collectively participate in a ball, I ask Rita, enthusiastic dancer and driving force of these events, why she is not dancing. She replies: – Because I don’t have a skirt!” (December 7th, 1998)
To use „an outfit that twirls”, such as the „blue skirt”, becomes identical to wearing clothes that, by not being pants – clothing first identified as masculine, move away from the model of an androgynous gender, or an outfit that by being hyper-feminine encapsulates the body in a setting that reflects its forms and shape, but immobilizes it. In the framework of relations and sociability of child-girls the “proper” use of women’s clothing is guided by the superlative of wearing typical and exclusively feminine clothes – dresses and skirts – and with an aesthetic corresponding to the expressive effects of the “blue skirt”.

Therefore it can be said that the momentary suspension of the symbolic representation of the roles and images of the traditional adult women, by the eruption of the social reproduction of twirls that the “blue skirt” launched as a fashion inside and outside the “home”, marks a difference very significant in relation to its initial use that: i) the possibility of asserting individual powers legitimized in values of peer culture – the value of playfulness brings with it the challenge of boundaries vs. control of the body; the pursuit of their own interests vs. the interests of the childhood world in which they live, ii) the conciliation of the individual with the collective, by the emergence and institutionalization of genderized practices of being a girl in a group of girls - the twirls and the same taste in clothes that twirl, iii) learning body techniques and the strengthening of social relations – observation and training, education and mutual comparisons, that “soften” the outbreak of inflated competitions; iv) the interpretive reproduction of the values of the dominant feminine culture in which the perception of visual effects generated by the creative use of the “blue skirt” amongst others by twirling, converts into a rewarding experience for the child herself and in herself, and in a uniquely feminine subjectivity defined in their own terms as “enjoying being vain” and “cute”... but respected, as we shall see below.

“— If we twirl too much can our panties be seen?” — between playfulness and morality

With an uninhibited pleasure and creativity that expressed strength, energy and dynamism, the use of the “blue skirt” coexisted in a series of tensions in which this exterior image of autonomy and determination remained within, in ways of feeling and judging, rigged and tied to the values of traditional femininity. This means that in the context of women’s interactions, where appearances were carefully produced, the subjective experience of the girls was complemented with an emotional and moral work of socialization, more refined and insidious, aiming at containment behaviours. The social construction of how to be a girl among girls became apparent when in the course of using their clothing of choice they expressed a kind of moral panic:

“Inês arrives home. Stops looking at girls who are twirling and then turns to me and tells me in a tone of secrecy: – Do you know I really like dresses? I really like to wear dresses to school! The ones that don’t have a split dance a lot and those that have a split also dance but showing the panties!”. (January 22nd, 1999)

“— We can see Gabi’s panties on the photo! – Rita says, commenting on the latest photos I had taken.” (May 19th, 1999)

Suggesting a surveillance of the self against the excesses that the joyful and playful use of twirling clothes could trigger and of a self-discipline to curb the emotions flared by revelry, the interpretative reproduction of sexual taboos expressed in the moral panic
of the girls with the “showing of their panties”, or better, with the possibility that they could be seen, points, even in the absence of any outside observation, to the subtraction from public view of something that is indirectly associated with sex, in what is most private and intimate. Not showing sex, not showing thighs, were some of the prohibitions that revealed a moral spectrum, where a high sensitivity to the social reputation of gender stood.

The reflectivity of the girls around this game of the perception of others, present or absent, real or imagined, was anchored in their respect for the values of virtue and sexual purity to which, in the event of profanity, even if remote, they associated feelings of shame and guilt, typical of a tradition linked to the fear of a loose womanly sexuality, subversive of the natural order of things (Peristiany 1988). It is here that we observe how social constraints, by implying tyrannies of intimacy, act founding an emotional culture – beliefs, norms, values – and a “feminine psychology” anchored in a pedagogy “of-what-others-will-say-and-of-what-others-will-think”, where decency excels as an insignia identical with a moral code of respectability, and containment as the mechanism which enables them.

On the logic and on the system of socialization among the girls, it seems to be the game and the anticipated assessment of the social effects as negative that intervene in the restriction of the expression of behaviours, gestures and physical postures. Consequently, social control is largely self-control: the act of twirling dresses and skirts in public is not offensive, but rather its effect in going beyond the limits of the “show”, accidental and tolerable, especially near boys. Between what can be shown and what must be covered and hidden at all costs, a way of being in the feminine body is elaborated where gender and sexuality are inextricably linked, and where the fear of judgments of levity and immoral profiancy (because they violate the rules of good behaviour) and/or amorality (because they are unaware of those rules) requires from them, as a supreme quality, the rationalization of sexual modesty.

These ways to reconcile the preservation of the self and the personal intimacy with sexuality made invisible in everyday life, reveal a way of existence, doing, and being a girl among girls by learning the art of concealment, participate in the management of social impressions among others and highlight a selfish decentiation to an altruistic vocation at the service of a strategy of presenting themselves as a sensitive being/gender, i.e., how to be intimate, delicate and complex, able to build a dignified and worthy reputation. In this sense, the social reproduction of this code of morality, evident in the latent concern “– If we twirl too much will our panties be seen?”, by directly striking with the uninhibited behaviour and sexual openness manifested in the girls twirls, places the construction of their femininity in a network of tensions where relations of interdependence between the individual and the social, emotion and reason, deviance and conformity, present and future, childhood and adulthood, take place.

**Final considerations**

Taken by surprise at the twirls initially described, I wavered between continuing or stopping twirling, not because it advocates the supposed innocence of children, but because, on the contrary, I could fall into the meshes of a powerful taboo: of considering that there is something wrong with children being sexually “knowledgeable”, nourishing the idea that children and sex should be apart (Kehily 2004). Between one position and the other, it is important to realize that “puberty is not the beginning of the expression of feelings
and experiences towards sexuality” (Gittins 1998; Kehily 2004) and that the issue of twirls for girls aimed, after all, not to do without the performance necessary to effect maximum levitation, but to do it without endangering their feminine reputation as playful girls, able to be respectable. In this sense, perhaps it can be said that the kind of feminine sensibility in which the sublimation of forms of expression are realized in embarrassment, shame, modesty, and shyness, rooted in a culture or tradition that makes women submissive and passive beings that are almost unnoticed – in part conservatively played out by these girls in kindergarten – intertwines with other forms of other/new behaviours in which, along with extraversion and lack of inhibition, not only do the girls have fun twirling, but they also use it to attract attention, to be seen and heard. Breaking with what is the dominant image of women as silent and quiet, but not enough to challenge the limits of tolerance that the moral character of “well-behaved” girls demands, these forms of behaviour, situated midway between the values of feminine tradition and their self-determination as child-girls, rather than standing as contradictory or ambiguous, reveal them both as constitutive dimensions of their heterosexual femininity and resources available to someone who knows how to take advantage of things and situations.

References