

*The Feminine Mystique* at fifty:  
**Relevance and limitations in contemporary Western culture**

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In submission for the Barbara Roberts Memorial Award essay challenge

April 14, 2016

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In 1963, Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique*, a book that addressed the growing discontent of American middle-class housewives excluded from social and productive life in post-World War II society. She describes these women's unhappiness as the result of attempting to conform to a culturally-constructed 'happy suburban housewife' image—what Friedan calls the feminine 'mystique,' otherwise understood as the ideological and cultural dimensions characterizing femininity during that era. "The feminine mystique says that the highest value and the only commitment for women is the fulfillment of their own femininity," wrote Friedan, which is found "only in sexual passivity, male domination, and nurturing maternal love" (p.91-92). *The Feminine Mystique* was an important sociological study of a specific group of people in a specific temporal and cultural context. More than just a historical text, however, the book has also become generally acknowledged as "both a feminist classic and as a book which acted as a catalyst to the western feminist movement which began in the mid to late sixties" (Bowlby, 61). Because feminists continue to read and reflect upon Friedan's work today, it is important to consider its utility in current feminist theory. The keystone of progress is looking at old things in new ways, ways that are often critical; thus, the goal of this paper is to examine *The Feminine Mystique* from a contemporary perspective. Friedan argued that, perpetuated by educators, experts, advertisers, and the media, the feminine mystique had powerful consequences for American women, most especially the arrested development of their self-identities. Although this message was revolutionary for millions of women to whom it had not previously been accessible, and indeed continues to raise women's consciousness to issues of inequality and discrimination even today, for others *The Feminine Mystique* lacks credibility in

contemporary North American culture, due to its insensitivity to matters of class, race/ethnicity, and sexuality, as well as its emphasis on reform within the existing system rather than radical social change.

### **Core Themes**

The central theme in Friedan's (1963) work is the tension between the demands of the feminine 'mystique'—the idea that a woman's identity is based on her biology, her reproductive purpose, and her relational roles—and the demands of the development of individual human growth. Friedan contends that the arrested development of women's identities as a result of the 'mystique' had serious consequences, not only for women themselves, but also for families, children, and society as a whole.

Using a content analysis of popular women's magazines, Friedan (1963) explores how the media shaped women's social roles as wives and mothers. In the decade following the Second World War, she argues, the media's image of the 'ideal woman' shifted from a strong, independent career woman to one who found her fulfillment solely in her home and family. Friedan (1963) observes that a generation of women who internalized this image of the 'happy housewife' and now attempted to find "all the fundamental meanings of life" in their homes were easy targets for advertisers, who sought to 'help' them create an identity through the acquisition of consumer goods (p.316). In addition to media and advertising, Friedan (1963) writes that the oppression of the 'mystique' is "broadcast by the very agents of education and social science that are supposed to be the chief enemies of prejudice" (p.167). For instance, she critiques the ideas of Sigmund Freud and Margaret Mead, both of whom promoted the idea that "anatomy is destiny [and that] the identity of woman is determined by her biology" (p.136), contending that their reputations as respected academic experts "elevated" the feminine mystique to a "scientific

religion” that was difficult for many women to deny (p.194). Friedan (1963) also critiques the shift that occurred in women’s education after the Second World War, which increasingly directed women away from demanding academic interests that might lead to meaningful careers in favour of courses that could “teach them adjustment within the world of home and children” (p.237).

Taken together, Friedan (1963) argued, ideals of femininity promoted by journalists, advertisers, experts, and educators perpetuated a problem of identity for American women. She contends that while the search for identity is a common and accepted theme among men, by permitting girls to evade tests of reality, and real commitments, in school and the world, by the promise of magical fulfillment through marriage, the feminine mystique arrests their development at an infantile level, short of personal identity, with an inevitably weak core of self (1963, p.403)

For Friedan (1963), however, experiencing the crisis of identity is a necessary condition in order “to become fully human,” a condition which a woman’s confinement to domestic life kept her from realizing (p.136). In addition to women’s ‘forfeited self,’ adherence to the ideals of the mystique often resulted in emotional distress with physical symptoms, including depression, suicidal tendencies, substance addiction, and abuse.

Moreover, Friedan (1963) posited that the failure to grow as a human being has wide-ranging effects on family, children, and society as a whole. She cites research showing that overbearing mothers, who had no interests outside their home and children, tended to raise poorly-adjusted children, transferring their passivity and lack of interest to the next generation. As a result, she says, “the whole nation stopped growing up” (p.178) and now suffers from “a vacuum of larger purpose,” from “the lack of an ideology of national purpose” (p.179). Friedan’s

prescription against this “full-scale social decline” (Bowlby, 1980, p.66) involved education that leads to meaningful work, thus preventing women from trying to find total fulfillment in marriage and motherhood alone.

### **Groundbreaking Ideas of *The Feminine Mystique***

Most of the ideas presented in *The Feminine Mystique* were not new. Indeed, Mary Wollstonecraft had argued for many of the same concepts in the eighteenth century. The thesis of her 1792 book, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, like Friedan’s *Feminine Mystique*, contends that “through formal education, women can develop their innate capabilities for intellectual thought and thus become better wives and mothers” (Calixte, Johnson, & Motopanyane, 2010, p.4). Likewise, other feminist authors more contemporary to Friedan had presented similar ideas. For example, a decade before Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique*, French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir wrote *The Second Sex*, which—like Friedan’s work—criticized the social institutions which oppressed women, and “made women aware of the commonality of their problem” (Dijkstra, 1980, p.292). Unlike *The Feminine Mystique*, however, de Beauvoir’s work identified women’s economic dependency as the source of their oppression, and claimed that liberation required collective action to restructure those social institutions—a radical message at the time (Dijkstra, 1980). Feminist research reveals that even the popular women’s magazines actually represented a somewhat more diverse presentation of women’s roles than Friedan claimed (Fraterrigo, 2015; Bradley, 2004; Dijkstra, 1980).

Thus, in *The Feminine Mystique*, Friedan (1963) expanded on the themes already present in popular media of the time. However, she de-radicalized and commercialized these ideas, thereby making them palatable and accessible to the ‘average’ American woman in an era where feminism, although present, was hardly a clear voice—which is what made the book truly

groundbreaking (Bradley, 2004; Dijkstra, 1980). For instance, in her book investigating the impact of mass media during the sixties and early seventies on American feminism, Patricia Bradley (2004) explains how certain biographical details of Friedan's life—her ability as a commercial writer, her political involvement as a radical activist and labour journalist—combined to influence her book's success: Friedan knew how to “accommodate her writing to the complications of 1950s mass culture” (p.14) and how to “frame radical ideas in a popular format” (p.21). Sandra Dijkstra (1980) agrees, observing that Friedan “adapted many of [*The Second Sex*'s] basic premises to make them ‘safe’ for America, reducing them from radical to reformist solutions, from philosophical to popular jargon, and from European to American references” (p.294). In doing so, Friedan's work engaged millions of American women in feminist thought and became “the founding document of the second wave of feminism” (Bradley, 2004, p.3).

### **Relevance for the Contemporary Social/Cultural Context**

The enduring popularity of *The Feminine Mystique* even more than fifty years after its original publication is an indicator of its continued relevance in the social/cultural context. One reason for this is women's continued association with domesticity, child care, and the keeping of the home despite the legal gains feminism has made for women in securing equal opportunities in educational institutions and in workplaces since Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique*. For instance, the 2010 General Social Survey reports that in dual-earner households where both partners work full-time, women spend an average of 49.8 hours per week on child care, nearly double the average time (27.2 hours) spent by men (Stats Can, 2011). A similar gap between women and men was evident in the time spent on domestic work, which includes household chores, yard work, and home maintenance. Among dual-earner couples where both partners work

full-time, women reported spending an average of 13.9 hours weekly on unpaid domestic work, about one and a half times the average time (8.6 hours) spent by men (Stats Can, 2011). Thus, despite a slowly growing number of men who share in housework and child-rearing, the “truly equal partnership” between men and women that Friedan envisioned has not yet occurred (Friedan, 1963, p.263). Women today haven’t given up the spheres of domesticity that Friedan described back in 1963; they’ve just taken on additional ones.

Another reason for the continued relevance of *The Feminine Mystique* is Friedan’s prescient understanding of the media’s powerful influence on women’s self-identities. Fraterrigo (2015) observes that “Friedan took seriously the power of cultural representations, even those as seemingly trivial as magazine fiction and advertising, to frame choices and shape lives” (p.37). Friedan realized that what women read or see about themselves played a critical role in their sense of identity—or lack thereof—and contributed to the power of the mystique. Thus, in the “absence of other visions and role models [in postwar media], girls could hardly fathom an alternative to the housewife role” (Fraterrigo, 2015, p.36). Similarly, third-wave feminists today recognize the importance of media as a site of social and political struggle, taking on such issues as body image; gender fluidity; “advertisements that sexualize young girls; ...a dearth of positive images of women in diverse roles; [and] the preponderance of males who control mass media and thus wield considerable power in shaping images of femininity and feminism” (Fraterrigo, 2015, p.36). What Friedan and the third-wavers have in common is the realization that although femininity may be a social construction, its centrality in mass media has real consequences for women’s lives.

In the introduction to the fiftieth anniversary edition of *The Feminine Mystique*, Gail Collins (2013) calls the book “a very specific cry of rage” about the way postwar American

culture prevented intelligent, well-educated, women from pursuing their basic need to grow and develop their potentialities as human beings (p.ii). The book raised the consciousness of hundreds of thousands of women to gendered inequalities and discrimination in the decade in which it was written—and even today continues to speak on a “supremely, specifically personal” level to many women, myself included (Collins, 2013, p.ii).

Friedan (1963) described an interview with one young mother whose experience closely mirrored my own. The woman said:

The tragedy was, nobody ever looked us in the eye and said you have to decide what you want to do with your life, besides being your husband’s wife and children’s mother. I never thought it through until I was thirty-six and my husband was so busy with his practice that he couldn’t entertain me every night... It wasn’t until I got so lonely as the doctor’s wife and kept screaming at the kids because they didn’t fill my life that I realized I had to make my own life. I still had to decide what I wanted to be. I hadn’t finished evolving at all” (Friedan, 1963, p.92)

This passage resonated deeply with me. Raised in a conservative home, I became a wife and mother before my twenty-first birthday. Like my mother before me, I focused all my energies on my domestic responsibilities. Yet it wasn’t until nearly fifteen years later, going through a divorce, that I realized, like the woman in Friedan’s interview, I had not made my own life, I had no idea what I wanted to be. Like Friedan, I found my solution in education: I went back to school and am currently in the final year of my undergraduate degree, with plans to pursue graduate education. I am experiencing now, in the wistful words of one of Friedan’s interviewees, how it feels “to be able to stretch and stretch and stretch, and learn all you want, and not have to hold yourself back” (Friedan, 1963, p.130). I recognize, though, that Friedan’s

book may speak to me because as a middle-class, heterosexual, white woman, I am exactly the privileged demographic about whom and for whom *The Feminine Mystique* was written.

### **Limitations in the Contemporary Social/Cultural Context**

The book, however, does not speak equally to all women. Postmodern and anti-racist scholars critique Friedan's work for universalizing white middle-class women's experiences, thereby failing to take intersectionality into account, while radical feminists argue that, even understood within its historical context, Friedan's message was politically moderate.

Modern feminisms, liberal and radical theories in particular, share a metanarrative of common oppression under patriarchy—implying that “*all women* [emphasis added] share a common lot”—without an inclusive analysis of how race, class, and sexuality determine “the extent to which sexism will be an oppressive in the lives of individual women” (hooks, 2000, p.3). For instance, for some women, economic or racial oppression is a much more pressing reality than patriarchal oppression. Yet Friedan (1963) wrote that “the only kind of work which permits *a woman* [emphasis added] to realize her abilities fully, to achieve identity in society...[is] the lifelong commitment to an art or science, to politics or profession” (p.476). Critics argue that through its perpetuation of the notion that ‘work liberates women’—*all* women—and by so clearly demarcating the line between ordinary wage work and fulfilling careers, Friedan's book “alienated many poor and working-class women, especially non-white women, from feminist movement” for a number of reasons (hooks, 2000, p.98). First, Friedan failed to acknowledge that, by the end of the 1950s, large numbers of women already worked for wages outside the home, and that for most working women, their jobs had “more to do with self-preservation than self-realization....As workers, poor and working-class women knew that work was neither personally fulfilling nor liberatory—that it was for the most part exploitative and

dehumanizing” (hooks, 2000, p.98). Second, Friedan did not discuss the question of who would do the childcare and housework if “more women like herself were....given equal access with white men to the professions”; presumably, for her audience, the answer was to be found in hired help—likely working-class women and/or women of colour not given the same advantages (hooks, 2000, p.1-2). Third, despite her past as a radical activist and thus her awareness of the ongoing civil rights movement, Friedan deliberately downplayed the systemic barriers to the equal workforce participation of many women of colour, including poverty, lack of education, and constraints on their sexual and reproductive rights.

Similarly, for some women, sexual discrimination within the category ‘women’ is of more immediate concern than patriarchal discrimination. Critics charge that *The Feminine Mystique* universalized the experiences of heterosexual, married housewives in its heteronormative assumptions (Bowlby, 1984; Fraterrigo, 2015). For instance, lesbian women are conspicuously absent from Friedan’s book, advancing “the premise that the normal woman is heterosexual” (Bowlby, 1987, p.70). In a later book, Friedan (1976) explained this absence with the contention that an emphasis on sexual politics, such as lesbianism, was “highly dangerous and diversionary” (p.206) for the unity of the feminist movement and may ultimately alienate “everywoman” (p.201). Portraying the experiences of white, heterosexual, middle-class housewives as the experiences of all American women is problematic because, in assuming that these experiences are universal, the differing experiences of women of colour, working women, lesbian women, and other disenfranchised groups are pushed to the periphery where they are rendered invisible.

Radical feminists argue that *The Feminine Mystique* is politically moderate, even for its time but particularly by today’s standards, thereby limiting its utility for contemporary feminist

theory. Dijkstra (1980) observes that although other feminist authors of the time wrote of the dynamic by which men establish their dominance over women and the need for collective revolt, Friedan never provided an analysis of male privilege or gendered distribution of power. For instance, in *The Second Sex* de Beauvoir wrote that women's role in marriage was "a surviving relic of dead ways of life" and that motherhood was "the origin of woman's restricted existence," yet Friedan's argument was only that marriage and motherhood ought to occupy a secondary position relative to a fulfilling career, not that these institutions themselves are to be questioned as part of a woman's 'life plan' (Dijkstra, 1980, p.296-297). Furthermore, *The Feminine Mystique* did not address in any substantive ways political or legal resolutions. In fact, Friedan (1963) wrote "it is not necessary to destroy or even remake the institutions which incarcerate women: They can simply say 'no' to the housewife image" (p.330). Radical feminists allege that Friedan's "limited reformist message" represented an individualistic solution to women's oppression that benefitted only a particular subgroup of women, rather than a collective demand for structural change that would benefit all (Dijkstra, 1980, p.300).

## **Conclusion**

In the early twentieth century, scientist Karl Popper pointed out that it is a theory's incorrect predictions, rather than its correct ones, that produce scientific progress. In other words, scientific advance is "built upon the successive correction of many errors, both large and small" (Hergenhahn, 2009, p.10). Thus, the idea that a theory or explanation of a phenomena must be entirely correct in order to be useful is inaccurate. According to Popperian science, *all* theories would eventually be replaced with more complete theories; therefore, the highest status any theory could hope to achieve was 'not yet disconfirmed' (Hergenhahn, 2009). Popper was speaking of the natural sciences; however, I would argue that the same is true of the social

sciences. Although Friedan's explanation of the phenomena she called the 'feminine mystique' erred in its essentialist treatment of women and its failure to examine how the different aspects of a woman's social location influence her experience of sexism, the true relevance of *The Feminine Mystique* lies in its ability to spark multiple conversations even decades after it was written—and that, according to Popper, is the ultimate objective of any social theory.

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