Further Readings


Media and Gender Stereotypes

Gender stereotypes are common beliefs formed in culture about how men and women behave. The appearance of gender stereotypes is a result of the sociohistorical construction of a gender relations model in which gender differences were situated above other individual differences of personality between men and women. Gender stereotypes often contribute to the socialization of gender roles, which are a set of expected behavior patterns or norms for women and men. As sociological theories on stereotypes have shown, stereotypes are used as a form of maintaining social stratification by relegating individuals into negative classifications based on their personal identities. The emphasis on the individual, the influence of hegemonic forces on the individual in relation to group membership, and the resulting intergroup conflict make it plausible to understand how stereotypes facilitate different forms of stratification.

In the case of gender stereotypes in the media, this stratification comes in the form of unequal, melodramatic representations of men and women.

The collective media is defined as a social institution that includes print and broadcast news, periodicals, advertising, film, television, literature, music, and music videos. According to communications researchers at Ball State University, individuals consume some form of print or electronic media (information and entertainment) 11 hours per day. Individuals engage media texts that reproduce gender stereotypes, which influence their social perceptions. Media scholars suggest that media texts may contribute to or undermine the inequalities that exist in contemporary societies on individual and institutional levels. Critical media theorists suggest that media texts and ideology go hand in hand, since media often reproduce dominant ideologies. Mass media plays a significant role in the process of gender socialization, and much of their gendered texts are stereotypes.

The Social Construction of Gender

The literature on gender identity suggests that gender is relational, based in the hierarchical association that relates male dominance and female subordination in individuals, institutions, and representations of ideology. Gender is also fluid and variable across space, time, and culture. Robert W. Connell defines gender as a social practice that is organized in relation to the material realities of the human body. Masculinity and femininity are gender projects whereby individuals negotiate their understanding of one in relation to the other. While biological differences exist between men and women, only through the social process of defining masculinity and femininity do these biological differences become stratified.
Through both formal and informal socialization mechanisms, individuals learn their gender roles, which are carried out by way of certain social prescriptions; for example, corresponding behavior to a certain gender expressed by speech, manners, gestures, and clothes. These mechanisms include the family, religious institutions, school, social organizations, and the media. Socialization is a critical component to understanding how individuals learn gendered behavior. Yet sociological perspectives on gender socialization often analyze this behavior in the context of social inequality, or the macrostructural forces that translate disparate social meaning into a system of gender-stratified life chances.

Media make up one of the most influential formal social structures through which gender is constructed. Yet gender is almost always represented stereotypically. The most dominant media texts that persuade individuals in contemporary society are advertising and television.

**Advertising**

One of the earliest sociological examinations of gender stereotypes in the media was conducted by Erving Goffman. In his study of pictorial representations of men and women in advertising, Goffman argued that advertisements draw upon gender display, or perceived behaviors of men and women, as opposed to actual behaviors. This exhibition of gender has also been conceptualized as gender performance, or the presentation of a characterized or sensational representation of masculinity and femininity, often performed as a means of highlighting the inherent contradictions in gender display. Advertisements create cultural cues that tell individuals about the nature of society and how things are connected to larger social forces, in this case gender performance.

In the 1970s and 1980s, studies of gender in television advertising in the United States found that women were typically represented as subservient to men, as housewives, mothers, or in some other domestic capacity. Women were also illustrated as inactive (with an overrepresentation of women indoors), physical objects of male desire, with little to no authority and expertise. By the 1990s, advertisers responded to public resistance to this stereotypical display of gender, shifting the trend from illustrating women as physical objects toward positioning women’s images in the context of family or female independence.

Media scholars identify this trend toward the representation of female empowerment as the advertising industry’s attempt to reflect changes in the culture, due in large part to the impact of the feminist movement and shifting perspectives on the role of women outside of the home. Yet some argue that this shift also reinforced traditional roles of women while creating a new set of contradictory expectations for women to live up to—the ability to simultaneously become feminine (or, as Jean Kilbourne suggests, to be nice and kind, to value romantic relationships with boys, and to compete with other girls for their attention) and masculine (to compete with men in the labor force by adopting stereotypical male traits such as manipulation, anger, exuberance, and egotism).

According to Nielsen Media Research, in the first half of 2006, advertising spending for the top 10 companies in the United States reached nearly $9.8 billion. In addition, product placement advertising (the seemingly inconspicuous placing of branded products within other media texts, including television, film, and music videos) has created another avenue for advertisers to sell products. This has become an unconscious form of embedding gendered images among stereotypical representations of social behavior and interaction.

**Television**

Television is arguably one of the most significant discursive mediums in American culture. It is also the activity that consumes the majority of leisure time for Americans. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics American Time Use Survey, watching television was the leisure activity that occupied the most time (2.6 hours per day), accounting for about half of all leisure time for both men and women. By contrast, the next most common leisure activity, socializing (e.g., visiting with friends, attending or hosting social events) accounted for roughly three quarters of an hour per day for both men and women.

The commercialization of television technology in the 1940s spawned a new generation of advertising that shifted the marketing practices from the male-dominated audience of television’s predecessor—radio—to what was anticipated to be a female-driven target audience. In their anthology on gender, race, and class in media, Gail Dines and Jean M. Humez point out that from the early commercial television of the post–World War II period to the development of
entertainment genres that continued well into the 1970s, the television industry developed scheduling (daytime and nighttime) and programming practices that reflected the gendered division of labor and an ideology of separation between the domestic (feminine) and public (masculine) domains of society. Daytime television was targeted toward a female audience, while nighttime, or primetime, television (which has implications of preference and superiority) was marketed toward families with a presumed male-headed household. Although primetime television has evolved to include a diverse range of male and female representations, studies on the depiction of women in primetime television suggest that the increase in representations of women are those primarily of women in the workplace (often within the context of male-dominated jobs, such as law enforcement or the corporate environment) and women within the reality-television genre, including tabloid news, talk shows, and other competition-driven formats (e.g., Survivor, America's Next Top Model).

Daytime programming consists primarily of soap operas, talk shows, and news programs. Feminist media scholars offer competing perspectives on soap operas and the extent to which they reinforce or subvert stereotypical gender displays. In a study of audience interaction with soap operas as texts, Tania Modleski argued that viewers are forced to take on multiple subject positions or temporary identities, as opposed to one single character. The endless story line and frequency of character shifts suggest that the viewer is engaging a process of gender role construction, as opposed to single-gendered characters. John Fiske later argued that because soap operas present a constant state of disruption for their characters and their lives are constructed out of the dominant ideologies inscribed in the status quo, women viewers are presented with a type of disruption without resolution that produces the possibility to challenge status quo beliefs of gender roles. Yet other ethnographic studies of soap opera audiences provide mixed interpretations of whether the openness of the text has a liberatory function or whether it reinforces traditional constructions of gender.

The talk show format grew in popularity during the late 1970s, and by the 1980s was distinctively characterized as “women’s programming.” From Phil Donohue, Sally Jesse Raphael, and Oprah Winfrey to Ricki Lake, Jerry Springer, and Tyra Banks, this genre presents conflicted messages of a gendered, raced, and classed narrative of female discourse through the presentation of everyday lives. While these shows attempt to create a platform to engage the social and political issues of the day, particularly making public the historically private issues of women, studies show that this platform is sensationalized for entertainment purposes, which often undermines the audience’s ability to seriously consider these social problems.

The emergence of gender-specific and gender-targeted cable networks, like Lifetime (established in 1984 for women) and Spike TV (established in 2003 for men), created a new avenue for advertising and television programming to market to gender-specific audiences. Like the melodrama of women’s programming on daytime television, male-centered programming reinforces sensational stereotypes of men as domineering, aggressive (particularly in the context of sports fanaticism), oversexed, and underprivileged, which suggests a backlash to the inroads made by women in the wake of the feminist movement. Representations of men often emphasize the hardships of the working-class white male as an underrepresented class, with shows like Married With Children, The Simpsons, and The Man Show.

Conclusion

Much of the contemporary literature on gender stereotypes in the media uses an intersectional approach to analyze the impact of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation on representations of individuals and groups in the media. Given the high rates of media consumption, particularly television, and decreasing rates of social communication, many individuals engage the social world largely through the lenses of various media. Some view these representations as formulaic messages of gender roles and behaviors that, coupled with disproportionate representations of minority populations, present an idealistic, contrary portrait of society.

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See also Body Image; Feminist Magazines; Gender Performance; Gender Stereotypes; Men’s Magazines; Primetime Comedy; Primetime Drama

Further Readings

Menopause

Menopause is a time of significant transition for women, representing the termination of the reproductive phase. Although menopause is thought to be a biological process, it also has sociocultural and sociosexual meanings and consequences. Biologically, menopause is the permanent cessation of menstruation as a result of decreasing hormone levels. To understand menopause, it is necessary to define it medically and socioculturally, including the symptoms associated with it and the cause of those symptoms. Placing the experiences of menopausal women within the medicalized model facilitates an understanding of the challenges with which women are confronted. Last, a review of the social construction of menopause cross-culturally is necessary, as menopause is an archetype of how societal notions of gender and femininity interconnect to form a valuation system of women.

Definition and Symptomology

There is no definitive medical definition of menopause. Menopause is diagnosed retrospectively after 12 full months without menstruation. Despite the fact that there is no clear linkage between chronological and reproductive age, most medical professionals still use age as a marker to identify when menopause occurs. In Western countries, doctors place the age of menopause around 50 years, although hormone levels often decline in women in the preceding 8 to 10 years. In general terms, menopause, or climacteric, as it is characterized in medical terminology, occurs when the ovaries become less sensitive and/or resistant to certain hormones, which, in turn, causes a decrease in the production of estrogen. The reduction in hormone levels is categorized in terms of vasomotor (e.g., hot flashes, fatigue), atrophic (e.g., complaints related to urinary and reproductive systems), and psychological or sexual (e.g., breast tenderness, vaginal dryness) symptoms.

It is generally assumed that age of symptom onset is due to a combination of genetics and maternal activity during pregnancy. It is also assumed that the external environment and the female’s behavior have an impact on eventual menopause experience. For instance, smoking and having multiple births (e.g., twins) are associated with significantly earlier menopause, while women who are married, from higher socioeconomic classes, and taking hormone replacements experience menopause later in life. It is unclear how such variables impact the onset of menopause, but clear associations have been demonstrated, and it has been established that late-stage menopause results in increased health risks, such as endometrial and breast cancers. Current research is unable to distinguish between the effects of the aging process and menopausal symptoms. For instance, the fatigue a woman in her 40s or 50s may experience could also be due to taking care of ailing parents, work-related stress, marital difficulties, or children leaving home for college. Menopause occurs during a normally stressful and challenging time in a woman’s life, and any discussion of symptomology should be placed within such a context. Moreover, minimal research has been conducted on how menopause is experienced by lesbians, women of color, low-income women, and women with mental illness. As such, it is important to study menopause from a life span perspective, noting that symptoms vary according to the interaction between biology and sociocultural and sociosexual factors.

Medicalization of Menopause

Menopause has been medicalized and pathologized in Western countries, leaving women dependent on the medical establishment and the pharmaceutical industry for treatment and relief of symptoms. It is measured in terms of loss of ability, functioning, and role. When women enter midlife and begin to identify vague symptoms, such as fatigue or depression, the response of the medical establishment is to assume the cause is a result of hormone deficiencies. Women are often placed on hormone replacement therapy, which