



FEMINISM AND FAMILIES TODAY: What's the New Mystique?

A CCF Online Symposium on the 50th
Anniversary of the *Feminine Mystique*

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Table of Contents

Keynote: Mystifying “The Feminine Mystique” Four Myths about Betty Friedan and Feminism

By Stephanie Coontz

The Youth and Beauty Mystique - Its Costs for Women and Men

By Paula England

Sexual Mystiques - Do we still like it old school?

By Virginia Rutter

The Unfeminine Mystique - Stereotypes about African-American Women

By Shirley Hill

Lesbian Mystiques

By Judith A. Howard

Latinas' Mystiques

By Lorena Garcia

The Rise of the “Motherhood Mystique”

By Cameron Macdonald

Keynote: Mystifying “The Feminine Mystique” Four Myths about Betty Friedan and Feminism

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Fifty years ago Betty Friedan touched off an international uproar with her claim that millions of women had been ensnared by a set of myths about women’s nature: the fiction that women were naturally passive, sexually and intellectually; that they wanted nothing more than to be dependent on a man; and that they got their deepest fulfillment in life out of keeping a spotless home. Friedan called these myths “the feminine mystique,” and she made the then-controversial claim that “women are people” as well as females, possessing aspirations and capabilities similar to those of men. She urged women to reject the feminine mystique and pursue a meaningful life outside as well as inside the home.

In the half century since the publication of *The Feminine Mystique*, many myths have grown up about what Friedan actually wrote and what the feminist movement, which she helped found, has and has not achieved. Here are four of the most common.

1. **THE ANTI-MALE MYTH: Betty Friedan was a man-hater, and *The Feminine Mystique* was anti-marriage.**

REALITY: Friedan hated housework -- and her willingness to say so was considered shocking in the early 1960s -- but she believed that marriages would be more harmonious and loving when wives were free to find meaning in their own work or community activities rather than seeking fulfillment solely through the accomplishments of their husbands. She even suggested that her tombstone should read: “She helped make women feel better about being women and therefore better able to freely and fully love men.” And today, research confirms that couples with egalitarian gender values report the highest relationship satisfaction.

2. **THE ANTI-HOMEMAKER MYTH: Feminism has hurt homemakers.**

REALITY: In 1963, when *The Feminine Mystique* was published, only eight states gave stay-at-home wives any claim on their husband’s earnings, even if they had put their husband through school and then devoted themselves to raising the children for 40 years. “Head and master” laws gave husbands the final say over financial decisions, whether a wife could get a credit card, and where the couple should live. Rape was legally defined as “forcible sexual intercourse with a woman other than one’s wife.” Feminist-inspired reforms have improved the lives of homemakers as well as of employed women.

3. THE CAREER WOMAN MYTH: The entry of women into the workforce and their growing educational advantage over men has destabilized marriage and doomed many women to a life of loneliness.

REALITY: As more wives went to work divorce rates initially rose, but this trend reversed as people adjusted to women's new status. Divorce rates have been falling since 1980. Today the states with the highest percentage of working wives tend to have the lowest divorce rates.

Educated women are now just as likely to marry as any other group of women and because they are so much less likely to divorce, by age 40 they are the most married group of women in America. Three-quarters of female college graduates aged 40 are married at age 40, compared to two-thirds of women that age with some college education, 63 percent of high school graduates, and only 56 percent of women with less than a high school degree. Women who earn more than \$60,000 a year are more likely to be married than low-earning women. And now, women who choose to remain single have far more options to lead successful and fulfilling lives than ever before.

4. THE POST-FEMINIST MYTH: Women are now equal to or have even drawn ahead of men, so gender equity is no longer an issue

REALITY: Women still earn less than men with the same educational credentials in every occupation, and more women than men live below the poverty level. At the same time, women have impressively increased their representation in high-earning and high-status occupations. But as Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg shows in her forthcoming book, *Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead*, they are still held back from top leadership positions by remnants of the feminine mystique that persist in the minds of others and in their own internalized self-images as well.

Young women no longer feel that they need to play dumb or pretend to be bad at sports, as the old feminine mystique mandated. But the spread of what I have called "the hottie mystique" has led to a sexualization of young girls that can distract them from exploring their new options. It has even convinced some women that it is empowering to work at the new crop of "breastaurants," where waitresses are decked out in sexually titillating outfits and trained to stoke their male customers' egos with compliments and coquetry.

The Youth and Beauty Mystique - Its Costs for Women and Men

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Today, a male manager who selected only young, beautiful women employees would be seen as a Neanderthal. But in the personal sphere, when a 50 year-old single man dates only much younger women, and chooses one to marry, few of his friends question his sense of entitlement to a younger woman.

Unlike “the feminine mystique,” which Friedan described as a set of internalized stereotypes that led women to make “mistaken” choices in their personal lives, the youth mystique comes largely from the choices of men, and few Americans fault them for exercising their preferences. Sociologist Elizabeth McClintock and I examined marriage licenses taken out between 1970 and 1988. We found that the older a man is when he marries, the more likely he is to choose a woman much younger than himself.

Men under 30 typically marry women less than 2 years their junior. But men who marry in their 30s tend to marry women 4 years younger. Men in their 40s typically choose a bride who is 6 years younger, and men over 60 marry women who are on average 8 years younger. It appears that the older men are when choosing a partner, the less attractive women their own age look compared to a youthful ideal, and the more they want a wife younger than themselves.

This makes it difficult for older women to find mates. Largely as a result of this pattern, we calculated that the number of single men available for every 100 single women goes down by age: 85 for 36 to 45, 70 for those 46 to 55, and less than 60 for those 56 to 65 years of age. No wonder women feel a need to spend so much energy trying to make themselves look younger!

Despite the media hype about “cougars” – older women stalking younger men -- we found no parallel pattern for women. They marry partners within a few years of their age no matter how old they are when they marry.

Just as today we question ageism in employment decisions, maybe we should question youth-biased standards in our private lives—especially when only men are seen as entitled to a younger partner. In the long run, moreover, men as well as women may be ill-served by the youth mystique.

This is because the youth mystique also affects divorce, only it does so in a more gender neutral way. In research I am currently doing with sociologists Paul Allison and Liana Sayer, we use a national survey that asked ex-spouses which one wanted the breakup more. Men were most likely to initiate a divorce when their wives were at least three years

their senior. But the same held for women—they too were most likely to leave a partner more than three years older than themselves. In fact, for both men and women, the more their spouse's age exceeded theirs, the likelier they were to initiate a divorce.

The younger partner tends to leave the older, regardless of gender. So just as Friedan argued for women about the feminine mystique, the youth mystique may be leading men to make mistaken choices that will leave them less happy in the long run.

Sexual Mystiques - Do we still like it old school?

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Americans have rejected most of the stereotypes and double standards that prevailed 50 years ago. Very few relationships are organized on the principle that men and women are opposites, with totally different capabilities, needs, and duties. We no longer believe that a happy marriage requires a man to be the breadwinner and decision-maker and the woman to take care of all the emotional and nurturing work.

But the last bastion of the feminine mystique may be a *sexual mystique*. Like the feminine mystique before it, the sexual mystique relies on the fantasy that men and women live in different worlds, and that these differences must be maintained for everyone to be turned on and sexually satisfied. According to this mystique a happy sex life requires a macho man who is in control and a woman who is charged up with desire, yet submissive and teachable.

Think about the appeal of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, seen by many as a daring exploration of up-to-date, high risk sex. In fact, the domination/submission theme in the book not only **misrepresents** BDSM (bondage, discipline/dominance, submission/sadism, masochism) communities, but is based on a very traditional sexual script: man in charge, woman submitting. The protagonist's turn-on is that the bright, feisty, but innocent young heroine submits to him; hers is that this dangerous, powerful, commanding man will eventually take care of her. From the sexual mystique point of view, *Fifty Shades* isn't kinky or risky at all. Instead *Fifty Shades'* link to sexual fantasies is **safe, familiar territory**, catering to very old fashioned anxieties and desires.

These mystiques linger in real life as well. On the one hand, **research** shows that men and women are much more likely to share housework than in the past and that sharing makes their marriages happier. But a **new study** from **Julie Brines** and colleagues looked at what kind of housework couples share, in terms of "feminine" or "masculine" tasks (think doing the dishes versus mowing the lawn). They found that men and women who share housework in more traditional ways seem to have more sex than those who share housework without regard to traditional notions of what are men's versus women's tasks. In other words, these new-school housework-sharing couples found that following old-school *gender*scripts fueled their old-school *sexual* scripts.

Other social science research tells us the same story. Despite the significant decline in the double standard about the desirability of virginity for women over the past 50 years, **Paula England** and colleagues found that among college students, there is an orgasm double standard. Men have more orgasms than women in straight couples, and this is especially true early on in the relationship.

Pepper Schwartz and her colleagues surveyed 70,000 people about their relationships for their just-released book, *The Normal Bar*. They found that although the sexual fantasies of men and women were more similar to each other than in the past, men still reported more active fantasy lives, with a third more men than women imagined seeking another partner if they could. Times have changed since the 1980s, when Schwartz found that men were threatened when women initiated sex “too much.” But even today, sexual fantasies of freedom and pleasure still bear traces of traditional gender stereotypes.

The old feminine mystique has been banished from most homes and workplaces. But it still remains in the bedroom. People should not be judged for their sexual fantasies, but if we could bring our sexual desires more in line with the equality and flexibility we now expect in other aspects of our relationships, we might reduce some of the frustrations and misunderstandings in contemporary relationships.

The Unfeminine Mystique - Stereotypes about African-American Women

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The gendered mystique that still poses barriers to African-American women in their personal and public lives is perhaps best described as an “unfeminine mystique” – the idea that they have characteristics and embrace lifestyles that are outside the boundaries of “real” womanhood. This “unfeminine mystique” has plagued African-American women for more than 200 years.

In the early 19th century, a new definition of femininity was applied to white women. In sharp contrast to the colonial idea of women as helpmates and fellow providers for their family, the Victorian ideal of “true womanhood” emphasized women’s seclusion from the public world of work and social interactions. The True (White) Woman was depicted as sexually innocent, innately submissive, and incapable of making her way through life without a man to protect her. Black women, by contrast, were seen as indelicate because of their work and social activities outside the home. They were depicted as sexually profligate and dominant over men. They abandoned their children to engage in paid labor. And they often raised children without a man in the home.

The idea that African-American women were “unfeminine” masked the fact that most simply had little control over their sexuality, childbearing, or work experiences. But it justified denying them the privileges and respect supposedly accorded to those who conformed to the stereotype of “the weaker sex.”

In the 20th century the “unfeminine mystique” was modernized into the image of the “black matriarch.” African –American women were described as domineering figures who transgressed mainstream gender restrictions by heading their own families and usurping the power of African-American men. Despite many scholarly refutations of the “black matriarch” thesis, it still powerfully shapes the images, expectations, and experiences of black women. Black women are constantly told that the strength and self-sufficiency they have had to acquire is an affront to black manhood, and is at the root of the gender trouble between black men and women. Some African-American men seek to reclaim their power through exploitative or even violent relationships with women. Others, buying into the myth that African-American women are able to fend for themselves, often feel justified letting them do just that.

Rather than investigate the external economic and social pressures that put extra strain on relationships in many African-American communities, many observers -- including some black leaders and churches -- castigate black women for failing to create male-headed

families that are seen as vital to the success of black people. Employers assume African-American women are all single-mothers and unreliable workers. Policymakers stereotype African-American women as sexually irresponsible, blame them for the economic and social challenges facing black children, and use those claims to justify denying social assistance to struggling families. And, sadly, African-American women often buy into the "unfeminine mystique," blaming themselves for not being able to form successful intimate relationships while at the same time experiencing frustration for not being as strong and independent as they are assumed to be. What is needed are truly liberating images of African-American women -- images that portray them as fully human with all the vulnerabilities and strengths that entails.

Lesbian Mystiques

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Betty Friedan highlighted the many ways that cultural images and expectations of gender in the 1950s and 60s held women back. The expectations derived most obviously from patriarchy, which Friedan recognized, but also from white supremacy, capitalism, and heterosexism, which she did not. In Friedan's time the feminine mystique certainly constrained women's senses of themselves and their possibilities, but at least it recognized women as a group. The "lesbian mystique," by contrast, denied lesbians even existed. The concept was literally inconceivable. In the 19th century, Queen Victoria is rumored to have flatly proclaimed: "Women don't do that."

Of course there were lesbian subcultures and activism throughout the ages, even during the heyday of the feminine mystique. A group of us living in Madison WI at the time, not exactly Friedan's suburban middle America, organized what we rather inflatedly called a national conference of the National Lesbian Feminist Organization. And there were the womyn's music festivals, at least one of which continues to this day.

But through most of the 20th century, to the extent that lesbians were recognized at all, they were viewed as masculine, butch, man-hating (ironically) dykes. Femmes were not regarded as similarly lesbian, since they looked like "normal women." Lesbians were also assumed to be working class – out of the middle class mainstream.

These assumptions were held not only by the larger culture, but also by heterosexual feminists, who were worried that recognition of lesbians would endanger the feminist movement. Friedan herself is infamous for coining the phrase, the "lavender menace" in the late 1960s, when the National Organization of Women excluded lesbians.

Perhaps in reaction to this invisibility and intolerance, lesbians in the 1970s held images and self-definitions that were also limited in some ways. There was an essentialism about 1970s lesbians, evident in an assumption that lesbian behavior predicted a lifetime of lesbian preference and identity. Other even more profoundly unrecognized identities, especially trans identities, were conflated within lesbianism, complicating the presumed "essences" all the more.

These essentialisms have changed markedly in the 21st century. A recent *New York Times* essay by Michael Schulman, "**Generation LGBTQIA**" (January 9, 2013), makes clear that today we recognize a far broader and more fluid dimension of sexual possibilities. One's sexual partners are not assumed to always fit one gender profile: they change, they play. Whether or not this fluidity will grow into more stable patterns as these women (and men) age is an open question.

More generally, there has been an astonishingly rapid transformation in public opinion about gay men and lesbians in recent years. In November, for the first time, three U.S. states approved same-sex marriage by popular vote. Meanwhile, Minnesota defeated the same kind of anti same-sex marriage measure that had passed everywhere it was introduced in the previous 15 years. We can now marry in a number of states, including my own. We can give birth to children; we can adopt children. We can serve openly as Presidents and Provosts of major institutions of higher education. We can serve openly in the military.

I do not mean to suggest that discrimination against lesbians is a thing of the past. Still, the degree of prejudice and ignorance has been dramatically reduced (in the U.S., certainly not in all global regions), through exactly the kind of consciousness-raising and collective action that Friedan helped pioneer for the women's movement as a whole.

Latinas' Mystiques

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Latinas are often described as being either too devoted to their cultural values or not sufficiently connected to them. They are often told that they must choose “one of way of being,” either Latina or American. This expectation not only implies that there is an “authentic” Latina femininity and American femininity, but that their success depends on enacting the “right” femininity.

A prevailing mystique facing Latinas is that their “culture” holds them back from success and fulfillment. More specifically, they are told that *machismo* and *familismo* are to blame, respectively referring to an exaggerated expression of masculinity among Latino men and a strong emphasis placed on family that requires Latinas to be self-sacrificing. There are certainly aspects of Latinas’ cultural backgrounds that privilege men, but this is not unique to Latinas/os. Yet, this is the persistent narrative about Latinas’ challenges. This powerful mystique conveys to Latinas that they must reject their “culture” to be successful.

But numerous Latinas have demonstrated that rejection of their culture is not a prerequisite for pursuing professional and personal ambitions. U.S. Latinas have consistently described themselves as being caught between two worlds, that of their particular communities and that of the dominant society. And it is precisely because of this that Latinas can challenge the idea of an “authentic” Latina or American femininity. Latinas that resist the dichotomies imposed upon them understand that “culture” is not fixed and that they can create new cultural meanings and practices. For instance, some Latinas do not interpret their professional goals and their family as mutually exclusive. Instead, they sometimes link them together as a strategy for success. This way, a desire to “give back” to their families and communities fuels their motivation to persist despite the structural barriers they encounter, such as racist-sexist workplace practices.

In my interviews with 2nd generation working-class **Mexican and Puerto Rican girls about their understandings of and approaches to safe sex**, I found that the mystique that Latinas’ “culture” impedes their progress was also a condition that shaped how they made sense of their choices and those of other young Latinas. For instance, they interpreted the predicament of teen mothers to be caused by their willingness to adhere to cultural expectations of femininity that had prevented them from enacting sexual self-protective behaviors, such as condom use. The teen women I interviewed saw themselves as being more critical of aspects of their culture and therefore, “not like those girls.” Nevertheless, they still identified as Latinas, rejecting the notion that their sexual behavior reflected their Americanization. Their negotiations of their culture and future goals were connected to their awareness of the damaging stereotypes about Latina women. There is no denying that culture plays a role in defining Latinas’ lives, but it is not the only factor. We must also pay attention to how misrepresentations of “Latino culture” are utilized to produce this

contemporary mystique facing Latinas because the misrepresentations' power lies in shifting responsibility for success or failure solely onto Latinas, obscuring the social forces restricting their opportunities.

The Rise of the “Motherhood Mystique”

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When I think back on *the Feminine Mystique*, I am reminded of my favorite childhood television show, “Bewitched,” which featured a beleaguered housewife and witch, Samantha Stevens. As partner in her husband Darrin’s “two-person career,” holding a job of her own was out of the question. She was on call to whip up fabulous meals for Darrin’s boss and his clients at a moment’s notice – yet she wasn’t even supposed to use her superpowers to add a tasty dessert. She spent her days cooking, cleaning and helping her husband’s career, all the while proudly avoiding magical shortcuts. She had the requisite two children, but they mostly sat in the background, being supervised by a witchy relative or their babysitter, Esmeralda.

In the 1950s and early 1960s, a woman’s first priority, even if she had superpowers, was to catch and keep a man. She caught him by being beautiful; she kept him by being adoring and submissive. Whatever powers she might possess, be they brains, creativity, or levitation, had to be suppressed as an unforgivable threat to the male ego. Keeping a happy marriage was her primary aim; a clean house came second; and well-adjusted children, third.

Today women’s work outside of the home is often necessary and desirable. But we are a long way from the gender equity Friedan advocated. A new “Motherhood Mystique” has replaced the Feminine Mystique, and that motherhood mystique has reversed the priorities of its predecessor. Where the marital relationship was the core of the family unit in the 1950s and 1960s, today the mother-child bond is primary. Not only must the middle-class mother ensure her child gets into the right schools and has all the right extra-curricular activities, she must remain that child’s primary attachment figure regardless of whether she works outside the home or not. Her priorities are children, career, spouse and household, in that order. That does not spell liberation.

The ideology undergirding the postwar “feminine mystique” was the Freudian psychoanalytic construct of “normal” femininity, with its emphasis on female passivity. Psychiatrists ratcheted up women’s guilt by warning that if they did not put their husband’s needs first they would ruin him as a breadwinner, undermine his masculinity, and make themselves neurotic. Today many developmental psychologists ratchet up women’s guilt by wrongly claiming that if they work outside the home or put their children in day care between the supposedly magical years of one and three their children will end up with attachment disorders or behavioral problems. Yet research shows that the *quality of childcare*, both by mothers and others, matters more than who provides care.

Today’s working moms need not feel guilty. They actually spend more time interacting with their children than their mid-twentieth century stay-at-home counterparts. Galinsky’s

interview-based research for *Ask the Children: The Breakthrough Study that Reveals How to Succeed at Work and Parenting* shows that today's children that are happiest when their mothers feel less stressed and guilty, not when their mothers spent more time with them. Here, too **working mothers** score high marks, experiencing greater well-being better health, and fewer episodes of depression than contemporary at-home moms.

Friedan argued that the feminine mystique put inordinate pressure on marriage to fulfill women's emotional and intellectual lives, undermining marital happiness. Today, the motherhood mystique similarly overburdens parent-child relationships and expectations. Rather than enjoy the time freed up by the presence of childcare providers, working mothers too often feel threatened by providers' strong bonds with children. Mothers consequently cut back on time in community engagement, time with friends, time with their husbands, and time for themselves. The motherhood mystique also creates guilt and anxiety within mothers and "mompitations" between them.

Ultimately, the "motherhood mystique" keeps so focused on our *private* problems that we lack the energy to push for *public* solutions that would benefit all: family-friendly workplaces, paid family leave, and funding for excellent childcare and pre-school. Perhaps we could ask Samantha to twitch her nose.

About CCF

The Council on Contemporary Families is a non-profit, non-partisan organization dedicated to providing the press and public with the latest research and best-practice findings about American families. Our members include demographers, economists, family therapists, historians, political scientists, psychologists, social workers, sociologists, as well as other family social scientists and practitioners.

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