



The Social Construction of Gender

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Gender is socially constructed. The 'correct' gender roles one is supposed to fill are promoted to children from birth due to preconceived ideas regarding what males and females are supposed to be like. These gender roles tend to be all encompassing. They dictate what males and females should wear, how they should act and talk, and even what hobbies they should enjoy. Simone de Beauvoir discussed how society constructs gender in *The Second Sex*. However, this book was published in 1949, and since that time era, magazine and television have virtually exploded, as has the advertising industry. People are being reached from all angles, through television shows, radio, and advertising through all mediums. Media influences gender behavior much more now than it did in 1949.

To begin, it is important to understand the difference in 'gender' and 'sex'. By definition, gender is "sexual category, males or females as a group"¹, while sex is "the condition or character of being male or female"². Although they sound as if they mean the same thing, it is stated: "many anthropologists reserve *sex* for reference to biological categories, while using *gender* to refer to social or cultural categories."³. As stated above, sex is usually, aside from special cases, either male or female based upon which set of reproductive organs one has. Gender, however, is a social construct, based upon society's accepted 'norms' and ideas regarding acceptable or favorable behavior and appearances for each sex.

¹ Pickett, Joseph P., ed. *The American Heritage Dictionary*. (Random House: New York, 2001), 355.

² *Ibid*, 760.

³ "gender." *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*. 2007. Merriam-Webster Online. Retrieved 12 December 2007, from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/gender>.

Our focus will first turn to the role television plays in gender construction. Although it was not a common item to be found in a household immediately after its invention, television sets are now a very prominent part of modern life that much of society gets their information from. According to one website, ninety-eight percent of American households have one television; thirty-four percent have two; the average American watches over three hours of television per day and sees over thirty thousand commercials in one year.⁴ It is extremely easy to see why the television is such a major conveyer of information. It seems from the beginning of television programming and film making, the idea of proper gender roles has been stressed; it's not just in modern productions, it's in older ones as well. How many commercials are there that target women, telling them they are too old, too overweight, that their hair is too grey, or that they shouldn't have laugh lines? Many of these are so-called 'beauty product' advertisements, but all they do is reinforce the idea that women must appear flawless at all times in order to be considered pretty. They reinforce the idea that women are supposed to have long hair, perfect makeup, flawless body shape; all this does in reinforce unrealistic ideas of what a woman is supposed to look like. However, commercials that seem to be even more damaging are the ones from family oriented businesses. Consider the commercial a well-known pizza restaurant used in 2007 to advertise their double deep pizza: a man is asleep on the couch, fantasizing that two blonde young women (who fit the 'Hollywood' standard of beautiful) are delivering a double deep pizza to his home. This man is quite disappointed when he wakes up and answers his door to see two men standing with his pizza. This advertisement

⁴ Soundvision Foundation Inc. *Some Statistics on Television in America*. 2007. Retrieved 11 December 2007, from <http://www.soundvision.com/info/misc/tvturnoff.asp>.

did not attest to how delicious their pizza was, or what it was made with. This advertisement placed emphasis on the two blonde women at the door.

According to the October 1999 online edition of the Canada National Post, an estimated “thirty percent of North American women are blonde; 5/6ths had some help from a bottle”.⁵ There are approximately 144 million women in North America.⁶ That would mean that approximately forty-three million women are blonde, and of these forty-three million, approximately thirty-six million *dye* their hair blonde. That’s a huge number. Take it even further: an average price for a bottle of hair dye at Wal-Mart is six dollars. How much of the money spent on blonde hair dye goes back into the pool of money used to tell women their hair isn’t good enough?

However, television does not only focus on proper appearances for women, it also attempts to tell men what they need to become valued and valuable. For instance, one company makes a hair dye product that is supposed to be specially formulated ‘just for men’. According to the product’s website, “women’s hair color is designed to be dramatic, to help a woman get noticed. Just for Men is exactly the opposite. We have eleven natural-looking shades. . .”⁷ The television commercial for this particular product features a man with a grey beard entering a nightclub or bar; the beautiful *blonde* woman at the bar shuns him, and the viewer is led to think that it is because of his grey beard. It then shows him re-entering the same bar after using this hair dye; he suddenly is gaining admiring looks from those around

⁵ Sailer, Steve. National Post of Canada. *Why Do Gentlemen Prefer Blondes?* October, 1999. Retrieved December 10, 2007.

⁶ <http://www.generalmedicine.com>

⁷ <http://www.justformen.com/whyuse/index.shtml>

him, including the same woman from the previous scenario. Does the color of a man's beard dictate the size of his heart or the amount of compassion and understanding in his body? The answer should be no, but it doesn't seem as if these are even qualities that matter anymore. Just make sure there are no grey beards, and all will be fine.

Television doesn't just offer ideas of how men and women are supposed to appear; it offers ideas of how men and women are supposed to act and what they are supposed to want. Although it is an older film (1939) *Gone with the Wind* offers a great perspective on the ideal 'genteel southern lady'. There's the main character, Scarlett O'Hara, who is reprimanded by her 'mammy' that if she doesn't eat before going to the barbeque, people will think badly of her. When Scarlett expresses that she is going to eat as much as she pleases at the barbeque, Mammy is severely upset. Ladies, after all, are supposed to pick at their food and be quite dainty. What's so wrong with a woman eating as much as it takes to fill herself up? Society disapproves. Although not so strongly reinforced in more modern times, it is still an issue. Many women are afraid to eat what they truly desire while in public; this arises from the fear of how others will perceive them.

There are a plethora of television shows that show what a 'normal' husband and wife couple are supposed to act like as well. Although it doesn't shout the message that women are supposed to be thin and beautiful, *Malcolm in the Middle* portrays a different look at how men and women are supposed to act. In *Malcolm*, the mother is level headed, considered by others to be a 'bitch', and is often putting down her husband's plans or ideas. Her husband is flighty, irresponsible, and often does typical 'man' things (i.e., allows his sons to cut school to go to the race track; becomes obsessed with gambling; loses the baby when he is supposed to be

watching him; or better yet, when he managed to keep up with the baby, plays shuffleboard, using the child as the puck).

It seems that television offers a differing gender roles for women based upon age and marital status: if you're a young single woman, you must be thin, beautiful, and sexy. However, the minute you have a child or a family, you must be in control, in charge, and, as stated above, somewhat of a bitch. Take the movie *Knocked Up*. Basically, the plot of the movie revolves around a man and his one night stand and what happens when she shows up two months later telling him she's pregnant and the child is his. Katherine Heigl, the actress who plays Allison, the primary female character of the movie, doesn't even like the movie; she believes it to be sexist and portray negative images of women (especially pregnant ones). Heigl states, "It paints the women as shrews, as humorless and uptight, and it paints the men as lovable, goofy, fun-loving guys. It exaggerated the characters, and I had a hard time with it, on some days. I'm playing such a bitch; why is she being such a killjoy? Why is this how you're portraying women?"⁸ However, if this is how a woman feels about a film she's in herself, why doesn't she stand up and say something or take action that will make a difference? *It's passivity that makes these ideas prevalent and unchanging.*

Of course, there are some feminist films in which strong women are portrayed who don't fit into the box society tries to impose upon them; just to name a few, there are *Fried Green Tomatoes*, *Frida*, *Thelma and Louise*, and *A League of Their Own*. These movies all deal with patriarchy, pecking order and stepping out of the role that a woman is supposed to play.

⁸ <http://buzzsugar.com/854434>

There are also films in which men play an 'unusual' role that is not common in film. (Remember Gregory Focker in *Meet the Parents*? He was a male nurse, he also 'got hell' for it throughout the film from the other, more 'masculine' men.)

Even radio advertisements have undertones of how women and men are supposed to act. Jared Jeweler's has a commercial featuring the 'benevolent' male buying a diamond for his wife. The commercial then begins to discuss how the woman screamed, and then was speechless when she saw the diamond. Her envious friend state then states, "I wonder when I'll get one of those?" "A diamond?" the lucky wife responds. "No," says the friend, "A husband like Bryan." What happened to the idea of (in the words of a popular song from early 2000s) "I buy my own diamonds and I buy my own rings"⁹? Or, why doesn't the woman buy her husband a diamond? Is it because 'diamonds are a girl's best friend'? This is just another constructed idea of gender: women are supposed to wait for their perfect man to shower them with presents; women are supposed to always be in search of a man to 'take care' of them. (Naturally, there are thousands of beauty products advertised to assure the woman looks as beautiful as possible so the man she finds deems her worthy. . .)

Print media is also another problem of reinforcing typified ideas of gender. All it takes is one skimming through of a Cosmopolitan or Glamour magazine to easily see the type of ideas being pressed upon women as to how they are supposed to look and act. Cosmopolitan's December 2007 issue features an article on 'Best Place to Meet a Guy' (*If you're on the prowl, check out these hottie spots we've mapped out- they're saturated with the male species*) and a

⁹ Destiny's Child. *Independent Woman Part I*. from the album Survivor, 2001.

section on one's personal style (*When you really need to pull out all the stops and score that amazing guy...*). Why can't women look nice for themselves, because it makes them feel good? Why must the idea that a woman must always be pursuing or be with a man be so prevalent and so reinforced? The Cosmopolitan online game of the month isn't much better. Called 'Boy Toy', it features a short description of the game that states "Our cute sweet guy exists solely to serve you. That's right, control what he does, and if he keeps you happy, then you win points in the game." Yet again- why must it always be that a woman needs a man to please her?

It must be reinforced, though, that it's not just women's magazines that portray these generalized ideas of acceptable gender actions and appearances. In GQ Magazine website's link entitled 'women', there are featured several models and actresses in bikinis and underwear. Apparently, this is how a woman is supposed to look in today's society. Anything less is unacceptable. It seems society likes setting themselves up for disappointment: *women don't look like this*. Even the women in the photos don't look like this; it's thanks to Adobe Photoshop that they appear the way they do.

The examples of 'role enforcement' and stereotyping in the media are *endless*. It is important to recognize the fact that these gender roles are reinforced again and again to keep people in that 'box' (as mentioned earlier) that society at large likes to keep people in. Collectively, society does not deal well with change, or with things that are unfamiliar, not 'normal', or unique. A very important question should now be addressed: *What are we (women collectively) going to do about it?* Do we sit back and complain and take no action? Or do we step forward, as a whole, and say "*enough is enough!*"? It's time to start an honest and realistic trend that effectively re-evaluates not only advertising and media, but patriarchy and capitalism as a whole.

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