

**WOMEN'S STUDIES CELEBRATION**  
Women's History Month 2005

**NOMINATION: Papers and projects done in completion of course work for Spring, Summer and Fall 2004 eligible for nomination. Students do not need to be enrolled Fall 2004 or Spring 2005 to be eligible.**  
(Students are encouraged to identify works they would like nominated and approach their professor to initiate the process.)

Instructor Susan Turell Dept. PSYC/WMWS  
Course Number and Name PSYC 336 Semester completed fall 04  
Title of Nominated Work Seeking a Hairy Ideal: A journey of self realization and social understanding

**CATEGORY:** Sampson:  
Undergraduate Research Paper \_\_\_\_\_  
Undergraduate Project  \_\_\_\_\_  
Graduate \_\_\_\_\_

See \_\_\_\_\_  
Olson \_\_\_\_\_  
Kessler \_\_\_\_\_  
Turell  \_\_\_\_\_  
Belter \_\_\_\_\_

**STUDENT INFORMATION:**

Name Erin Page  
Email PAGEEM Year/Major Art/Semin  
Local Address Chancellors Hall  
Local Phone 855-2666 / 762-2731

**\*\*WHY DO YOU, THE INSTRUCTOR, RECOMMEND THIS AS AN EXEMPLARY STUDENT PAPER/PROJECT? (Attach a separate sheet.)**

As the nominating instructor, please notify the student and ask them to turn in the paper, or attach to your nomination form.

.....  
Awards are sponsored by the UW-Eau Claire Foundation, Helen X. Sampson Fund, and by private individuals. Research involving human subjects must conform to the guidelines given by the Institutional Research Board. Contact Research Services, 836-3405, with questions.

**Submission deadline is February 11, 2005.**

TO: WMNS Awards Committee Judges

FROM: Susan C. Turell 

January 26, 2005

I am pleased to nominate Erin Page's paper "Seeking a hairy ideal: A journey of self-realization and social understanding" for a WMNS 2005 award. She completed this project for my Psychology of Women class, as a gender role reversal. Erin's paper begins with self reflections about her relationship to shaving her leg and underarm hair. She adeptly applied her growing knowledge about herself to larger issues of gender roles for women and men. Further, she tied her own experience into relevant research about the topic, and its connection to psychological issues for women such as body image distortions and pressures to meet the ideal. I believe her paper is a fine example of how feminist theory and research can be applied to one's life and to create a new understanding of being a woman in a patriarchal society.

**Erin Page  
December 2004**

**Seeking a Hairy Ideal:  
A journey of self realization and social understanding**

The gender role reversal that I chose to pursue this semester was to not shave my legs or arm pits for an extended period of time. Then, upon growing it out, I was to in some fashion appear in social situations in which I would be able to gauge my own feelings as well as others reactions to my “natural state of being”.

Starting out, I thought that this was all going to be a breeze; I mean I had gone for almost a week in the past without shaving, what were another few or more weeks. Interestingly however, for the first couple weeks that I decided I would “start” the reversal, I would go for maybe 4 days and then almost as though I couldn’t stop myself, I would shave. It turned out that this was going to be much harder than I had originally thought. At that point I attempted to evaluate what I was feeling and why I was driven to this behavior. I knew that in part I was feeling almost ashamed, as though I was doing something wrong by not shaving. Another key factor was that it made me feel in many ways less attractive and less approachable, even though for the most part at this point in time people could not tell. So, a couple of weeks into it I knew that this was some kind of “social no” that I had internalized to the extent that without even going very far, I was starting to sense very negative feelings in myself towards the idea of carrying this out. When I finally decided I would stick with it, I told myself that this would challenge me, the people around me, and that I and hopefully others might learn from the experience.

Looking back now, one thing is for certain, this reversal along with the course and readings helped me to see things in a different light. It’s hard to say how much this ended up challenging others, and I will explain this following, but I know that personally it made me step back, I mean forward, in so many ways and bring greater understanding

and meaning to a part of my almost daily life and routine that I hadn't seen before. The reason why I don't think I challenged people around me enough, was because that feeling of doing something wrong or feeling ashamed was an aspect of the internalization of prescribed roles that I could and in some ways have not in social settings yet overcome. I realized this when, even though the weather was nice, I started folding up all my tank tops and skirts and would place them in the bottom drawer, of which I hardly accessed. I also found that I was starting to avoid wearing my "short socks" and much preferred the ones I could pull up well past my ankles. The list goes on: Avoiding wearing my sandals, having not shaved the tops of my toes or feet either, making sure that when I sat down my pants would not go up too far, consciously saying to myself, "will my short sleeves stay put if I raise my hand?". As I said before all this negativity was obviously something so internalized that I didn't even think twice or sometimes once before employing means of avoiding the showing of or hiding my unshaven body. This all probably sounds pretty discouraging and empty at this point, but after the course of almost a month, I really started fully realizing these feelings and the resulting compulsions and wanted to change them. They were unhealthy, stressful, and all over counter intuitive.

At the one month mark, having discussed in depth the affects of gender role prescriptions on women in class, I was really gaining an understanding of myself and my actions. This understanding helped me to start making the changes necessary to successfully complete the project. I started out by returning to my short socks, wearing the shorter sleeved short sleeve shirts, and trying to not think so much about hiding. This

in so many ways helped me confront the negativity head on, more than just not shaving itself.

At first I was quite embarrassed, becoming a human tomato whenever I noticed someone noticing or staring at the hair. For instance, I immediately would have this extreme level of observance and self consciousness if the pants had crept up while I was crossing my legs. Yet, I began to realize that there was more often than not, no reaction or just a quick glance by others; hardly the enduring stare I initially perceived it to be. On the contrary, one time I overheard one female whisper to her friend the fact that it looked like I had a pine forest growing on my legs; I have learned to take these kinds of comments with a grain of salt. As I continued on my journey I also started to realize some benefits to this “being natural” thing. I wasn’t getting itchy rashes, my body lotion was lasting a lot longer, morning routine was taking a lot less time and much less hassle, I was more on time, money was being saved (or maybe spent on more exciting things...) and the list goes on. Thus, because I had come to understand and start to change how I felt about letting my hair grow, the negativity was really starting to be replaced by a host of aspects that were much more positive. As you can see in more ways than one, this was certainly a reversal for me. The act of not shaving became so much more than just a choice of action or inaction in this case and broadened into helping me change some long held feelings towards myself, turning many negatives, preoccupations, etc. into or replacing them with positives.

Eventually I did fulfill the reversal in it’s entirety by going to the gym, wearing a tank top and shorts to work out. The workout that day was probably one of my shortest. I became quite self conscious very quickly at that level of exposure, making more out of

every observance that I perceived to be happening. Even after I put my sweats back on it was past the point of that instance's recovery. I do not however look back at this as a failure; change takes time, is gradual, and is a learning process, so I fully realize that this reversal is something I'm going to continue to learn and benefit from even after this project, paper, and class are really finished. It also made me realize that these gender role prescriptions can be quite detrimental to the female psyche especially when we challenge or do not fulfill them.

People did not for the most part as I observed overtly direct negativity towards me and my anomalous activity, and this was also a positive aspect for me to see. This may have been partly do to my lack of time/willingness to see this all happen and preoccupation of my own feelings, however in a society of valued composure and restraint, the not speaking up or possible hiding of negativity does not seem too atypical. Building on this idea of internalization, it made me realize even further the power and hold that gender roles and societal prescriptions have on women, and thus is really a large psychological concern for women as a whole. This was such a seemingly small task for me to accomplish, but revealed so many psychologically negative avenues that I could have fallen victim to. This further helps me see the correlation to and importance of a class such as woman's psychology, because if something so small can be so damaging, that thing being one gender role, then realization and strive for change are a must, which I felt this class jump-started in a lot of us.

As you have read this reversal was quite the ordeal, however yielded very positive outcomes. Doing research also helped me to further come to an understanding of my experience as a member of this society, because as you will read on, studies show rather

concretely that the feelings I was experiencing and ideas I held dealing with things such things as femininity and attractiveness were not all that odd. Also, several of my sources were articles that came from *Psychology of Women Quarterly* or from other psychologically based journals which further establishes my point that this issue is certainly one of psychological concern and importance. As I stated throughout the first part of my reaction, there was a great deal of negativity and ashamedness towards myself in not shaving my legs, which later really made me question why I would harbor such feelings towards something so natural.

An interesting way to look at this norm of shaving and its importance in the persistence of social prescriptions was to show its correlation and connectedness to the body-modifying mindset that so many women have and carry out. (Gold, 2004) Imbedded in the concept of morphing what is natural, the act of shaving really shows a very concrete way in which we as women oppose something natural with great regularity so as to meet some kind of bodily ideal, whereas other behaviors such as dieting many times can be masked as healthily beneficial in spite of its all too often negative outcomes.(Tiggemann & Lewis, 2004) Consistently studies have shown that nearly 80-90% of women shave on a somewhat normal basis; the exception for the most part being feminists and lesbians. However, it has been found that even within these groups the majority is shaving regularly or occasionally shaves. (Tiggemann & Lewis, 2004) The results are in some ways skewed, as they often are in psychological studies, because they are for the most part taken of professional women or those who were “economically stable”, however the numbers reached are really of a statistical significance and really do show us something about what women are doing and why that is.

Other studies have been done where participants are exposed to situations either proposed in print or actual video, in which a woman does or does not break the norm of shaving. Upon seeing these or reading accounts, the participants are then asked to report their reactions and often answer certain questions. (Basow & Braman, 1998) An interesting and statistically significant outcome in these and the other studies centers on the consistent reasons women gave for shaving. Two of them, femininity and attractiveness, really stood out in my mind, directly relating back to the ideas I had when I started questioning the negative feelings I was having towards my hairiness. (Tiggemann & Lewis, 2004) The universality of these reasons can certainly be seen as evidence of the pervasiveness of gender roles such as this one. It is however quite alarming when you think about it, because to be feminine and attractive you really must go against nature and intentionally change what is inherently going to be there if you are a sexually mature adult. Interestingly, a second very common reason, but primarily a reason for initially starting to shave had to do with normative reasons and societal pressures; however the previously stated reasons of femininity and attractiveness had more validity in the maintenance of the act. (Tiggemann & Lewis, 2004) I also found this to be quite an intriguing find, realizing that throughout the process and even in my reaction I hardly recognized what I was going through as a result of breaking a social norm, but in contrast focused on the internalization of feelings of less attractiveness and not being feminine. This seems quite congruent with the findings, because I clearly remember when I decided to start shaving and that I felt a sort of pressure to conform to a normative way of being, however in continuing to shave it certainly does not feel like it is

that pressure that drives the act, possibly because it is such a norm, and I am now part of that norm group.

Where this change or transitioning of reasons comes into play may in my mind have largely to do with the messages we get from media, advertising, and other related forms that provoke gender roles and their persistence. Historically we see this as the case, because with the rise of the advertising industry and the media showing the feminine attractive ideal as cleanly shaven, the act of shaving in women became concurrently more normative. (Basow, 1991) Clearly we can see in today's society that if anything the media has improved on its pervasiveness of ideals, thus in so many ways women are constantly being bombarded with images and messages of what it is to be the ideally attractive and sexual female. The findings for reasons thus start to make sense in the respect that naturally we as women are perceived as inherently not attractive thus we must shave, diet, or undergo surgery to become the ideal, and because the role of shaving is so normative, it is a pressure, however when in the norm group it becomes then about the maintenance, and why? As stated earlier, to be feminine and attractive. (Toerien & Wilkinson, 2004)

Certainly there was a lot to be learned from going against such a normative and ingrained gender role, and as I previously mentioned this has helped me on the process of realization of both aspects of myself but also of society and its huge influence on so many parts of me. I foresee that this experience will in many ways push me to challenge the other aspects of myself that I see as feminine and seemingly inherent. Overall, though this reversal was a challenge, it was in countless ways very beneficial and I look forward to the understanding that the experience will continue to provide me with.

## References

- Basow, S.A. (1991). The Hairless Ideal: Women and Their Body Hair. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 15, pp. 83-96.
- Basow, S.A. & Braman, A.C. (1998). Women and Body Hair, Social Perceptions and Attitudes. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 22, pp. 637-645.
- Gold, E. (2004). Living Review Life Etc.: Smooth operators; What is it with body hair? Why can't we stand the sight of a furry. *Independent on Sunday* (London) August 8, 2004, Sunday. Newspaper Publishing PLC
- Synnott, A. (1987). Shame and Glory: A sociology of hair. *British Journal of Sociology*, 38, 381-413.
- Tiggemann, M. & Kenyon, S.J. (1998). The Hairlessness norm: the removal of body hair in women. *Sex Roles*, 39, 873-885.
- Tiggemann, M. & Lewis, C. (2004). Attitudes Toward Women's Body Hair: Relationship with Disgust Sensitivity. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 28, pp. 381-387.
- Toerien, M. & Wilkinson, S. (2004). Exploring the depilation norm: a qualitative questionnaire study of women's body hair removal. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 1, pp. 69-92.
- Yoder, Janice D. *Women and gender: transforming psychology*. Second Edition. Pearson Education, New Jersey, 2003.