

Hairlessness as a Social Fact

Our cultural obsession with hairless female bodies manifested itself most recently during a casual conversation with peers over lunch. Without my prompting, the discussion of shaving began as one friend asked another to offer her thoughts on hair removal. The hour-long dialogue that ensued called to attention the success of hairlessness as a social fact. Social facts, as Durkheim outlines, exert control over us and become fundamental to how we live our lives. Women—and sometimes men—become so accustomed to shaving that they feel a natural inclination to remove hair from their bodies. While shaving may have begun as an aesthetic accompaniment to shortening hemlines, it has become a manner by which to police women's bodies.

I really enjoy shaving. I take pleasure in it. I don't mind the process of shaving, and I love the feeling of being clean shaven. We take social facts as common knowledge. As Durkheim explains, social facts “consist of manners of acting, thinking and feeling external to the individual” (*The Rules of Sociological Method*, 52). Though they occur on a societal and structural level, we feel an innate desire to shave. Social facts, therefore, present a paradox: they exist externally from us, yet we believe that they arise from within us. Taking pleasure in the practice of shaving—a social fact—reinforces this paradox. We equate enjoying the process of shaving with seemingly innate desires like preferring sunny days to rainy days or preferring ice cream to broccoli. In actuality, social facts constrain us; these thoughts and actions about hairlessness occur apart from the individual. They are branded upon us through education and coercion.

We can scrutinize advertisements from Venus and examine romantic comedies like *Friends with Benefits* to pinpoint the shaving industry's coercive powers. However, common

discourse among women unearths clear evidence of the success of the ideal of hairlessness as a controlling force. From early ages, girls discover that a hairless body forms the ideal body. We learn that if a girl or woman chooses not to shave, the heterosexual male gaze will view her as unfeminine and unworthy. These expectations of hairlessness exist externally from us and are strengthened through daily conversations with peers. *It's going to be eighty degrees tomorrow; I need to shave. I'm going out tonight; I should shave. I can't wear a tank top; I forgot to shave.* Even through nonchalant comments, social facts coerce us into forming thoughts that we would not otherwise consider. Through their ubiquity, social facts condition us to act in predictable, established ways.

Because it was a multi-school get-together at the beach, a bunch of girls went together the Thursday before and all got waxes for the weekend. So that started something. I would do it all the time. Though individuals constitute society, the collective profoundly influences individuals. Durkheim notes that the collective mindset is “repeated in individuals because it imposes itself upon them” (*The Rules of Sociological Method*, 56). The collective acceptance of hairlessness compels the individual to shave or wax herself. This widespread approval results from the interactions—conversations and actions—among girls and women. When a few girls wax their bikini lines, others are coerced into joining, thus reinforcing the collectivity.

My sister's roommate doesn't shave her legs, and I was kind of shocked the first time I saw it. Related to our collective affirmation of shaving are the sacred and the profane. Durkheim describes the sacred as the ideal. Conversely, Durkheim notes that society strives against the profane. The social fact of hair removal functions as a control agent over women's bodies. Through external coercion, the collective comes to believe that a hairless body denotes a sacred body whereas a hairy body represents a profane body. When meeting a woman for the first time,

an individual may detect body hair just as easily as spotting her eye color or shirt style. We immediately categorize a hairy body as dirty and unworthy of sexual interactions. Social facts develop into schemas, training us to efficiently discern between the sacred and the profane.

While an overwhelming majority of women in the United States shave some part of their bodies, women do occasionally resist the sacred ideal. The distinction between the sacred and the profane blurred briefly in 2012 when a photograph highlighting a woman's facial hair surfaced on Reddit. Taken clandestinely, the picture garnered widespread responses, both positive and negative. Balpreet Kaur, the woman featured in the photograph, replied on Reddit, asserting that she wholly accepted her facial hair as part of her appearance. Kaur added that as a baptized Sikh, she "[believes] in the sacredness of this body" (Kaur, 2012). Kaur eroded the rigidity of the social fact through reclaiming what it means to embody the sacred. When anti-conformists resist social facts, they fight against the very core of them: regulation and control.

In some ways, we acknowledge that hairlessness has become normalized. When we discuss shaving and the time and effort spent worrying about hairlessness, we recognize its coercive powers. We realize that men and women alike work hard to categorize a hairy body as a dirty, unfeminine body; yet, we continue to profess that shaving arose because of the *natural instinct* of who we find attractive and who we mark as unattractive. Though blips of pushback exist within the otherwise steady heartbeat of this social fact, the hair removal phenomenon has largely succeeded in creating a clear demarcation between the sacred and the profane. As self-proclaimed feminist students, we attempt to combat the policing of women's bodies.

Hairlessness, however, roots itself deeply into a web of other social facts. In trying to resist the norm of hairless bodies, the social facts of femininity and sexuality confront us, limiting us even more to a controllable commodity.