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Writing 201
5-3-2018

Cultural Myths of Gender

From the earliest stages of childhood, women and men are faced with a choice: will they

conform to cultural assumptions of how each gender "should" act and look, or will they deviate

from the norm, define for themselves what it means to be a man or woman and risk ostracization,

insult, and even violence? Those who find these societal guidelines too rigid often have a

difficult path ahead of them. Men, facing pressure from other men to be strong and stoic, suffer

internally due to the psychological buildup of repressed emotions and the relational

disconnection that follows. Women, taught from a young age by role models and cultural images

to be beautiful, nurturing and accommodating also suffer psychological damage from external

and internal pressure to measure up while also enduring physical harm through violence and

sexual assault by men. Ultimately, traditional gender roles harm women more than men.

Societal expectations leave an unseen mark on men, who face immense pressure to fulfil

a narrow set of criteria that define what it means to be a "real" man. As Kimmel explains, this

code of masculinity can be summarized in the mandate that men should be dominant at all times,

reserved emotionally and that all signs of weakness are strictly verboten (462). Common

conceptions of gender equate strength with masculinity and weakness with femininity, thus, the

pursuit of masculinity is judged on the basis of how unlike a woman a man appears. Because of

this aversion, many young boys avoid traits often associated with femininity such as emotional

sensitivity, dependence, and vulnerability. Kimmel asserts that these negative associations with

virtually all emotions except anger lead them to isolate for fear of showing weakness, choosing instead to withdraw, maintaining a mask of stoicism (469). Naturally, this dynamic has long-term repercussions on boy's emotional lives; disconnection from their own feelings leads to disconnection in relationships with each other and with adults who might impart mature perspectives and guidance if the boys could receive it. Unfortunately, the prioritization of self-sufficiency renders many boys unable to receive instruction and prolongs immaturity and emotional disconnection well into adulthood (Kimmel 470). Men put forth a tough exterior and aspire to the highest levels of masculine hierarchy, but inside they struggle to understand their own emotions and in the end, they suffer in self-created isolation.

While men are harmed emotionally due to cultural codes of masculinity, women suffer psychologically as they attempt to satisfy the unrealistic expectations of limiting stereotypes. These expectations are introduced to girls at very young ages through all sorts of images; from dolls with idealized feminine body types to movies featuring helpless princesses waiting for a strong man to rescue them, girls learn what Distelhorst calls the "gender curriculum" without anyone saying a word (25). It is often assumed that biology alone accounts for gender traits, but Distelhorst suggests that observation and imitation are key factors as well, particularly when it comes to traits such as deference, a common thread in the guidelines for femininity (25). Advertising, one of the primary vehicles for reinforcing feminine stereotypes, has normalized postures of deference and submission which, as Kilbourne notes, are often borrowed from pornography (420). She describes an ad for jeans featuring a young girl in an elevator with downcast eyes, at once vulnerable and provocative; the copy reads, "push my buttons, I'm looking for a man who can totally floor me" (427). Unsurprisingly, the jeans are completely

obscured, but the message is loud and clear: women should be sexy, and submissiveness is sexy. From cartoons aimed at young girls to teen magazine covers to the hardest pornography, the idea of beauty and submissiveness above all is continually reinforced. The American Psychological Association reports that the "sexualization of girls in advertising and other media is strongly linked to mental health problems such as eating disorders, low self-esteem and depression" (Zurbriggen et al.). The psychological damage resulting from the pressures to conform to these limiting portrayals of femininity is inescapable.

Perhaps the most damning evidence that narrow gender constructs are especially harmful to women is the frequent physical violence and sexual assault they endure. A government study by Tjaden and Thoennes revealed that "one in five women have suffered rape or attempted rape and over half of all women have been physically assaulted"; these attacks usually occur before the age of seventeen and usually at the hands of partners and husbands (qtd. In Kilbourne 433). Valenti points out that this reality is often treated as sadly unavoidable and, referring to to a 2006 Wall Street Journal story on the rape and murder of Imette St. Guillen whose headline read, "Ladies, You Should Know Better" due to the fact that St. Guillen had been in a bar prior to her attack, that women are commonly blamed for their own assaults (17). Media portrayal of women can not solely account for these staggering facts, but the connection between the two is worth consideration. The pervasive imagery of gender in media relies heavily on extremes of dominance and deference, and women are rarely, if ever, the dominant figures. Advertising, for example, usually features not just strong men and diminutive women, but men who physically dominate women, often simulating violence in eroticized scenarios while women, in the victim role, affect submissive poses and rarely show signs of struggle, giving the impression that they

agree with the situation. By sexualizing women to such a large degree, especially in the context of advertising where objects are ostensibly the focus, they inevitably become objects themselves. This feeds real-world violence; Kilbourne observes that objectification of a person is necessary to justify violence. She states, "it is very difficult to be violent with someone we think of as an equal, but it is very easy to abuse a thing" (431). The power of these images lies in their ubiquity. Women are exposed to these scenes from the time they are young and, as a culture, we grow numb and come to believe that these scenarios reflect normalcy, that this is how real women look and act, that to be truly beautiful and live the lives portrayed in ads, a woman must submit to male dominance and even be willing to endure physical harm (Kilbourne 420). Women who acquiesce to this idea of femininity may be more likely to stay in dangerous relationships and tolerate violence rather than stand up for themselves and demand better treatment; after all, movies, magazines and ads have shown women that this is what culture expects. Widespread acceptance of ads portraying violence and the broad indifference to actual violence speaks to the fact that culture at large assumes this is the way of the world, that to be a woman is to risk physical and sexual assault. The cultural myth of femininity is unattainable, untenable and in the end it hurts women, literally.

Cultural myths of gender have endured for a long time and it is not hard to understand why they persist. There is a comfort to categorizing people in simple terms: it keeps confusion at bay and protects traditional views from the perceived threat of progress. The problem is that these concepts of masculinity and femininity are indeed myths; they are oversimplifications that, while hinting at the truth, can never fully convey the true complexity of humanity. In order for these myths to work, this complexity gets reduced to stereotypes that, at best, are cartoonishly

simplistic and, at worst, are psychologically and physically damaging and, while both genders

suffer, women bear the brunt of it. As Vazquez explains, personhood is at stake; seeking to

understand one another requires looking past external markers of gender and attempting to know

the whole person (478). The longevity of the cultural myths of gender relies on objectification

because inanimate objects can be put in boxes. People, on the other hand, will never fit; perhaps

it is time that we stop trying.

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