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Julianna Greco
jgreco8@uwo.ca

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Gender: A Social Construction

Julianna Greco

Introduction

Differences within the world are evident with regards to culture, race and many other structural variables, the presence of these variables are important yet not salient. The salience of gender is clear from the moment of birth, the child begins socialization into a male or female. Both the constructions of masculinity and femininity serve as a prominent feature in ones life and act as a substantial influence on how their life is lead. Through the use of contemporary examples it will be made clear that gender is socially constructed through our everyday practices.

Early Childhood Socialization of Masculinity & femininity

The instance a baby is born the first thing the doctor announces is if the child is a boy or a girl, this evidence alone is enough to demonstrate how salient gender is and the ways in which it acts as a determinant towards aspects of life. Following the birth family and friends will gather and welcome the child into the world with clothes, toys and necessities that the parents will need. Latent gendered practices begin here, item 3 (b) in the list, blatantly reinforces the gendered stereotype through the discourse of colors, blue is for boys and pink is for girls (Glatt, 2012). Society has placed narrow binary categories of what a child's sex could possibly be, this card not only reinforces the gendered stereotype yet it proposes an issue with the ways in which hegemonic views of what masculinity and femininity are supposed to act like. List item 3(a) demonstrates a completely gender neutral baby card, with yellow and white as the two main colors. This card demonstrates how the baby's sex is clearly unknown since it states "baby" on the cover as opposed to "baby boy" or "baby girl". The latent function for having cards specifically for girls, boys and 'unknowns', depicts society's hidden infatuation with gender. It also demonstrates how one simple act of picking out a card for a baby serves as a way of doing our gender, which in turn introduces gender to a new born in the hopes that they will conform

into one of the two definite gender identities (Glatt, 2012). The significance these cards play is much more than just a welcoming to the world, more importantly it's the beginning of the social construction into a gender.

The primary socialization of a child is determined by the parents, they serve as the child's earliest exposure to how constructions of male and female traditionally act and behave (Witt, 1997). According to the sex category of the child, parents will tailor their behavior and alter it accordingly. To better understand the differential socialization of the two genders it is made clear in the toys that are advertised and purchased for the children (ibid) item number 4 (a&b) indicate the stereotypical gendered norms that remain evident in what toys the dominant culture believes uniformly aligns with definitions of masculinity and femininity. The underlying assumptions of these two advertisements are that girls are to play with dolls and typically enjoy 'in the house' activities, whereas a stereotypical boy toy advertisement depicted a boy playing with tools. This ultimately creates a dynamic of boys to be dominant and active and girls to be passive and in the home. On the opposing side of the spectrum, Witt (1977) points out that androgynous parents tend to have a family that consists of warmth and upmost support. This claim is supported as it is true that kids coming from androgynous parents are happier overall (ibid). A reasonable claim, is that most parents strive for happy children along with a supportive and warm household, so one might be inclined to wonder why the androgynous lifestyle is not the norm? The reasoning for this is that the salience of gender persists through the existence of the dominant society's set of gendered practices and norms. These norms are socially constructed on a daily basis, which is primarily due to the fact that we consistently do our gender.

As children mature, secondary socialization begins to have a significant impact on childhood development. This socialization consists of the contribution from persons outside of

the family that shape children's views of what definitions of masculinity and femininity entail. One may argue that subsequent to pre-school, kindergarten is the first institutional arena that routinely practices the hegemonic definitions of masculinity and femininity that also involve the incorporation of various agents (Chen and Rao 2011). Kindergarten teachers consistently reinforce the gendered stereotypes through a process of gendered segregation on a daily basis (ibid). Such stereotypes as the importance of beauty and grace in girls and aggressiveness in boys is communicated to the children repeatedly (ibid). To better explain the effect the kindergarten experience has on children, a study of four Chinese kindergarten classes was carried out in Hong Kong, the children were observed for a total of one hundred and five visits of three hour intervals over the span of twelve months (ibid). A total of two hundred and six gendered anecdotes were recorded, and the findings depicted the various ways in which gender is socially constructed in the kindergarten classroom. Among these, gendered labels were used, gender segregation was demonstrated, and overall teachers interactions with boys were more frequent and positive. These findings clearly depict the main reason for the salience of gender due to the agents that practice it. The teachers did not once acknowledge how they produced a gendered environment and therefore were unaware of their significant contribution to the construction of gender to their students.

The Hegemonic Male, demonstrated through Music & Sports

The hegemonic view of masculinity would be characterized as: powerful, strong, aggressive and would include a finite way in which men act in certain discourses that is typically heterosexual in most respects (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). To glance at the present world and verify the narrow hegemonic masculine criteria is met, is far from reality. Hegemonic masculinity currently serves as 'what it means to be a male', and for the most part, remains

inconsistent with contemporary society. The normative behaviors are demanding and problematic for some men, this poses the issue concerning how these narrow definitions are continually reinforced and why they have not adapted to changes accordingly (Glatt, 2012). In most respects one could thank the popular hegemonic male character that is displayed in institutions and arenas such as sports and music, in this case the NBA will be analyzed.

The institution of sports and the arena of music together make an adamant point of reinforcing and maintaining hegemonic masculinity. The NBA (National Basketball Association) uses music when a game is at a pause, usually hip hop music is associated with the sport of basketball as they both portray a comparable image of urban, baggy clothing, tough, aggressive and competitive persons (McLeod, 2006). This is ironically consistent with the heterosexual masculine image that is also demonstrated in the game of basketball. In no way is this claim stating that all music played in the context of a basketball game reinforces the stereotypical view of a man. In some cases men are exploited which then puts the stereotypical masculine view into question, whether this is seen as a good or bad thing. To reiterate this point, Item 2 relates to Lady GaGa's song, 'Love Games'. The popularity of this song alone goes to demonstrate something larger about society, the fact that this pop artist depicts a male's genitalia as an object, in a way reverses the roles and broadens the masculine definition. Regardless if one views this as a good or bad thing, what can be for certain is the social construction of gender from songs such as these.

To continue with the use of the NBA, it would come as a surprise that the violation of hegemonic masculine views are approved in the context of sports under certain circumstances. However if you regard the NBA finals for example: winning is a huge accomplishment, therefore it is deemed acceptable for players to cry, show affection towards their teammates, and express

emotion (as seen in item 5). If a player was to cry and get emotional in any other circumstance they may be called soft, gay or other tantalizing words that are closely related to feminine and homosexual characteristics. In the context of sports it seems as if male athletes gain the 'right to cry' after a big win or loss, this demonstrates the gendered norm that it is only acceptable for males to show emotion in certain circumstances. The underlying issue here stems out of the fact that there are too many variations of men in the world for there to be one narrow explanation that every male should strive to fit into, its simply not right and it demonstrates how the institution of sports socially constructs our gender.

Constructions of Femininity from Print Media & Female Sports Commentators

The feminine persona is created by multiple institutions in society. Media in particular contributes negative conceptions of what it means to be a girl and latently demonstrates the subordination of women. These conceptualizations of femininity have been present in past media forms such as comics, and still reside in contemporary media in the form of magazines. To display a time difference of the subordination and how this was normalized in previous years refer to item 1. In this comic there is a blatant disregard for women as persons outside of the house as Batman states "A wife's place is in the home". Batman and Robin imply humor in the fact that the wife would even attempt to fight a battle that they would, this reinforces the beliefs that women were inferior to males, and also that men overall were dominant. Subordination also latently took place in the absence of the wife's name. She is labelled 'wife' implying again that the role of the wife is her dominant and only role, tending to the needs of the husband. Progression throughout the years has brought the status of women much closer to being equal to males, however subordination still exists, yet in a much different form.

Teen magazines are filled with strategies to upgrade the female in every way: the secret to making your lips bigger, how to kiss, and multiple dieting strategies. Although these pose an issue with society, the bigger concern in magazines is the latent function they serve to girls. Women have been gaining more power as the years go by and magazines have slightly adapted to this by incorporating words such as “independence” and “empowerment” however the issue lies in the context they are using these words (Gengler, 2011). Magazines explicitly use empowering words for females to sell them products, in a sense they use a pseudo-feminist rhetoric by telling young girls they can experience independence and empowerment by purchasing goods that will enhance their femininity (ibid). What all this is saying is that regardless of the time period or what medium the messages of gender are portrayed on, the simple fact that there is a divide between two genders that it is reinforced through the media demonstrates yet another way that gender is socially constructed through our everyday practices.

When speaking of the media, one can also regard the women who make up the mediums that form the view of the ideal women, especially when referring to female sports commentators. Many female sports commentators are viewed after a professional sports game, usually interviewing the male who played the best. The interesting aspect here is the majority of the female sports commentators are independent and powerful women, yet due to the hyper masculine arena they work in, they are in a sense subordinated. These women interview males who embody the dominant hegemonic definition of masculinity, these males are rewarded with an interview for playing good, in a sense women are the prize (Glatt, 2012). In the televised sports manhood formula states that women are seen as sexy props for male athletes. This is reiterated in item number 6, when searching on google “female sports commentators” multiple searches concerning the sexuality and sex appeal of these women arise. When a female obtains

the image of an ideal woman that the media has created, somehow she still doesn't measure up, as demonstrated with item 6, a woman could possess all the desired qualities and yet the domination of men will ensure some measure of subordination to take place. On a daily basis, comments, actions and the mass media look for new ways to 'keep woman in there place' by replacing liberating terms with alternate discourse they are teaching adolescent girls the wrong path to adolescence. These teachings occur subtly on a daily basis and discreetly serve to play a big role in constructions of gender.

The way society is taught to be socialized is salient and goes unnoticed, therefore it is valid to claim that gender is socially constructed through our everyday practices, whether we are aware of the construction or not. With socialization beginning the instant a child is born, the process is continuous through out adolescence and varies dramatically across the two genders. With guidance from institutions and arenas such as education, sports, music and the mass media gender seems to be coerced, as it comes with a scripted set of behaviors and attitudes. The issue society faces now can be recognized through people who clearly don't fit the definition, which in fact accounts for many people. In a sense people are living in a world they simply don't fit into, they are marginalized, and because of these narrow definitions it seems right that they should be. To alter societies views changes must be made and the social constructions of gender that take place on a daily basis must include alternatives to the idolized hegemonic male, and female.

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