

Children, Television and Gender Roles

A critical review of the available evidence concerning what influence television may have on the development of children's understanding of gender roles and of their own gender identities

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How children learn about, or acquire gender roles has become an increasingly popular topic; looking at the variables which work together to influence a child's understanding of gender. Indeed, with the increasing amount of television that children are watching (some as much as seven hours per day), one might be concerned as to whether or not television plays any part in the concepts that children grow up with so far as gender roles are concerned.

If television is found to influence children's concepts of gender, then not only does it reflect upon the influence that television might have in other areas, but it may also have implications for the children in so far as what they come to expect as the norm, and the types of behaviour and attitudes they exhibit and expect others to.

However, television is not an isolated element. If it were the sole source of gender representations, there would be no problem measuring the extent to which it might influence children. It remains, though, that television is one possible variable among many; our parents, peers, the behaviour expected of us, perhaps even the attitudes of people that we generally come into contact with. As such, it is problematic to try to measure any possible influences.

In order to gain a relatively wide understanding of the

possible effect that television might have, despite looking at the various studies conducted, we will be looking at television in the context of several theories of sex role acquisition. First, however, to understand *how* TV may influence it's young viewers, we must be familiar with the content of what they see.

In an ever-changing world, television has been accused by many of representing gender in an extremely stereotyped and traditional manner which is no longer appropriate for the variety of roles taken on by the sexes. Even the percentage of time devoted to the sexes on-screen is accused of being unrepresentative of the 'real' world, or the world beyond the screen. Indeed, these stereotypes are generally supported by the television industry as a whole, frequently presenting women in the home via the housewife-type role, with the man as the strong, bread winning husband.

In adult television programmes, Durkin (1985) cites Butler and Paisley (1980) who reviewed thirteen studies with regard to the frequency with which men and women appear on television programmes. Resulting from this, they found that over 72% of the characters were male, with the remaining 28% female. Furthermore, over a twenty-five-year period, Dominick (1979) was reported to have found females to occupy star roles only thirty percent of the time (Durkin, 1985: 25).

In adult programmes women are not seen in high status occupations as often as men generally. Indeed, their jobs tend to be those more often associated with traditional feminine characteristics such as caring, organisation etc. and so we often see them as nurses or secretaries; those roles secondary to the man as doctor or 'boss'. When women are shown to be successful in their career, it is often

to be at the expense of their personal life, which invariably tends to be unhappy.

One area of television which has been heavily criticised for its gender representation is advertising, which is widely acknowledged to place women in more subordinate role. Indeed, even the voice-overs reinforce such gender stereotyping. For example, voice-overs which are intended to be authoritative in adverts are usually male, whereas female voice-overs tend to be used in a more seductive manner. Indeed, there are extremely limited numbers of adverts which use the female voice-over in a commanding manner.

Children's television reaches a very high proportion of the audience it is intended for. Findings have been reported which generally comply with the example set by the adult programmes in so far as the manner in which men and women are portrayed. Durkin notes that results from studies of children's television in Britain have found many programmes in which the main or even sole characters are male, giving a figure of approximately 70% to 85% generally (Durkin, 1985: 28). He also cites a study conducted by Dohrmann (1979) of educational programmes in the US which found males to be the leading characters 100% of the time (Durkin, 1985: 28). While this must seem somewhat shocking with regard to the implicit messages it may have been portraying to children; i.e. that men are leaders and women follow, or that men lead because they are more intelligent, one must bear in mind that in Britain today, that this is not the case, indeed, far more educational programmes are presented by women, perhaps owing to the fact that it is considered more of a woman's area of television.

In children's television, when women are portrayed in

occupational roles, this tends to be very narrowly defined in comparison to men; in a similar way to the adult programmes. Women are generally restricted to traditional feminine, or 'women's' occupations. In so far as aggression is concerned, such behaviours are displayed the vast majority of the time by the male characters.

Thus we can see that children are generally presented with a distorted point of view from the television, one which suggests a higher population of men than women, when in fact, the opposite is true, and tend to present very gender specific roles.

When men are shown to be in roles traditionally associated with women, i.e. the home, they invariably become incompetent, and we see the having trouble working out how to use the washing machine etc. The same also seems to happen to women who take on the traditionally masculine roles. Therefore, one might argue that being faced with such concepts for perhaps, hours a day, that children will inevitably come to accept such examples as the norm.

Before analysing research conducted with such hypotheses, however, there are several schools of thought in which television might be considered to play a role in the acquisition of sex roles; the first being biological.

From the perspective of this theory, people are born with inherent gender oriented roles which are innate, and therefore, unchanging. This school of thought argues that women are born with 'feminine identities, and are naturally suited to the roles of mothering and house-keeping, whereas men are 'natural' hunters whose role is one of dominance.

According to such a theory, television would play little or no part in influencing sex roles, but perhaps only serve to reflect the underlying biological processes of social behaviour as they are in 'reality'. From this point of view, we can conclude that television would not be a consideration as to the possible influences of gender roles, and so, therefore, any individual arguing from such a perspective, would be highly unlikely to conduct any research in the manner of which we are focusing on here.

Other theories focus upon environmental aspects to account for the explanation of sex role acquisition. An example of this is the Social Learning Theory, which focuses upon the relationship between certain stimuli and human behaviour. It puts forward the suggestion that there are a set of 'learning principles', upon which are based any forms of human behaviour. The main three principles have been noted as observation, reinforcement and imitation. In terms of acquiring the concept of gender, Social Learning theorists would argue that this occurs through children observing gender-typed behaviour, having it reinforced through attitudes and example, until the child imitates it and eventually adopts it.

The concern of the Social Learning Theory has largely rested with the behaviour modelled for children in film and television. In such a context, television becomes one of many variable factors which contribute to sex role development; although there has been little research conducted with the specific intentions of examining television's influence in the forming of gender roles.

Such a theory, however, fails to appreciate what sense children make of the models they are presented with in television. It assumes a certain passivity of the child within a behaviourist-type framework, i.e. that we are shaped by,

and learn solely through our environment.

A great deal of research has been conducted which has concluded that children are not passive, but play an active role in learning, and therefore take an active role in learning about gender roles. However, this leaves us little further on with regard to the impact that television would have. From this perspective, though, it would be argued that television would have a potentially significant effect.

The cognitive developmental approach takes into account the role that the child may have in this process, noting how the child manages to categorise it's own gender and others' by discovering the correlates of gender role qualities. This school of thought argues that the acquisition of gender roles is to an extent dependant upon the child's cognitive understanding of his or her social environment. Durkin argues that this approach 'emphasises self-regulation of the inquisitive child as opposed to merely accumulating bits of information presented randomly' (Durkin, 1985: 52). From such a perspective, the role of television is argued to be a source of information that a child could utilise in order to aid it's construction and understanding of the social world in which it lives. And so the extent to which they will utilise what they watch on television, will largely depend upon their current cognitive abilities. From this perspective, the child is actually seen to participate in the process of gender role acquisition, rather than being uncontrollably shaped by biological and social 'forces'. Television, therefore, would need to be considered within the framework of their cognitive abilities, and their place and involvement in society.

Of the three theories highlighted, one could argue that the cognitive developmental approach is perhaps the more realistic to consider when looking at a topic such as this, as

it would take into account a wider amount of variables, including both environmental and cognitive aspects. However, not all the studies that we will be evaluating, have accounted for such a large number of possibilities. Indeed, some assumptions have been made in compliance with the Social Learning Theory, whereby the attitude has been taken that a passively receptive child can be influenced and moulded by television's messages regarding gender stereotypes. However, this is widely accepted to be an over-generalised view of what actually goes on.

According to the developmental theory, children of approximately five or six years of age, have the ability to recognise gender as an invariant characteristic, even when changes are made superficially to hair and/or clothing.

Van Evra (1990) cites Ruble et al. (1981), who argue that children's interest in same sex models and gender appropriate behaviours increase owing to their sense of 'gender inevitability', rather than vice-versa. Their results indicate a link between the viewing of television and gender stereotyped behaviour, and between a child's cognitive developmental and the impact that gender-related television has. If this is true, then the cognitive level that the child is at, will influence how he or she will adopt gender roles, and the likelihood of the children adopting them as a result of watching television. Indeed, Evra argues, that children who lack understanding and information in an area, can be considered to be more likely to look to television in order to find that information, and furthermore, as a result, they will be more vulnerable to its portrayals. From this argument then, if television portrays biased or stereotyped gender roles, then that is what such a child will be likely to adopt.

Another aspect of television's influence that a fair amount

of research has been conducted on, is with reference to the amount of time that a child spends watching television. It seems reasonable to assume that the more television a child watches, the more likely they will be to believe and assimilate the gender stereotypes they see represented. This theory is known as the television cultivation effect, in so far as viewing is considered to be a contributory factor in the cultivation of common perspectives among what could otherwise be referred to as a relatively diverse audience.

Durkin (1985), cites a study conducted by McGhee and Frueh (1975) which, they argued, correlated higher amounts of television viewing with an increase in their acquisition of stereotyped gender roles. Their study consisted of forty boys and forty girls, sampled at four age levels: 4-6, 8, 10, 12 years of age. Their viewing time was measured, and then the children were administered the 'it' scale. This is where the child is given a drawing of a stick figure (it), before being asked to select what objects 'it' would prefer, from a host of pictures of objects which have associations with stereotyped sex roles. The aim of this test is the it provides a measure of the strength of the childrens' gender role preference.

Their results consisted of frequent television viewers gaining higher scores on the 'it' scale ; boys gained higher scores than girls, and it was found that the scores increased with age. They concluded, therefore, that high amounts of television viewing can be correlated with stronger traditional sex role development. They further argued that this would hold constant for boys and girls, increasing with age.

This study has been criticised for failing to clarify the causal relationship between the amounts of television watched, and its effects. Childrens' television viewing has

been found, in other studies, to increase with age, and McGhee and Frueh's study has also demonstrated that with age children tend to develop greater gender role beliefs. They do not attempt to explain this sufficiently enough to provide any conclusive evidence that television plays any significant role in this increase. The scale which they used has also been criticised, it was found to be biased in favour of the boys, and so therefore, this may well account for their higher scores.

Van Evra cites Beuf (1974), who also claimed to have found a relationship between the amount of viewing and the extent of gender stereotyping among children from three to six years. Yet children of such a young age have been found to be unreliable, and do not present a homogenous group.

According to Van Evra, Repetti (1984) found no relationship between the amount of viewing time, and the amount of gender stereotyping in children. What Repetti did find, however, was that the amount of viewing was found to be negatively associated with stereotyping. Indeed, the more educational television watched, the lower the gender stereotype score tended to be. This could, however, be reflective of the parents who encourage their children to watch educational television. That is to say that in practice, their behaviours may be less gender stereotyped.

Exposure to examples of stereotyped sex roles on television, cannot be taken as a measure of how the representation has influenced the viewer. Indeed, this is the manner of research which would be undertaken by Social Learning Theorists, but like them, it does not take into account what the information means to the audience, or the meaning they make of it, according to the context in which

they see it. As a result, one might argue that it is somewhat naïve to assume that the images children see on television are simply stored up in the child's mind without any measure of active interpretation played on the part of the child.

One aspect which might have some influence upon children is whether or not they identify with the characters they see on TV. If they do, to what extent are children influenced by them, and to what extent do they imitate?

Feilitzen and Linne (1975), as cited in Van Evra, put forward the idea that parents and other individuals who are close to the child will probably have more impact with regard to any aspect of socialisation than will the mass media, and indeed, television.

With reference to the identification theory, Feilitzen and Linne did note two different aspects: similarity and wishful identification. Similarity refers to when the child identifies with the familiar, whereas wishful refers to when the child identifies with the imaginative, or what they want something to be. Similarity identification was found to be more common in younger children, whereas wishful tended to occur more as the children's ages increased. The explanation that Feilitzen and Linne give to account for this, is that identification changes at around eight years of age, when children become interested in light adult programmes, and also more critical of children's.

Van Evra acknowledges these findings and notes that an individual could predict that if a child identifies with a character which he or she particularly admires, then they would be more likely to imitate the displayed behaviour. However, this gives no indication of the extent to which children imitate behaviour, or are influenced by the

characters they identify with.

If television does influence children's perceptions of gender roles, one may ask what the implications of this are and perhaps how it might 'affect' the child. Some research has focused upon the influence that television may have on occupational choice. Indeed, studies have indicated that television may be regarded by young people as a source of occupational information. For example, in a sample of teenagers between the age of thirteen and fifteen, Gunter reports that 89%-97% mentioned television as a source of information with regard to six given occupations (Gunter, 1995: 80). In his book, *Children and Television* (1990) Gunter cites research which was based upon children's aspirations for occupations when they become adults. He notes that boys tended to nominate occupations which are seen to be traditionally male; the police, army etc. This was also the case for girls. It was found that while the occupations suggested by both sexes were different, they both had a tendency to stereotype occupations. Gunter (1990) also cites Morgan who obtained information from a large sample of teenagers regarding their time spent viewing television, the degree to which they accepted gender stereotypes, and looked at their educational and occupational aspirations over a period of two years.

Morgan's results were found to support the view that television does cultivate gender stereotypes, although he found the effects to be mainly in girls. The girls who watched greater amounts of television were found to be more likely to hold the opinion that women are less ambitious than men, and find their happiness among children. It was also reported that for girls, there existed a relationship between the amount of television watched and their subsequent educational aspirations. The ones who watched more television were the ones who, after the two

year period, set their sights higher.

This is somewhat surprising given that the majority of women presented on television often tend to be seen in traditional women's occupations. It is possible that the heavy viewers, seeing the fairly limited roles of women, are more encouraged to want better for themselves. However, this is purely speculative, and more information needs to be available.

Gunter (1990), makes an interesting point in arguing that television sometimes over-represents professional women, which could perhaps also be an influencing factor in explaining this occurrence; but again, there is little evidence.

Morgan's results do indicate some manner of influence that television may have upon gender stereotyping, but they seem to suggest that while the girls opinions of women generally may conform to the standards set on television, it would seem that they reject this view and set themselves higher aspirations, rather than following the example set. Morgan's studies have been criticised as complex and difficult to explain, and the few correlations he provides, cannot be considered strong evidence on which to base conclusions regarding the effects of television.

It was mentioned earlier that conducting studies in an area such as this is problematic in so far as children are not socialised by television alone, and therefore, will not acquire any gender stereotypes solely from it. Furthermore, we cannot isolate television and say to what extent it does affect children's perspectives, as from the examples given, we can see that it is simply one variable in many. As such, the research conducted has shed light upon the possible effects that television may have upon children's concepts of

gender roles, and how this may occur. It has failed, however, to highlight any concrete causal influences which can be explained solely in reference to the television. In the light of this, therefore, we can be aware of how television *may* influence the development of children's understanding of, and identity within gender roles, but we have no evidence to conclude how, what, and why it does.

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