Heterosexuality and gender ideals in contemporary popular culture essay

[Health & Medicine](), [Body]()

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INTRODUCTION

Heterosexuality is the pattern of sexual experience based on an individual's sense of social and personal identity that results from the behaviors and attractions that express them and other members of a society that share similar attractions. Contemporary scientific studies propose that more than 50% of humans are bisexual and their sexual scale is fluid like and cannot be categorized contrary to what most people believe. These studies suggest that people's adherence to labels, categories and morals is influenced by social pressure. The identities of various sexes are hence not fixed and may change with evolving pressures placed on them by the society. This suggestion shows that there exists a relationship between gender ideals in a society and heterosexuality as the latter absorbs new elements from society to form the ideals. Even with the fluidity of heterosexuality in society it still can be categorized broadly into masculinity and femininity with each category having a relationship to gender ideals held by popular culture.

HETEROSEXUALITY AND MASCULINITY

It is important to note that the societies, in which we live in shape the way people live, relate with each other and generally interact and treat each other. The way a certain sex is treated in one society might be very different from the way the same sex is treated in another society. For example, in some communities, the female gender may be treated with respect and tenderness due to their feminine nature and also their physical capabilities which determine the kind of work and duties they handle in the society. The same sex may be treated with contempt in another society, bearing in mind that this is the same sex with the same roles to play in the society, and these differences are brought about by the society's basic perception towards the sex, and the amount of importance that they attach to them (Gardiner, 2002, p. 144).

With this background information, it will be easier and clearer to understand the differences in treatment as well as the jobs accorded to these sexes. However, all across the world, there are some general attributes and treatments that are accorded to various parties in the society, and this is a universal trait that runs across majority of the societies across the world, even with their differences in culture, traditions and values. The male sex is the main concern of this section and a number of similarities can be seen and identified in majority of the societies across the globe.

The male sex in almost every society across the world is treated with respect and caution, and rationality is always attached and associated with this sex. According to various writers, philosophers and evangelists for example

Hannah Moore and William Wilberforce, the roles that the male sex plays in the society also defines their body type. This is the reason why most males in the society are expected to grow to be huge and naturally strong, and the same reason why they are subjected to the manual and more involving duties while the ladies receive the less complicated, less mind-involving and passive jobs which are associated with the ladies.

With this background information in mind, it will be understandable and easier to look at how an ideal masculine person is expected to behave and be in the society. The society in which we live in consists of a number of sectors and segmentations. All these sectors which include relations and interactions, our social associations for instance in working places, educational institutions, social settings and the duties which people are expected to undertake make the society. There are various ways in which an ideal masculine individual is expected to behave in these different settings, and the society expects that all these behaviors which are encoded in one's character and personality should always portray and command respect (Bowler, 1997, p. 45).

Work places for example are some of the areas where men are expected by the society to portray their masculinity through their character, and this includes having a respectable outlook towards the people working with them. This includes respectful domination over the females, who work with them at their workplaces and also the submissive and less masculine males in their work places. A number of qualities are expected to be seen in their characters in different situations. In working settings for example, a number

of traits such as taking full responsibility of actions and owning up to mistakes in an attempt to counter and correct them are some of the expected traits in men. This shows their leadership qualities in these working settings, and in fact these are some of the characters that employees look out for in males in cases such as promotion and transfer, and not only their conceptual knowledge and skill is considered. These are some of the traits that make up effective leaders.

At the same time, other characters such as their firmness in decision making is also considered, and males are expected to be firm in this. At the same time, decision making ability also expresses men's rationality in handling issues. These are some of the traits and conducts expected in men and the common thing between all of them is encoded in a man's character. Differences in character and personality are the main reason that causes differences in how men relate with different issues in relation to the above discusses traits (Donaldson, 1993, p. 32).

According to various writers such as Saglia Diego, the first expression one gets from a person through first sight for example the masculinity of a man through his physical looks defines him in a relatively large way and it is possible for a person meeting him for the first time give a brief profile about him. For this reason therefore, a man is expected to be masculine and alert at all times, and this is why even in work places, men are expected to handle the manual, complex and difficult jobs which may proof to be challenging to the female sex. This includes pulling and pushing bulky items, directing and through physical examples showing how to move or handle an item in

working places. These are some of the qualities that make men respected and treated with rationality in their working places. Saglia goes ahead to give an example of Byron, a poetry celebrity and what people see when they meet the physical aspects of a man for the first time. The impressions that his body made backed up with his defiant energy in his performances are something that many youths related with and made a source of reference for men's masculinity (Emig & Rowland, 2007, p. 45).

A home setting is yet another area that a man's masculinity and voice should be clearly distinguished from the females'. A male in every home has the responsibility accorded to him by the society to be the leader and offer protection to his family. Protection to one's family covers a wide range of areas such as physical family protection, financial protection for example being able to provide for the family needs such as food, accommodation, entertainment etc. In almost every society, males are expected to be the rational ones especially in family settings, and in fact many people argue that they the male members of the family should reason out with rationality by the use of their brains and reason, while the female members of the society majorly use their emotions and feelings. How effectively a man is able to rationally handle various tasks, challenges and duties as well as relate with family members and friends in social settings on a level based on respect and maturity determines how seriously the society will take him.

Lastly, various writers and psychologists such as Salgia Diego have addressed one of the issues that have led to a lot of friction and disagreements in the current society in which we live based on sexuality and

gender, which are same sex relationships. Many people have seen it as a weakness in the involved persons. Salgia Diego however argues that the choice to be either homosexual or heterosexual is not only affected by the community in which people grow up in, but also by their own individual approach and perspectives concerning the matter of sexuality. This conception can also be seen and applied in the way the way people react to the roles accorded to them by the society.

For the male members of the society, homosexuality is seen as a weak factor among the homosexual person, and in fact homosexuality is seen as morals in most societies across the globe. For this reason, homosexual partners in the society opt to take a passive role in the society and their fear to express their opinions concerning their sexuality, and this makes them take a second position with the other men leading in the society.

HETEROSEXUALITY AND FEMININITY IDEALS IN CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

Social construction is used to refer to norms, beliefs and values that are a creation of the society. These norms, beliefs and values are reinforced and perpetuated by social institutions such as marriage, work place, education, media, and religion. Through social construction, femininity ideals are impacted on females. From birth, female children are trained to behave, act, think, and even react in a particular way that contemporary culture has created as the ideal feminine way of doing things. This conditioning of female children is done by adults and ends up bringing out specific manifestations of roles in females. An example of social construction in

feminine ideals is the encouraging of female children to be compassionate, co-operative and caring in preparation for roles they will play when they are married. When a female child does not meet these ideals they are seen as deviating from the norm and may even be discriminated against; at times such ladies find it hard to even get into relationships as most males say it would feel like ' dating another man.'

Parents are the biggest agents of social construction in society. The significance of this group of people when it comes to defining feminine ideals is mainly due to the fact that they normally have the longest contact with the child- since birth. Parents are considered as the first teachers of gender ideals and this ' teaching' starts before the child can walk, talk, or comprehend any form of learning according to society's understanding of learning. Studies show that parents are quicker to respond to cries from female children than those from the male children (Tessman, 2009, p. 86). This behavior by the parent is influenced by the female ideal that women are supposed to be more emotional and susceptible to pain than their male counterparts.

Peer pressure is another construct of gender ideals in society. Females are influenced on how to behave to be ideal females in the society through expectations placed on them by their peer groups. When a female does not submit to these ideals they may be teased and discriminated by the group. Examples of gender ideals propagated by peer groups that are related to heterosexuality include the way a female behaves in a romantic relationship. Females and in this case girls and ladies who are unmarried are expected to

not go ' chasing' after men even when they have a strong attraction for the latter. When it comes to matters of love and romantic relationships, the ideal woman should play a passive role and leave the active roles such as organizing dates to their male counterparts. Peer groups impact such ideals by discussing how to comply with the requirements within themselves.

The media is also an agent of social construction when it comes to heterosexuality and gender ideals in women. The mass media is fast evolving from an information passing avenue to an avenue for displaying what a perfect lifestyle is supposed to be. This is done mainly through advertising and consumer behavior trainings that profile an ideal human being. The areas profiled include socio-economic and physical aspect. The physical aspects involve creation of a perfect body symbol. This profiling is both biologically and artificially inappropriate. Media images depicting ultra-thin women models are a contributor to unhealthy feeding habits in the female gender (Freedman, 2007, p. 91). The advertisements containing the images try to show that people with such bodies are more loved by members of the opposite sex, they have better cars, jobs and also they make better leaders (Wykes & Gunter, 2004, p. 82). It is estimated that in one day a normal person is exposed to about 3, 000 advertisements (Tessman, 2009, p. 108). There is evidence that body dissatisfaction increased in girls who had a fashion magazine subscription for 15 months (Tessman, 2009, p. 120). What these repeated advertisements do is that on each exposure they increase the feeling of dissatisfaction in a person up to the point when they believe that their bodies are ugly, big, thin, too dark or too light.

Toys are also used to create feminine ideals in society through the depiction of women using unrealistically body-sized toys. For example the use of ultra-thin female dolls to show that the ideal woman should not have a huge body. A research conducted on girls aged between 5 to 7 years showed that girls exposed to images of ultra-thin dolls had a higher desire to have such bodies as compared to those that were exposed to dolls with normal bodies (Wykes & Gunter, 2004, p. 27). These results show that such girls may also suffer from body dissatisfaction at their age. This is of great concern since most young ones at such ages are very vulnerable as they trust almost anything they are told by adults.

Some feminists argue that women ideals proposed by society lead to victimization of women; this is true judging by the number of stereotypes at present about women. However, what is not true is the argument that the way to end this victimization is by women adapting masculine ideals (Genz, 2009, p. 38). This is because every gender has a special role to play in society and by not performing these roles, society would be thrown into confusion. For example, imagine if mothers stopped caring for their children, what would families be like?

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