

An Analysis of Sex, Gender, and Sex/Gender Role Messages
Of Newsworthy Issues Presented in Media Coverage

In today's media, implications of social order furtively frame newsworthy issues in accordance with naturalized gender identities and the accompanying sex/gender roles. Apparent public, as well as disguised, messages regarding sex/gender roles are conveyed by television programs' topics and themes. Moreover, the program design itself provides observable and concealed evaluations of power, worth, value, and importance in relation culture, sex, and gender through both verbal and nonverbal communications.

The coverage provided by *NewsChannel 11* entailed several topics. The first topic of discussion was centered on a missing Petersburg teacher. The next issue of focus was the recent death of a West Nile virus victim followed by a review of the symptoms and prevention methods. In the area crime report, it was revealed that a Lubbock preacher, 46, was found stabbed to death in his home. A police cruiser underwent open fire by three Lubbock residents, all of which have been arrested. Also reported were a drive-by shooting and DWI murder case. Another topic of interest was the history of the South Plains Fair. A featured speaker was well-known general manager Herbert Higgs, Jr., who told of the fair's origin and background. The Health Wise portion of the broadcast addressed Medicare costs and benefits among senior citizens. A featured interviewee was Dalmer Hoskins, a representative of the American Association of Retired Persons. Also within this portion was information regarding Pink Sunday, an event that will unite breast cancer awareness and the church. Ashley Hamm, the executive director of the Susan G. Komen Foundation, was featured to provide general awareness information.

The first featured guest of the sports edition was Texas Tech football head coach, Mike Leach, who made comments and predictions about the Red Raiders season. Next, a junior from Cooper I.S.D. was Carlyle Stokes, the End Zone's Player of the Week. His coach, John Windham, played a supporting role to the athlete, as he complimented the athletic ability and pride of the player. The local weather was presented by chief meteorologist John Robison, and the final topic covered in

this nightly edition was the “Consider This” segment. Dan Jackson, vice president and general manager, introduced featured guest Emma Holmes, an infant suffering from diabetes.

The social status’ for the featured persons discussed in topics including the teacher abduction, West Nile virus, sports edition, “Consider This”, and the history of the South Plains Fair can be viewed as middle class and relevant to the issues at hand. In the settings of these topics, middle class was the established social standing. For the issue concerning the area crime report, the featured persons (the criminals) fall into the lower class of social status, obviously predictive of the nature of the theme.

There were several covert sex/gender role messages that were implied throughout the news segment. During the sports edition, coverage included Texas Tech football, tennis, Texas Tech baseball, high school football, and cheerleading. The latter topic was the only issue discussed that involved participation by both women and men. However, the piece lasted all of 15seconds, with no video footage whatsoever. The other sections (which are male exclusive) were at least 1 minute in length and all included visual coverage. The male athletes were provided nicknames, such as the “next great American”, tennis player Sam Query, and baseball stud “big” Matt Smith.

There were also overt sex/gender role messages sent during the segments. The very obvious was seen during Ben Lawson’s report of the historic South Plains fair. He described the early fair days as a time when “the farmers argued over who had the biggest produce, and the women [tended] to the homemade recipes and the homemade remedies” (Lawson, 2006). Blatantly, he painted a picture of what agricultural life and society was like, and how it differed for women and men in West Texas years ago.

The program design overtly and covertly demonstrated the relational process of power, worth, value, and importance. Throughout the program, male reporters were assigned to topics involving criminal activity, physical action, historical and scientific issues. Abner Euresti covered

the local murder cases and drive-by shootings, while Ben Lawson reported on the early days in the panhandle of Texas. Lawson openly revealed the importance of the fair's history as based on the male dominated field of agriculture. Pete Christy provided all coverage on athletic events, and Dan Jackson detailed the horridness of diabetes. The female reporters, however, were assigned to topics which frequently exposed the victimization, weaknesses, and vulnerability of women. The broadcast sent an underlying message suggesting that men are more powerful when it comes to media positions. There were six male reporters as opposed to two females. Also evident was the lack of reciprocal respect between the reporters. Noticeable on several occasions, when McCay spoke to her colleagues, she and her views were devalued as her male co-anchors avoided eye contact and shuffled through their notes.

There were instances of both verbal and nonverbal communications which contained sex/gender messages. Relevant once again, the comparison of male versus female roles during the Great Depression and establishment of the fair exemplifies a verbal message. Nonverbal communication was present in the footage of a local house fire. The Lubbock Fire Department was filmed exhausting the fire; all members shown were male. Not a single female firefighter was present or mentioned.

One relationship between the media coverage and Dr. Krefting's lecture is encompassed in the idea that prevailing views of women are naturalized. As Lawson spoke of the "homemaker" role of women as opposed to the agricultural role of men, he shaped gender identity norms as a reference of what it was like to be a woman or man years ago. He spoke of the gender distinctions as if it were only natural, and to him humorous, to place women and men in their corresponding social positions.

The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer strongly conveyed the distinctions between women and men in regards to political power, science, and technology. The segment began with an overview of the state of emergency in Thailand. Martial law had been declared, resulting in a suspension of the

constitution, as a coup seized control of Bangkok. Richard Doner (Emory University) and Catharin Dalpino (Georgetown University) were featured and discussed the present situations. Also featured were Sondhi, the military leader in Thailand and Thaksin, the prime minister. The two debaters were representative of worldly knowledge and reveal a high social standing. Likewise, the two mentioned world leaders were representative of social power. The next topic presented covered two senators viewpoints and discussion on the U.N. Assembly address delivered by President Bush. Senator Joe Biden and Senator Richard Lugar were featured and expressed their outlooks concerning the foreign relations situations at hand. They were representatives of high class and political power, and the messages they suggested reveal these status levels clearly.

Following aired a segment on women and science, which revealed some of the biases facing women that prevent the advancement in areas of science and engineering. The featured speaker was Donna Shalala, President of the University of Miami. She addressed firmly the biases that are encountered each day by women pursuing careers in university settings. Dr. Shalala's high status was relative to that of the topic of discussion; the very demeaning and discriminating experiences she discussed, she had herself overcome. The final topic of discussion introduced the advancements in technology of prosthetics development. Featured interviewees include Sarah Reininson, Laura Brumund and Captain David Rozelle, all amputees, as well as Peter Harsch and Maurice Mulligan, both active in the development of new and improved artificial limbs. The amputees were seen in a lower social light, as they were portrayed as victims and disadvantaged in today's society. Social status was evident through the interviews with Harsch and Mulligan, as they were undoubtedly positively regarded for their contributions to scientific development. Supporting roles were played by disabled army veterans and children.

Subtle and not so subtle messages related to sex/gender roles were presented throughout the news segment. It was noticeable during Bush's address to the U.N. Assembly the fact that there are very few women in this world who hold leadership positions. Of all the nations shown, the world

leaders were men, with a few women in supporting positions. The females presented in the women and science segment (that in fact represent the strength and stamina of the disabled) were portrayed as victimized and weak. The males who endured the same physical disabilities were openly viewed as dominating and successful in coping with their situations.

Obvious evaluations of power and worth that are conveyed by program design were consistently present throughout the segment. Valuable knowledge and prestige were reflected by the chosen debating senators, both politically powerful men. The “scientific” points of prosthetics technology were presented by men. Disguised importance was evident in the way women who live daily with disabilities were portrayed; they were construed as sufferers and delicate beings. The design of this program is one in which male dominance was secretly expressed through the power men in politics and science hold.

Verbal communications that imply sex/gender messages were clearly used by Dr. Shalala in regards to women and careers. She openly addressed the climate of college departments and tenure tracks, unveiling through discussion the inadvertent discrimination women face in pursuing educational and career goals. She also vocally expressed the fact that desire and ability for science is present in women, and universities should make an effort not to leave out talent on the basis of gender. Nonverbal communications containing sex/gender messages were present as well. Male amputees were portrayed as better, stronger, and faster in acquiring mobility skills than were women amputees. Furthermore, it was clear that male war veterans receive abundant government assistance for artificial limbs; whereas females are being denied insurance coverage for the appendages, and therefore go without or face large amounts of debt.

As Dr. Krefling noted, society is repeatedly constraining power positions that are available to women. Even though competence is demonstrated, socially, historically, and culturally shaped gender roles prevail, thus restricting women to the “accepted” positions that are considered the norm. The knowledge of women is taken for granted and beliefs about gender are socially framed.

In the episode of Star Trek: The Next Generation, the passengers of the USS Enterprise faced moral and philosophical issues as they encountered two opposing galaxy groups. One important theme was that of social status itself. The episode featured the Brachians, who are members of an upper class, and the Onarians, who are members of the lower class. Another important theme was the obvious struggle between ethics and idealistic regulations, apparent in the disagreement between the female physician and the captain of the ship. Both of these characters are featured roles, and both occupy high status positions on the ship.

Disguised messages regarding men's and women's roles in society were present in the episode. All captains of the ship were male, as they were the dominant beings. A covert message was transmitted in the argument between the physician and the captain. Although the woman doctor provided facts, suggested reliable treatment options, and demonstrated true knowledge about the plague, or withdrawal, from which the Onarians suffered, the captain refused to support her propositions. He was unwilling to violate the intergalactic regulations set forth, even though such a violation would have been beneficial in the matter.

The program design framed the evaluations of power, value, and importance. Among the pilots of the ship, one was female. She was valued highly enough that her male co-pilots respected her opinions and suggestions in regards to her occupational position. Also influential, the female physician was representative of scientific knowledge. Overall, the program design lacked equality in its use of male and female characters. Women were clearly outnumbered and for the most part played supportive roles.

Verbal communications expressing gender messages excluded the use of sexist language. Nonverbal communications containing sex/gender messages were revealed by the female Brachian in the episode. She was presented as very personable, intelligent, outspoken, and confident. Her attire exposed a substantial portion of her waist, thus imposing ideas of feminine physical attraction.

In support of a point presented in Dr. Krefting's lecture, this episode incorporated questions of competence. As the competence of the female medical officer was demonstrated through her exemplary qualifications and profound knowledge base, her solution suggestions were regarded as less effective compared to those of the captain.

Consistent among each television segment was the infliction of a patriarchal hierarchy. In the news casts, it was obvious that men hold the most power in education, economics, and politics. Also evident during the prosthetic technology segment was the fact that men do have access to more resources in society. Male war veterans receive government support for artificial limbs, while women fight just to receive insurance coverage as financial aid. There was not equal potential for individual development or individual expression politically, socially, or interpersonally. In today's society, political power and prestige are of utmost importance, and are reserved for men. Such is evident among governmental debates, positions in political office, foreign relations, science, technology, and in university settings. The importance of newsworthy issues was directly related to sex/gender roles, evident through male dominated information segments. In moments where women are featured, themes involving victimization, oppression, and inferiority emerge. The male dominated focus of newsworthy events clearly benefits.

References

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