

Gender and the Mass Media. To what extent is it true to say that mass media has a significant role in socializing individuals into traditional gender roles?

Gender socialization begins in the home with parents playing a major role in how children are socialized. Sex is determined biologically but gender identity is determined through socialization. Gender roles are determined by culture and stereotyping. Children begin their gender socialization from birth and are taught behaviours appropriate for their gender by their parents. Most often males are socialized as dominant and females as compliant and supportive. Male children are greeted with tough toys such as trucks while their female counterparts are greeted with soft, cuddly toys for them to nurture and care for.

Stereotypes are often reinforced by mass media. Television plays a big role in socializing children into traditional gender roles. Women are cast primarily in roles that perpetuate the female stereotype of being subservient to males. Women are viewed in roles as housewives, mothers, secretaries, and nurses. Men are type cast as physically strong and assertive, professional, and successful. According to Daniel Chandler of the University of Wales "Up to 85% of the characters in children's TV are male, even in cartoons, and with animal characters - the sexual distribution of which is roughly as for Homo sapiens. Similarly, the occupational range for female characters on children's TV is far more limited than for males."(Chandler, 2007)

Early exposure to mass media serves to undo any socialization by parents that is more androgynous or gender neutral. Parents inadvertently are exposing their children to media that portrays men, women, and children in traditional, male dominated, roles.

Advertising campaigns often perpetuate gender stereotypes by portraying men using products during activities associated with males such as waxing a car, changing the oil, or mowing the lawn. Women are advertised as being primary users of home care products like dish soap, laundry soap, and vacuum cleaners. In advertising women are viewed in traditional roles as wives, mothers, and sometimes teachers. "Furthermore, news stories about women are rare or are about wives of important public figures, so professional women are infrequently presented as role models for girls or boys (Cantor, 1987)"

Television is not the only media that recreates culture and perpetuates gender stereotypes. Magazines, newspapers, comic books, and radio are other types of mass media. Radio is second to television but plays an important role in gender socialization. Children are exposed to lyrics that are damaging to women and newscasts that use language that identifies women in roles by their gender. For example, a male attorney would be described as 'Mr. Jones, Attorney for the defence' while the female attorney would be described as 'Ms. Smith the female attorney for the defence'. Another way women are referred to is a 'the wife of' or 'mother of' rather than identified with their name alone. This way of referring to women subordinates them to their husbands or role as caretakers.

Movies made in Ireland have tended toward representing characters along traditional gender roles. Irish cinema has been gradually changing how it portrays characters in movies. This is in line with Ireland's change from isolated country to member of the European Union. "The exponential growth of the Irish film industry will, with luck, lead to a greater diversity in the way gender politics are discussed. Whether Irish filmmakers will be able to address local issues such as these in an international market, with all the pressures to conform to stereotypical models, will be very interesting to observe."(Barton, 1999)

Children are exposed to many role models as they grow and mature. Role models include parents, grandparents, teachers, and sports figures. And, media provides role models that influence children's behaviour. Role models in media often portray men and women in traditional roles. Children develop along gender stereotypes by observing others and through imitation. Access to different types of media influence how a child behaves and the child's understanding of their role in society. A child who is continually exposed to media with gender bias and stereotypes will internalize those stereotypes and incorporate the stereotypes into their beliefs and behaviours. Gender biased behaviours and attitudes viewed in media directly influence the attitudes and behaviours of children. Children will imitate what they see in the media. "Children who witness female characters on television programs who are passive, indecisive, and subordinate to men (and see this reinforced by the environment around them) come to understand this is the appropriate way for females to behave." (Witt, 2007) Children who see action or violence in media often imitate what they see and children who see characters portrayed in traditional roles imitate that as well.

Many parents do a wonderful thing for their children. They read to them. Reading to a child boosts language development and strengthens the bond between parent and child. Unfortunately the very thing they are doing right for their children has a negative affect as well. Books are another media that help socialize children and pass on their culture to the next generation. Many popular children's books depict stereotypical behaviour by portraying male figures as active, strong, adventurers, and rescuers and female figures as passive, non-active, caretakers. Children often hav

e 'favourite' books that they want read to them over and over. This repetition serves to reinforce the attitudes and behaviours depicted in the book.

Parents and educators can influence the effect that media has on children by carefully choosing what media the children are exposed to. This is probably harder for the parent than the teacher who has more control over what children are exposed to in the classroom. Teachers can carefully select literature that is either gender neutral or portrays both males and females in active dynamic roles.

Teachers are tasked with providing an environment that encourages gender equity. Children ideally are socialized to believe that both girls and boys can have similar life goals. To create a gender neutral learning environment teachers need to first recognize gender biases that they have. Then the teachers can examine the media they use in the classroom and remove media that encourages gender bias. The teachers could then introduce media that encourages gender equity.

Conclusion: Mass media plays a big part in socializing children into traditional roles. Children are exposed to all types of media every day. This exposure results in children adopting traditional beliefs and behaviours specific to their gender. Although parents can't totally eliminate their children's exposure to media, they can choose media (books and videos) that promote gender equity. Parents and teachers can encourage children of both genders to strive to reach their goals. Girls should be encouraged to seek out educational and occupational goals based upon qualifications and not gender. Boys and girls can be socialized to believe in gender equity.

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