Gender Roles and Alternative Images

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Our gender, unlike our sex, is something we acquire socially. We are given daily prompts to follow by our family, friends, peers, and the media. We are taught what it is to be feminine and masculine. But from what perspective do these gender guidelines come? The dominant view in Western culture derives from the mindset of the white, male, heterosexual. It is from this perspective that we define masculinity and femininity in our society. Our gender roles are separated into two groupings, male and female, and they assume a heterosexual orientation. For instance, the characteristics associated with femininity are the polar opposite of masculinity. Where males are seen as 'naturally' strong, independent, and logical, women are assumed to be submissive, dependent, and emotional. Our culture accepts these gender roles as the natural order, reinforces the expectations, and rewards those who follow them through popular media.

Cultural representations reflect the dominant perspective. Using images of Anglo/European models to display society's wares, male consumers are given the message that buying the right car will increase their chances of landing a young, thin, trophy wife. Women are bombarded with expectations and rewards for following their gender assignment. For example, McDonald's has a commercial showing a wife spending all day cleaning house, washing the dog, and tending to the children. When the husband calls home promising to bring her a two-dollar value meal, she is ecstatic. After all she's earned it. This commercial not only portrays the domestic duties as female, it reinforces the limited value for such work.

The subjugation of women and people of color is another component of the dominant model of gender; this is a crucial factor in the maintenance of a system that values the white, heterosexual, male perspective as superior. Any

other perspective is labeled as alternative, and as I will examine, the dominant view of gender is often portrayed even within alternative focused advertisements

The focus of this research project is to examine how and if advertisements in "alternative" magazines challenge or reinforce dominant views of femininity and masculinity. By looking at the advertisements in these magazines I will provide some insight as to how gender is socially constructed and how it is a learned process. Acknowledging that gender is prescribed rather than a biological given will bring us one step closer to allowing ourselves to step out of this construction and create a more accepting environment for those who are not able or willing to fit into their assigned gender roles. Looking at alternative advertisements will give us insight into the social impact that the dominant view has, even in a community labeled deviant with regards to sexual orientation.

DATA / METHODS

I collected the data for this project by examining advertisements in magazines targeting the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender population, respectively. Some of the magazines target one group exclusively while others are more encompassing. *Girlfriends* and *Diva* are the two lesbian magazines I viewed, while the *Advocate* caters to the gay, lesbian, and to a lesser extent, bisexual communities. *Pride* and *Gay* target both gay and lesbian, while *Transgender* and *Anything that Moves* focus exclusively on issues concerning transsexuals, transvestites, and bisexuals.

I analyzed advertisements found in each of these magazines to see if and how they challenged the dominant view of femininity and masculinity. I examined twelve magazines: *The Advocate* 5/95, 1/96, 7/96, 3/97, 9/97, 10/97; *Anything That Moves*, no. 14, summer 1997; *Diva* 8-9/97; *Gay*, 9/97; *Girlfriends*, 7-8/97; *Pride*, annual edition 1997; *Transgender* no. 80, Fall 1997. *Diva*, *Pride*, and *Gay* are published abroad with the remaining published in the United States. I divided 350 images into three major categories: those that challenge the dominant gender portrayals, those that reinforce dominant gender portrayals, those that do both.

I developed categories to distinguish between certain gender traits to distinguish what is referred to as dominant view. For example, women shown in domestic situations would constitute a reinforcement of a dominant gender portrayal, while men shown in the same situation would act as a challenge. Socially recognized gender roles include the image of women as mothers and domestic caretakers, obsessed with their appearance, weight, and happiness of the family. For men, the dominant gender role is that of the goal-oriented breadwinner. Men are taught that heterosexuality is rewarded by the achieve-

ment of a successful career and the acquisition of a wife, who is expected to fulfill all domestic obligations. I looked for images that reinforced or challenged the dominant view according to gender role.

RESULTS

Challenges to conventional gender portrayals

The majority of the advertisements in alternative magazines deviated from the dominant view and the deviation took a variety of forms. Romantic couples of the same sex are shown dining in restaurants and dancing together in nightclubs. The challenge to the same sex couple is that conventionally, men and women are attracted to the opposite sex, not the same sex. When the dominant view, fundamentally based in religious doctrine, is turned upside down, I believe the result is a paranoid fear that if homosexuality becomes accepted socially, everyone will 'choose' it and there will be no one left to procreate, or dominate society.

One advertisement shows five young men of assorted races, sprawled on the floor of an apartment, clad only in their underwear, legs intertwined, watching a gay-oriented video. Not only does this advertisement break convention with the image of men as intimate with each other; it goes outside the dominant view by including men of color as potential love interests. Dominant masculinity is challenged by the many images showing male couples; real men do not kiss each other or dance together, or go on vacation together, unless it's to look for women. In the dominant view, real men are strong, emotionally isolated, and heterosexual, more often viewing women as objects of conquest than as equal partners.

Another advertisement shows a lesbian couple holding a baby. This depiction serves as a challenge by the absence of a male father figure. The threat of two women creating their own family without being dependent on a man goes against the dominant belief that women are naturally dependent and heterosexual.

Reinforcement of dominant gender portrayal

The most common portrayal of gender in the alternative magazines is to show men as goal-oriented creatures who are virtually non-existent in the domestic setting, living out their lives in an upper-middle class style. Of the 350 images I looked at, not one included an image of men with children. Their absence from domestic settings acts as a reinforcement of the dominant portrayal. A man's role is still considered to be that of the breadwinner.

Another reinforcement of the dominant view is that of the homosexual

being equated to a person with a mental disorder. One advertisement I saw numerous times was for a therapy-based clinic dealing with a variety of mental disorders. The ad shows a young man on the floor next to the toilet with a bottle of pills and a bottle of alcohol next to him. This is a reinforcement of the dominant view that homosexuals, gay men in particular, are mentally ill. Interestingly, these ads never show a woman in such desperate crisis, if a woman is shown at all, it's as a caring friend, a nurturing figure.

Another image that was reinforced is that of the homosexual as sexually promiscuous. For example, one advertisement featured five men watching a gay-oriented video. Instead of showing a pair of intimates enjoying a video, this ad shows an intimate group.

The way in which they are dressed and the way their legs are intertwined with each other has bearing as well. The innuendo is that they are all intimate. The dominant view of gay men being 'loose' with their bodies is being reinforced with this ad.

The most common portrayal of women was that, regardless of sexual orientation, they are still considered the primary caretakers of children. While men are invisible in domestic settings and never shown with children, women are often shown in this setting. The inclusion of children within this setting tells us that no matter with whom you sleep, women are expected to uphold this aspect of their gender role.

Ambiguous gender portrayal

In some instances, I found that while one factor of the dominant norm might be challenged, there might be another way in which the dominant view is reinforced. For example, the image of the lesbian couple with a baby clearly challenges the dominant view of what constitutes a family, yet at the same time reinforces the dominant view of women as mothers and caretakers of children. Another ambiguous pattern was in the advertisements catering to the terminally ill and those suffering from addiction and/or mental health issues. While the sexual orientation of the figure(s) shown is a deviation from the dominant view, there is still the renforcement of the stereotype of the sick homosexual.

The magazines targeting the transgender community are the most intriguing in terms of how they portrayed gender. The advertisements within this context are overwhelmingly aimed at those who want to achieve a gender crossover. While there are a few advertisements that target female to male crossover, most are directing the male in the ways of achieving feminine qualities. One ad promises a one-day getaway for those men who want to experience life as a woman. Activities include makeover, lessons in feminine mannerism, glamour photography, and shopping trips. Every aspect of what

it is to be a woman is addressed in the transgender magazines. The focus seems to be the achievement of perfect skin, superfluous hair removal, wearing the right shade of make-up, and lessons on talking and acting feminine. This learned aspect of gender illustrates what Simone de Beauvoir knew when she stated that, "One is not born a woman: one becomes a woman."

My first thought after viewing these advertisements was that here is the greatest challenge to the dominant view: people choosing to crossover to the opposite gender role. What could be more radical in terms of gender portrayal? This behavior does prove that our gender is socially constructed. The learned aspect of femininity is apparent in the countless books, tapes, and seminars being offered on the subject. But what type of challenge is there when heterosexual women are being taught the same form of femininity? In this respect there is more enforcement of the cultural norm than there is challenge. Judith Lorber addresses this topic in, *Paradoxes of Gender*. "In societies with only two genders, the gender dichotomy is not disturbed by transvestites, because others feel that a transvestite is only transitorily ambiguous-is 'really a man or woman beneath.' After sex surgery, transsexuals end up in a conventional gender status-a man or a woman with the appropriate genitals" (Eicher 20).

The gender of the bisexual is more complex than that of the transgender person. Within the gay and lesbian community there has been an attitude that the bisexual uses his or her ambiguous orientation as a means to escape the discrimination and social sanctioning that homosexuals face. Because of the bisexual's sexual ambiguity, there is discomfort even within the gay and lesbian community. The advertisement that most challenged the dominant feminine portrayal was found in the bisexual-oriented magazine, *Anything that Moves*. An image of a naturally hairy woman beckons to the reader to throw away her razor and let her 'naturalness' come out. This advertisement serves as a serious challenge to the Western dictum that in order to achieve real beauty a woman must be as hairless and smooth-skinned as a little girl.

CONCLUSION

For the most part, advertisements within the alternative magazines tend to reinforce the traditional belief that woman are natural nurturers of children, regardless of their sexual orientation, and that to be feminine is to be obsessed with physical appearance. The focus on appearance is played out in the male to female transsexual's education in femininity. Advertisements featuring gay men reinforce the dominant view that equates homosexuality with promiscuity and mental illness, while reinforcing the 'man as breadwinner' role, a universal component of Western masculinity.

There is no foundation for the biological argument regarding our gender.

From birth, the main physiological aspects are the same; our differences are located in our genitalia and reproductive capabilities. As Lorber states in *Paradoxes of Gender*:

> in the construction of ascribed social statuses of gender, age, grade, and race, social statuses are carefully constructed through prescribed processes of teaching, learning, emulation, and enforcement. Whatever genes, hormones, and biological evolution contribute to human social institutions is materially as well as qualitatively transformed by social practices.

The need to establish dichotomous gender roles is pervasive in Western culture. It is a way of making us comfortable with our behavioral expectations. If a person cannot categorize another, then how does one relate? With no social script to follow, the boundaries of gender behavior are limitless.

Historically we know that change, especially social change occurs slowly. If we are to move beyond the social construction of gender, as well as those of class and race, we must make the education of our children a priority. The adoption of gender, race, and class studies, starting at the primary level, within the public and private education system, is our only hope.

Bibliography

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