

Challenging stereotypical sex- roles: a discourse analysis of gender



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The sexual divide is arguably the most persistent and deepest divide in the world today (Epstein, 2007). Traditional masculine and feminine discourses play an important part in this obvious divide; these stereotypical sex roles contribute to the discrimination (Coghlan, 2006), degradation (Copenhagen & Eisler, 1996) and burdens millions of people around the world experience today, making it an issue of extreme significance.

There is little evidence to support the argument that men and women are significantly different, therefore one can conclude that all gendered stereotypes separating the sexes and the social roles attached to these stereotypes are socially prescribed (Epstein, 2007). The characteristics of masculinity as described by Bem (1975) include aggressiveness, independence, strength, dominance and the 'breadwinner'. Bem (1975) describes orthodox feminine traits as being nurturing, passive, weak, conforming, submissive, and predominantly 'belonging' in the home.

Religion has been a major influence on civilization throughout history and has contributed to these traditional sex role stereotypes. Through the process of observation, imitation and reinforcement as described by Bandura's social learning theory, individuals internalise these societal norms through the influence of role models and persistent messages in religion, government legislation, media, pop culture and the education system. In order for the unhealthy habits and attitudes to discontinue, structural and ideological change must occur at each of these points so that the wellbeing of society can be improved and equity achieved.

The inequitable social construction of sex roles and stereotypes affects the wellbeing of society as a whole as well as the individuals within it, making it a problem of extreme importance. Individuals of both sexes and of all age groups are affected physically, emotionally and spiritually by these traditional sex role standards (Eisler, 1995; Copenhaver ; Eisler, 1996; Jakupcak, Salters, Gratz ; Roemer, 2003). A recent study found that two of the three top issues worrying young women of today are poor self image and gender stereotypes (Williams, 2009).

These issues may affect women at work, at home, may undermine their ambition, affect their self-esteem and limit their potential (Bartholomew ; Costello, 1997). The stress caused by gender stereotypes affects both men and women alike. The pressure to conform to masculine gender roles has been linked to anger, hostility, personal loss, life dissatisfaction and high blood pressure in men (Eisler, 1995). Other stereotypes including male superiority and domination, feminine roles in the home and the notion that women have less intellectual capability (Epstein, 2007) have adverse affects on women around the globe.

In many countries, girls are still denied any education. In Southern Asia, twenty three and a half million girls do not attend school and in Africa virtually half of all girls are also excluded (Epstein, 2007). The conventional views of masculinity and femininity held by society were looked at by Sandra Bem (1976) in an effort to challenge these common notions and create potential change. The social construction of masculinity and femininity was observed and analysed by Sandra Bem (1976); a psychologist most famously known for the creation of the Bem Sex Role Inventory.
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The construction of the Bem Sex Role Inventory includes a separate Masculine scale and a separate Feminine scale, which Bem defined in terms of culturally or socially desirable traits for men and women, respectively. The inventory included 60 questions which were answered by the respondent to determine whether they were masculine, feminine, androgynous or undifferentiated. Assertiveness, aggressiveness, strength, superiority and being the 'breadwinner' are examples of masculine discourses on one end of the scale while various feminine discourses include being overly emotional, dependent, irrational, nurturing and being housewives.

Healthy functioning in contemporary society, according to Bem (1976), required both feminine and masculine psychological traits. She argued that it was tragic for society to inhibit the development of half of the necessary psychological traits in each individual, and that an individual's overreliance on either stereotypically masculine or feminine traits could be dangerous to the individual and to society. Bem (1993) believes that at one time, the main beliefs that men and women have different natures, that men are the superior sex and that male-female difference is natural were created by God and religion.

Religion and the Bible have provided the basis for many moral and gender-based belief systems prevalent today, and have contributed greatly to the masculine and feminine ideals through the language in the scriptures. The language and values in the bible have contributed to the construction of sex roles throughout history; usually to the detriment of the female sex. Religion was the most significant influence on the moral and political systems

throughout history and arguably still is. The language used in many parts of <https://assignbuster.com/challenging-stereotypical-sex-roles-a-discourse-analysis-of-gender/>

the bible implies male superiority or dominance, a discourse which has continued until today.

Starting at the beginning of the scriptures in Genesis, the creation of woman was told to be from “ the rib, which the Lord God had taken from man” (Genesis 2: 21, American Standard Version). This scripture tells that life originated with man, and woman was created from a man; a lesser being. Scripture also refers to women as “ a weaker vessel, the feminine one” (1 Peter 3: 7, New International Version) and teaches that “ the husband is the head of the wife” (Ephesians 5: 23, American Standard Version).

The language used in these scriptures contributes to the creation of masculine and feminine discourse, supporting the assumption of male superiority and dominance. The bible’s view of sex differences was not scientifically founded. Since the bible was written, male and female differences have been widely researched, and the results are often dissimilar to what the bible implies. There is a widely-held belief that the differences between men and women are based on apparent biological differences, although the evidence supporting these assumptions is minimal (Epstein, 2007).

The obvious physical differences between men and women may have provided the basis for the masculine and feminine stereotypes throughout the bible and consequent history. The biological explanation holds that men and women are naturally different and have different intelligences, physical abilities and emotional traits (Epstein, 2007). This view claims that men are naturally suited to dominance and women are naturally submissive (Epstein,

2007). But this set of assumptions about basic differences, although widely believed, is discredited by much reliable research.

It is important to note that the majority of the research conducted over the years showing the 'differences' has been conducted by men and a lot of the time on laboratory animals (Epstein, 2007), causing the results to be highly problematic. In fact, the research of social scientists has proved that males and females show little to no difference in measures of cognitive abilities and emotions (Hyde, 2005). The American Psychological Association has concluded that gender roles and social context lead to the few differences found (Hyde, 2005).

Even with this research, the masculine and feminine discourses continue to be emphasized and passed on. Most media reports (Brooks, 2006; Tierney, 2006) focus on sex differences instead of reporting on the findings of little or no significant difference between the sexes. Consequently, the stereotypes of masculinity and femininity are continually observed reinforced and imitated, a pattern outlined in the social learning theory. The social learning theory provides an explanation for the continuous reinforcement of traditional sex role discourses in Western society.

Proposed by Bandura (1977), the social learning theory emphasizes the importance of observing and imitating others, as well as the role of reinforcement. Bandura's social learning theory states that people learn behaviours, emotional reactions, and attitudes from role models whom they wish to emulate. Examples of role models may be celebrities, cartoon characters, religious figures or parents. Figures that an individual may look

up to such as Jesus Christ or even a priest can reinforce stereotypes of gender and influence one's beliefs and behaviour, whether in a positive or negative way.

Religion has not only provided a basis for the societal views of gender today but specific religions, namely some Christian religions, have debatably altered or misinterpreted some areas of the bible without being questioned, perhaps due to the authoritative position those within the religion hold in society. One example of this is the name priests are required to be called by their followers: Father. This name implies deep respect for the priest and enhances male superiority; yet nowhere in the bible does it state that you are to call a priest 'Father'.

In fact, the bible instructs followers that they cannot call anyone "Father" aside from God (Matthew 23: 9, New World Translation). Yet, Christian followers continue to obey the authoritative figures in their religion and accept the dominant male figure. The condemnation of contraception is another example of the misused power by church leaders. Priest Richard Roach of Marquette University said that "the introduction of contraceptives into a marriage changes the status of a wife from an honourable woman to a dishonourable woman" (Roach, 1982).

The Catholic religion instructs women on how they can and cannot treat their bodies; based on no significant evidence. Under this instruction, women may only have sexual intercourse with the intention of procreating, or becoming mothers. Nowhere in the bible does it state that Christians today cannot use contraceptive methods. Yet, the commandment remains. The implied

gendered roles in religion can also be observed in government policy and legislation. The characteristics of masculinity and femininity are reinforced throughout government legislation, a current example involving the maternity leave debate.

The issue of paid maternity leave has been a topic of debate in the last decade, yet the level of importance placed on paternity leave is minimal in comparison. This issue reinforces the assumption that women are more nurturing and fathers should continue to act as the breadwinners. Michael Bittman, a sociologist at the University of New South Wales says, " Men who take paternity leave are seen as people who are not serious about their careers. Most people still think taking time off for children is women's business. " (Arndt, 2003).

This societal view impedes potential change in the equality of caring responsibilities. A recent tour undertaken by the Sex Discrimination Commissioner, Elizabeth Broderick found that many Australian citizens believed that paid paternity leave would encourage men to take up a greater share of caring responsibilities, which is critical to achieving gender equality (Cerise, 2008). Some argued that a non-gendered approach was necessary to break the stereotype of the male as the primary breadwinner and provides families with more options when deciding who stays home and who works (Cerise, 2008).

Many men said they wanted to take on a greater share of responsibility but felt impeded by their workplace culture and social norms. (Cerise, 2008).

This survey of the general public supports the opinion to encourage '

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parenting' leave, as opposed to maternity leave; a term which is gender biased. Professor Graeme Russell from Macquarie University argues that government policies regarding paternity leave can initiate a vital change in societal attitudes through encouraging public debate (Arndt, 2003).

Research has pointed to positive change in equal caring and earning arrangements which lead to higher satisfaction (Arndt, 2003). The introduction of paid paternity leave in addition to paid maternity leave is essential if gendered norms are to change and parents can be given options and freedom to suit their needs. The reinforcement of these sex roles can also be observed in the media, along with other stereotypical masculine and feminine traits. Many researchers believe that television commercials are extremely influential in promoting traditional sex-role attitudes (Courtney ; Whipple, 1983).

Past research indicates that watching televised gender portrayals has an effect on an individual's real-world gender-based attitudes, beliefs and behaviours (Herrett-skjellum & Allen 1996; Mcghee & Frueh, 1980). People of all ages watch television advertising, and when women are constantly shown to be the leading parent in nappy commercials or boys being the only sex on toy car commercials, their attitudes toward what is and isn't acceptable according to gender can be affected.

Research has shown that women are more likely to be shown in dependent roles such as parent, spouse, and homemaker (Furnham ; Mak, 1999).

Women are also most often associated with home, and men are more often associated with non-domestic settings, typically outdoors (Furnham ; Mak,

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1999). These advertised roles reinforce the feminine discourse which characterizes the female role as a nurturer and homemaker. Whipple and Courtney (1980) found that progressive portrayals of sex roles in commercials were at least equally preferred, and in some cases more preferred, than traditional approaches.

Therefore, advertising can help change the stereotypical images of women's roles on television. Some approaches advertising agencies can take to lessen the gender roles portrayed include showing women in roles besides sex object, housewife, wife and mother; perhaps as professionals and showing men and women cooking or cleaning together (Harris, Hosch, McIntyre & Norvell, 1986). Simple changes such as this can have a positive affect on the overall view of masculine and feminine roles.

These small changes can also be made in the education system; one of the first places a person observes gendered norms. One of the first points of reference a child has to learn social norms and attitudes about masculinity and femininity is through teachers and educational reading materials at school (Kimmel, 2000). Teachers may send a message to children about sex roles. Studies have indicated that boys are often praised for their intellectual abilities in the classroom while young girls are often praised for their neatness (Maccoby, 1974).

Children in school learn through observation and internalise attitudes and beliefs emulated by teachers, therefore, teacher education is one of the focal areas where change must occur (Sayman, 2007). Research suggests that teachers can offer more gender-neutral education by encouraging the use of

gender neutral materials to play with and considering their own attitudes toward gender roles to ensure the messages they send are unbiased and non-sexist (Booth & Miller, 2002).

Educational books may also have an effect on the way children construct their definitions of masculinity and femininity (Cherland, 1994). In a study of children's literature, girls tended to be represented as sweet, conforming, naive and dependent while boys were portrayed as adventurous, strong, capable and independent (Ernst, 1995; Jett-Simpson ; Masland, 1993). Males tended to have roles as fighters, adventurers and rescuers while females tended to be caretakers, mothers and characters that support the male figure (Temple, 1993).

Educational readers have also been found to depict mothers as child carers and domestic workers, while showing fathers as paid workers which supports the discourse of traditional masculinity and femininity, positioning women as nurturers and men as breadwinners (Jackson ; Gee, 2005). In order to change the message children receive about gender, progressive educational books may be chosen by teachers over books which display traditional sex roles, and these traditional books may be altered or slowly phased out.

It is not only what children read or observe at school which may send messages about masculinity and femininity; these traditional views can also be taught through the movies children watch, namely, Disney movies. The characters in Disney movies may serve as role models for young children; hence, the characteristics of masculinity and femininity they portray are detrimental to children's' construction of gender roles. It has been

demonstrated by psychologists and educators that fairy tales influence the manner in which children conceive the world (Zipes, 1995).

Little girls idolize Disney princesses and look to them as perfect role models to follow in order to achieve a 'happy ever after' (Wachutka, 2007). The characteristics most Disney princesses display are beauty, dependence on males, and often a talent for household work (Wachutka, 2007). Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs is a prime example of a movie where these sex typed roles are made obvious. Snow White's only emphasized qualities throughout the entire movie are her looks and housekeeping skills (Wachutka, 2007).

These scenes reinforce stereotypical sex roles where a woman's physical appearance and work around the house are of the most importance, while the males in the movie go to work; reinforcing the male breadwinner stereotype. Traditional masculine and feminine characteristics are promoted and reinforced in Disney movies, and children observe and learn from their role models in these movies; creating a need for adjustment at this level if societal views are to be changed for the better. A simple call for more androgynous characters is needed to counteract the negative affect these sex typed characters may have on children's views.

The divide between sexes is the most persistent and possibly the deepest divide in the world today (Epstein, 2007). This divide has adverse affects at the individual and societal levels; it causes stress (Eisler, 1995), discrimination, degradation and emotional strain (Bartholemew & Costello, 1997). There is little evidence to support the argument that men and women are significantly different, therefore one can conclude that all gendered

stereotypes separating the sexes and the social roles attached to these are socially prescribed (Epstein, 2007).

The traditional roles attached to stereotypical masculinity as described by Bem (1976) include being aggressive, superior, dominant, independent, strong, and the breadwinner. The characteristics involved in traditional femininity include dependence, submissiveness, being nurturing and weak. It has been argued that these traditional roles have no scientific basis and have come about perhaps by the influence of religion in today's society.

The social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) describes the process of observation, imitation and reinforcement through which individuals learn these embedded stereotypes. Individuals may internalise these sex-typed roles through the influence of role models in religion, through governmental legislation, media and pop culture or through the education system. In order for change to occur, structural and ideological change must occur at each of these points so as to improve the wellbeing of society.