Who am I? An exploration into gender identity through photography and interview.

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Feminism is an important feature of my intellectual life, spending a large proportion of my time devoted to researching feminist works, be it through the reading of Sociological texts, newspaper and magazine articles, watching documentaries as well as taking part in the online community of feminists and LGBTQ+. This intense search for equality and acceptance led me to carry out this project. I felt that a practical EPQ would be best for me because it could combine my love of Photography as well as Sociology and will allow me to communicate in a way that best fits the contemporary society of millennials. Photographs can be used across many platforms to grab the interest of the masses to then further look into it for themselves and encourage them to read the accompanying work. This was an important factor in my decision making process as I wish for this body of work to not only be as part of a qualification but also as an artefact to accompany a body of qualitative research into what appears to be the real life issues of women in contemporary society, that can potentially lead to social change or solutions. For the final artefact, I decided to present it in a sketch book, in the style of an artist’s book. The interviews will accompany the photographs, each complimenting each other.

Once I decided I wanted to work using both photography and the written word, I began to investigate the way in which I could affectively achieve this. For this I researched the work of sociologists as well as photographers. I believe fundamentally that it is impossible in sociological research to ever truly separate oneself from the work they are carrying out and their investigative process. For this reason I tend to side with a committed approach to sociology, through feminist frameworks. I drew on the work of many Sociologists and feminist writers in my process, namely Anne Oakley whose feminist methodological approach to the interviewing process was key in my understanding of how to approach this topic of research and communicate the issues of my participants affectively. I found that Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber eloquently summarised this view of reflexivity and researchers role in the direction of research, writing ‘throughout the research process, subjective judgements on the part of researcher are always made’. The work of Herself Project was also influential in my interviewing process, as well as the process of writing up these interviews. As supporting background information to this project, I looked at the work of female photographers who focus on the issues surrounding their (and other women’s) femininity.

I found the essays in ‘Bad Feminist’ by Roxanne Gay very compelling in my attempt to understand a wide range of experiences. Francesca Woodman was particularly interesting to me, as her work strikes a chord with me as I find it interesting on an aesthetic and intellectual level as it appeals to my personal styles of photography and my own views of my femininity and experience. Her work is often dark, complex in understanding, sombre, concealed and open to interpretation. This is often reflected in my own work beyond this project, as well as the photos of myself that I have submitted. However, as each shoot acts as a piece of research lead by the participant, the other shoots do not reflect my usual photographic approach because this is not shared by the participants. I primarily wanted this research to be about the experiences and lifestyles of the participants so it was not

1 Anne Oakley, Sex, Gender and Society (London: Temple Smith Ltd., 1972)


3 http://herself.com/

4 Roxanne Gay, Bad Feminist Essays (London: Corsair, 2014)
appropriate for me to apply my personal approach as it is not in keeping with the feminist methodology I am using.

The work of Lee Miller⁵ was of interest to me as it represents the role of women in historic struggles, namely WWII. I travelled to London to see an exhibition of her work at the Imperial War Museum. This work was not directly influential on my own as it was more candid than mine and whilst it did explore women and their roles it was less focused on the causes of inequality, rather just acknowledging and presenting them.

Gender can be defined as 'the state of being male or female'⁶. Whilst this is commonly accepted to be a reasonable definition of gender, many people are beginning to question this definition as being too narrow, and there is a growing movement to accept gender as a non-binary categorisation system. In my discussion with my participants, this issue arose especially with two individuals; one a transgender male - Junior (FTM) and one agender person - Molly. I have also been considering the concept of myself being gender fluid before and throughout this project - the project has helped me to evaluate where I stand on this. As a result of being influenced by these movements I personally believe that society needs to take a wider and more open minded approach to gender. This being said, I tend to focus more on feminine issues as women appear to be a marginalised group within society and this issue is close to me in my everyday experience as a female and easily accessible for me to study.

From this research it appears to me that many women hold similar views to me, however each person sees the world through the prism of their own environment and experience. This is what makes research into this area so interesting because it is possible to uncover general trends, if this project had a larger sample I would potentially be able to investigate general experiences and issues within the different strata of women in society. Recurring themes within my research were the issue of self-presentation and labelling, this is particularly evident in the interviews with Tii and Tash. It was also clear that individuals were also aware that their experience would potentially be drastically different to others mentioning especially family upbringing⁷.

I had intended to also include responses from quotes that I had gathered through my reading and research. I decided to do this because I found these extracts very stimulating and was interested in the variety of ways that individuals may interpret them. However, only one participant responded to this. As a result, they will not be included in the artefact but will be submitted as part of the supplementary material. I also had some issues with attrition, participants dropping out part way through the process⁸ or not being able to complete any parts due to scheduling. Two participants who had to drop out would have given an interesting insight as they were older than my other participants and may have a different perspective that could have enriched the research.

I managed to complete the practical areas of my project in accordance to the time restrictions I had set myself originally with all the interviews and photo shoot carried out to time. However, where time became an issue was with my written work, I underestimated the amount of time it would take me to write up interview summaries, especially with regards to the process of referencing direct

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⁵ http://www.iwm.org.uk/history/lee-millers-second-world-war

⁶ https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/gender

⁷ Kat, Katie and Tash interviews

⁸ Emily
quotes. Keeping the participants involved in the process was a very important feature of my research. This required me to send everything that as about them to them for approval and consent to publish it. In order to get consent I drafted consent forms, using the University of Leeds model consent form as a template for reference when generating my own. I gave these to participants, and again there were issues getting these back in a timely manner.

The interviewing process was reasonably uniform in the set up as an attempt to minimise any investigator effects. All participants made initial contact with me via social media and were given briefs and consent forms to complete. For the interviewing process I intended to put the participants at ease, so whilst I had a few set questions to open up a discourse it was largely conversation based. If I felt the participant was not comfortable I would remind them they do not have to disclose anything they do not wish and make small talk with them in gaps in conversation. It was crucial that I really understood the responses I was hearing so I questioned the participants on their responses in an attempt to fully understand their meanings (I did remind participants that it was for this purpose and not to make them uncomfortable to that I disagreed with them). Throughout the interviews I recorded the conversation as well as taking notes, with the participants’ approval.

The presentation and selection process was difficult as I had to edit down the amount of photographs I included. For each person I took a large quantity of images with the aim of finally presenting a handful of images that represented the entire body accurately. The quantity of images varies dramatically for some as some participants wanted to a wider variety of things in their shoots than others.

Once the work was completed, it was clear to me that I had generated a very unique body of work that whilst had significant influences from other research, did not directly reflect any. I believe this to be a largely good thing as it offers a new insight and perspective in this particular area of research. The work was not as revealing as I had intended it to be as I had to sensor my work because it involved minors as well as it being part of a school qualification. I had taken nude images of myself and portraits of another individual in underwear as a response to social pressures with regards to the sexualisation of the female form and body shaming. My personal shoot was very much influenced by the Berger in ‘Ways of Seeing’ as there is a discussion between nude and naked. This was of particular interest to me and may become a source of later investigation when I am not restricted as such. Overall though, I am very pleased with the final product as it reflects the beliefs of all those involved well and is in keeping with my original plan.

Technically, the planning stages were particularly challenging as I had to find a place that it would be suitable to take photographs of people. I could not do this at school because of safeguarding, this led me to renting out a studio space in Oxford. I shot all the photographs using my cannon 700D and usually a tripod too (only when appropriate). I do not own any artificial lighting and as it was Autumn when I started shooting there was the issue of it being a bit dark, luckily the room I rented had lighting that was not yellow (this would not be appropriate as it would distort the white balance of the photograph) and was well lit naturally when the sun was out through windows. To edit my photographs I used Lightroom, however the editing process was minimal; it was only to correct minor errors such as exposure levels. I did not want to extensively edit images like I might have done.


in an independent project but it was important that this project was a collaboration and the images represented the true image of the models, not what I make them into.
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