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Power and the Social Order: Sex Role Stereotyping in Children's Television

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The field of political science has extended its definition of politics to encompass, among other things, processes of childhood socialization and cultural messages about power. Literature in the field of political socialization is currently investigating the processes through which attitudes and beliefs are acquired in order to understand the motivational bases for political behaviors. Writers from other discourses are being recognized by political scientists today for their contributions to this field of study. Psychoanalytic theories, feminism, and studies of power as they relate to the creation and meaning of language, have all emerged as useful tools. As assessment of their usefulness may enhance all academic discourse and our ability to comprehend and intervene in the 'real world' of power relations.

The aim of this study is to offer an assessment of the common themes in feminist, Lacanian psychoanalytic and deconstructionist theory. It will then discuss the degree to which these three discourses allow us to grasp the implications of the political socialization which occurs through television programming directed primarily at children. There are points of

commonality and discordance between these approaches. My aim will not be to make the argument that one approach is best, nor to arrive at a final synthesis. Rather, I construe these theoretical approaches as different lenses through which we can apprehend and evaluate the messages promoted by this medium. Each offers its own clarifying vision and each has its points of blindness as well. However, a critical interaction or dialogue between these various approaches seems to offer the best possible understanding of the politics of children's television.

This research is by no means an exhaustive study of children's television. It does not discuss all the messages found within children's programming, e.g., violence, racism, greed or any of the others. This study will simply address the issue of sex-role stereotyping as it relates to power in society. It will assert that television programming for children on the major networks on Saturday mornings helps children to construct an image of feminity and masculinity which supports the current power structure. I will relate my observations of these processes to literature which addresses the construction of power relationships in society.

The first section will discuss the structuralism of Lacan. It will focus primarily on the development of the individual and his entry into the symbolic social structure through language. In this section I hope

to point out that Lacan's notion of the symbolic social order and the power relationships it establishes in society are critical to our understanding of sex-role development. However, I will argue that Lacan's emphasis on the patriarchal family in gender development is stilted. It represents one epoch in history rather than being the timeless truth Lacan purports it to be.

The second section of the paper will discuss the deconstructionist theory in light of Lacan's symbolic social order. It will describe the ways in which signifiers (words) construct reality as part of a field and shifting field of relations. Where Lacan emphasizes the static, timeless and lawlike aspects of our cultural code, deconstruction emphasizes movement and the transformation of signifying relations or 'meaning'. Thus, there is the possibility for change in deconstruction that is absent in Lacan. However, this section will also focus on the issue of the ability of the individual to effect change in established representations, particularly those related to gender classification and power.

The third section of the paper will attempt to draw in the commonalities in the latter two discourses (Lacanian psychoanalytic and deconstruction). Additionally, it will provide an overview of the method of

feminist inquiry and its implications for understanding power. Lastly, this section will establish the framework by which we are able to evaluate the messages given to children and use it to understand the contributuion of these words and images in the creation and maintenance of the 'self' of the child and the structure of society.

As stated above, the focus of this paper is on the process of analysis. It does not call for a synthesis or creation of a new theory. Each of these theories provide us a vehicle for conceptualizing children's Saturday morning television programming on network television as one signifying practice through which gender is constructed as part of a field of asymmetrical power relationships.

The Psychoanalytic Approach of Jacques Lacan

Lacanian psychoanalytic theory has important implications for understanding the phenomenon of political socializaion. Lacan is a modern day interpretation of Freud. As a structuralist influenced by Ferdinand de Saussure and others, Lacan tells us that the self is created within and through language as part of a process including repression, alienation, and reflection of the unconscious. To become a member of society, the child

must take up a position in language.   As a structuralist, Lacan emphasizes

how the laws or code of language govern the individual, an influence

larger than that which was perceived by Freud. He notes the primary

importance of language as a determinant of one's place in society and as a

representative of the social order. For Lacan, language serves as the

vehicle for the development of the 'self' in the symbolic order. "I" is a

symbol employed by the conscious self to denote a differentiation between

self and other, or between self and the world. Lacan notes that once man

is represented on a signifying chain, he is forever in search of his

alienated self.   In other words, we accept as part of ourselves the role

assignment that society gives us. Yet according to Lacan we are forever

seeking deeper understanding of it, of ourselves in this social ordering, for

somewhere in the process of accepting our place in the social order , we

alienated our 'true' selves. Man, then, is inserted into a previously

constructed social order. He learns the codes and signifiers of this order

and through it, develops his place within it.

There are three stages in the process of acquisition of

selfhood. Progression along the path ot becoming an "I", however, proceeds

along a specific path. The first is that of pre-Oedipal bonding with the

mother. The child is literally one with the mother, and is completely in

its own world comprised of only the child and the mother. In the child's perception, there is confusion; there is no sense of where the mother ends and the child begins. In this phase, the child feels himself to be fused with the mother.

The second phase of Lacan's developmental process is the Imaginary phase. In this phase, the child is developing a sense of itself as different and separate from the mother. There is a preconscious sense of self; the child is aware he is separate but there is no hook for identity outside of the family. He seeks reunificaion with the mother. Because he is aware of the separateness of himself and seeks wholeness again by reunification with the mother, the child becomes dependent on her opinions of him. There is a dyadic mirroring process which takes place. The child sees himself only as mirrored back from the mother. Because reunification with the mother is the wish of the child, Lacan says that the child sees himself only in the mirrored images projected by the other's desire. This mirrored image goes on to become a crucial part of the child's personality as it takes on the fantasy or aspirational perspective when the child has graduated to the symbolic order.

"The ego is that which opposes itself most surely to the
truth of the being. The ego concentrates in it all the person's

ideals, all the person wants to be or thinks himself to be. The
ego is the other of our self, assimilated and stuck on to the
self, rather like an inadequate mold.

"The subject gradually fashions himself and lives
himself in accordance with his phantasy and his dreams, he
conceals himself from himself and from others."[1]

Thus, Lacan uses the Oedipal Complex to describe the

emergence of self and subsequent growth of the symbolic order. As he

progresses through the Oedipal phase the child actually desires the mother

and wishes to be her object of desire. However, the presence of the social

order makes itself felt here. The father, who prohibits the reunification

of the mother and child because of incest taboos, comes to represent the

Law for the child. It is the Law and the power of the Law which the child

comes to associate with the father, and with power.

Lacan's describes the third and final phase as entrance into the

symbolic, the wider field of culture and society. In this phase, the child

comes to take up his place in society through placement in the family. He

has sublimated his desire for his mother to a desire for power, provided

that there has been a successful resolution of the castration complex in

the Oedipal phase. Since it was the power of the father that commanded

the sublimation of his desire for his mother, power is then associated

with the father. More specifically, the child associates maleness with

power. The power of the father derives from his apparent possession of

the 'phallus', and the phallus becomes for the child the symbol of power

and plentitude. For Lacan, the

> "resolution of the Oedipus liberates the subject by giving him a
> name, a place in the family constellation, an original signifier
> of self and subjectivity. It promotes him in his realization of
> self through participation in the world of culture, language and
> civilization."[2]

Lacan denies claims that the phallus in the Oedipal metaphor is

actually the penis. He emphatically states that in fact the phallus is just a

term employed as analogous to power, the object of desire. Surrounded by

fantasies, the phallus taks on sexual connotations, but Lacan maintains

that these connotations are just a subsequent overlay added on by the

symbolism of the social order.

In the symbolic order, the child is privy to the codes of society.

It is through language and his understanding of the codes of the symbolic

order that the child is able to function in the adult world. Yet he still

retains remnants of the imaginary phase, where he attempts to mirror back

to society what he thinks society wants to see. It also requires that others

mirror back to him a certain image so that he can see himself as whole.

But wholeness in Lacanian theory is always an illusion that actually

conceals the splitting and repression necessary for accession to the

symbolic order. Language, for Lacan, both allows the individual the

symbolism needed to give form to his 'self' while simultaneously voicing

the restrictions of the social order. The boy will reject from himself those

things which are not 'male'--- those not recognized as socially acceptable

for men. He loses part of his humanness; he sublimates emotion and seeks

power instead. He then spends much of his search of self in attempt to

reuinte the alienated self to himself. Lacan feels that "the subject fades

behind a chain of signifiers."[3]

Others Debate Lacan

One of the major criticisms of Lacanian theory is put forth by

Michael Ryan. He questions the nature of the triad which causes the

development of the entry into the symbolic order. He feels it is a classic

representation of the bourgeois family. It is patriarchal; it is espousing a

specific morality; it is representative of a certain (capitalistic) society.

As such, it does not speak to the development of the imaginary nor

symbolic order as social conditions change. It does not allow for individual

action in the political sphere (other than as a substitution for the loss of

his desired object in his early life), nor does Lacan account for group

action. There is no societal pressure to change as there is in Marxian

theory. In Marx's theory, people are not only alienated from themselves, but

from each other as well. Instead, Lacanian theory places man within a

system that offers no hope for change. Man is in constant search for the

ultimate phallus

Ryan notes the obvious deletion of women from Lacanian theory.

Ryan correlates the lack of recognition of women to to lack of support for

other splinter groups within society.

> "Woman, then is a proletarian within a phallocracy; she is
> defined by her lack of ownership, yet her assistance as the
> disowned is required to substantiate male ownership."[4]

Marxist theorists could point to Lacanian theory as a real example of how

the dominant ruling class create truths which support their right to rule.

Lacan depicts women as the ones who make men seekers of power, but she

herself only stands on the periphery of power. She is only the object of

men's desire, and the intervention of the father to ward off the child's

advances are the only thing that keep children from reuniting with the

mother. Thus, the woman does not even have power enough to control

herself; in Lacanian theory, it is only the Name of the Father which pushes

the child to sublimate his wishes. Men then seek the power while women

don't; women who do seek the phallus are tolerated but only because it is

somehow an ascension in role. Men who do not seek the phallus, implies

Lacan, did not have a successful resolution of the Oedipal complex.

Although Ryan's criticism of Lacan may appear strident, he does

point to some inadequacies in Lacanian theory. Because Lacan does not

address himself to women or the development of the female child in his

theory, one is left questioning whether females are just unimportant or are

they never part of the symbolic order. Yet despite his obvious omission of

women from his theory, Juliet Mitchell applauds Lacan's philosophy for the

introduction of the concept of the self as developing through one's

sexuality. Since sexuality is defined by society, Mitchell feels that Lacan's

concept of the symbolic social order has important implications for general

political theory and specifically feminist theory.

> "The human animal is born into language and it is within the
> terms of language that the human subject is constructed.
> Language does not arise from within the individual, it is always
> out there in the world outside, lying in wait for the neonate.
> Language always belongs to another person. The human subject
> is created from a general law that comes to it from outside
> itself and through the speech of other people, and through this
> speech in its turn must relate to the general law."[5]

It seems that neither Ryan nor Mitchell deny Lacan's declaration

of a symbolic order to which the subject must become indoctrinated before

becoming a member of the larger society. In fact, Mitchell applauds this as

a crucial element in appraising society for feminist literature. They must

first acknowledge the presence of a symbolic order which imposes limits

on individuals within society by its very definitions of individuality. She

argues that once feminists realize that there is a symbolic order, once they

acknowledge that the restrictions they feel are based both within language

and within the person, only then can feminists even attempt to change the

social order. In other words, she feel that it is essential to know where to

attack the limitations in order to really change things.

Ryan agrees that there is a symbolic social order. He argues

that Lacan offers his definition of it as a timeless truth. Ryan feels that

the deletion of women from the power structure contributes to the

maintenance of the symbolic structure. Thus, in order to change the social

order, he feels it is necessary to redefine entry into it and definitions

within it.

Television is a source which both mirrors current images of

masculinity and feminity, and thus recreates them in children. Television

helps facilitate the entry of children into the symbolic social order by

giving them role definitions which they can then mirror, as well as offering

them fantasy to contribute to the Imaginary phase. However, the images

presented of male and female roles on TV reflect roles prevalent in the

1950's. Since sex-roles have changed since that era, consistent protrayals

of these images creates confusion and ambiguity in the minds of both

children and adults.

In light of this, Simone de Beauvoir writes,

"Representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work
of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which
they confuse with absolute truth."[6]

Lacan apparently could not see that the phallus became synonomous with

power because in today's world, the men have the power. However, as

transitions occur, as women achieve more equality, those symbolic

representations will have to change.

Deconstruction

Deconstructionists pick up the theme of language and its

influence on the symbolic ordering of society. As a discourse, they attempt

to both define the origins of the valuation of language and offer ways in

which change might be enacted in order to create a society less

hierarchically arranged. Ferdinand de Saussure and the deconstructionists

introduce the arbitrariness of the components of language, leading us to

recognize that it lacks a universal truth. In deconstructionist theory,

meaning conveyed by languae is relational, arbitrary and shifting. The

meanings and values implied by the concepts are all assigned by the group

tha possesses the power to make them stick. Thus, the male dominated

language reflects the world where the seat of power rested with the males.

They point to the symbolic order of Lacan to note its dependence on the

continued tie between signifier and signified. They note that objectivity

and truth are a myth; such concepts as truth are culturally determined and

language just reflects those cultural determinations.

> "Languages do not simply name existing categories; they
> articulate their own....A language does not simply assign
> arbitrary names to a set of independenly existing concepts. It
> sets up an arbitrary relation between signifiers of its own
> choosing on the other."[7]

In this statement by Saussure, the shift away from the notion

that language is created outside a value system is emphasized. He seems

to support the Lacanian notion that a symbolic order is in place which

allows certain definitions within a culture and disallows others. Changes

in language proceed constantly, but the changes which are maintained in our

language are those which the dominant class accepts and employs. Growth

of language -- changes in meanings, creation of new words or phrases --

occurs in almost a Darwinian mechanism. That is, changes are arbitrary,

but the ones that survive are the most important. But what survives in a

language is determined by the usage of the changes by those in power and

helps to create through language and in language the "will to power."[8]

> "Any purposefulness in biological evolution Darwin saw, does
> not lie in changes themselves, but wholly in the process of
> natural selection, which is in a sense, a synchronous process.
> New species develop from accidental or random mutation which
> themselves have no direction or purpose. But some mutants
> fare better than others in the ecological sphere of a particular
> moment."[9]

So it is with language. The changes that occur are random. But the changes

that are maintained are those which best serve the system. Feminist

studies have noted how words about female roles in society change over

time to give them less import than a man's role, i.e., a governor is a

supreme ruler of a state of country, but a governess is currently

synonomous with a nanny although it was once considered the female

equivalent of a governor.

Thus, we begin to note the effect society has in the creation of

a language and the role language has on the moulding of an individual.

Although signs are arbitrary, the relationship between the sign and the

signified creates in the minds of those who employ it certain relationships.

These relationships are reinforced the longer they survive. All this occurs

without the individual or the community as a whole being truly aware of it.

Jacques Derrida picks up Saussure's theme and elaborates on

them in the deconstructionist school of thought. He agrees that the social

order determines which definitions are important and accepted. But he

takes Saussure's theory one step further and emphasizes the importance of

clearing away the definitions, of subverting the conceptual hierarchies. In

doing this, Derrida acknowledges the relationships between issues of

power, dominance and meaning. Derrida argues that any attempt to change

the symbolic order must first take down the apparent tie between the

symbol and its referent. In other words, although Lacan's symbolic order

reflects an historical epoch which oppresses the female gender,

deconstructing the relationships between the signified and the signifiers

will create a different symbolic order. By uncovering the hidden agenda in

language, we can then begin to change the symbolic order.

Deconstructionists (or post-structuralists) see language as offering the

possibility for a kind of participatory democracy where a change in

meaning could give meaning to marginal voices within language and

society.

The deconstructionists, however, charge that Lacan's theory is

largely phallogocentric. Since the deconstructionists feel first that the

assignment of meaning to words and language is based on fiction, they feel

that the fiction which allows for the creation of phallogocentrism stems

from a male power base. Lacan's employment of the phallus gives value and power to the male-based power symbolic structure. Gender bias then becomes injected into the language and the language, word and images come to value those things identified as male. While the deconstrctionists would not accuse Lacan of constructing the system of male power which asserts and reasserts its supremacy through even subliminal suggestions in our language, they are quick to point out that Lacan was simply caught in the trap of the symbolic order he so aptly described. So changing the definitions of the symbolic order will change the symbolic order and thus change society.

However, this is more easily said than done. If the dominant class defines the world so that their meanings 'stick' , how will the oppressed class attain the leverage to make new meanings adhere? Yet they do not address the depoliticizing effect that would occur if all meaning were accepted as a fiction. Additionally, the prescription to give up the authoritative voice is a far more radical and threatening step for white men than for women and the other marginal voices which seek to establish an authoritative voice as a means to acquire more power within society. Language is both the symbolic structure and a part of the individual. Thus, it has a component of internalization which prevents it

from being deconstructed easily. Women and other marginal voices have

not got the authority to change meaning within language, nor do they

necessarily recognize the degree to which it affects their status.

> "The claim is that because deconstruction is never concerned
> only with signified content but especially with the conditions
> and assumptions of discourse, with frameworks of enquiry, it
> engages the institutional structures governing our practices,
> competencies, and performances. The questioning of these
> structures, whatever its consequences-- and they have not
> proven to be easy to calculate-- can be seen as a politicizing of
> what might otherwise be thought a neutral framework.
> Question of institutional force and structure prove to be
> involved in the problems deconstruction addresses."[10]

Ultimately, deconstruction implies that we can take apart the

definitions that the symbolic order has imposed. Yet it does not address

the problem that the defintions are part of the individuals who wish to

deconstruct the power structure and as such are difficult to uncover. Once

identified, the deconstructive process would be inhibited by those whom it

benefitted. And finally, once deconstructed, the culture is faced with the

enormity of the task of creating new meanings, coming up with new myths.

This might give rise to another hierarchical symbolic order.

However, the concept that the language is the creator of power

in society is one of special import to the feminists. Deconstruction can be

viewed as a liberating force. It can move people from their value-laden

languages and assumptions. It can be seen as Nietzschean; once moved from

an unconscious value system that imposes itself in everything we do and

say daily, we can construct a better model. It is this aspect of

deconstruction that feminist writers use to support their examination of

purveyors of language like television. The words and images presented in

children's television programming help to reinforce the symbolic order

present in language and society. Feminists attack the television depiction

of women as cardboard characterizations both as a poor definition of

femininity, and as a subliminal creator of the power base within society.

Feminism

Feminism is a field of study which encompasses many

subsections, but whose main focus is the omission of whole segments of

society from the operational bases. It questions the hierarchical

arrangement of society. Although it takes different avenues, feminist

discourse has long attempted to identify instances of the presence of the

symbolic order. Much of feminist discourse underscores the concept that

the symbolic order is a fiction which makes itself real. For this reason

consciousness raising, or analytical investigation becomes the primary

vehicle through which much of feminist discourse illuminates the

hierarchical structure of the symbolic order.

> "Implicit in feminist theory is a parallel argument; the
> molding, direction, and expression of sexuality organizes
> society into two sexes--women and men-- which division
> underlies the totality of social relations. Sexuality is that
> social process which creates, organizes, expresses and directs
> desire, creating the social beings we know as women and men,
> as their relations create society. As work is to Marxism,
> sexuality to feminism is socially constructed yet constructing,
> universal as activity yet historically specific, jointly
> comprised of matter and mind. As the organized expropriation
> of the work of some for the benefit of others defines a
> class--workers--the organized expropriation of the sexuality
> of some for the use of others defines the sex, woman.
> Heterosexuality is its structure, gender and family its
> congealed forms, sex roles its qualities generalized to social
> persona, reproduction a consequence, and control its issue."[11]

Thus, the focus of feminism may take superficially different tracts, but

the basic, underlying theme of most feminist discourse is aimed at

discovering through consciousness raising the means and forms of the

hierarchical arrangement of society.

Catherine MacKinnon is one such feminist theorist who attempts

to uncover the symbolic order which imposes its meanings onto us, creating

a separate being known as woman.   She argues that the primary vehicle for

feminist discourse therefore must be consciousness raising as a collective

methodology. MacKinnon feels that the identification of the ways that

society has structured the reality of the disenfranchised will allow us to

both deconstruct the meanings inherent in the language as well as avoid the

creation of a symbolic order which is so blatantly set against one cohort of

people. It is here that the "personal becomes political"[12]. By examining

the experience of women in their own words, as they relate their own

experiences, MacKinnon feels that many will begin to grasp the real effect

of the fiction of the symbolic order. The symbolic order can impose very

real situations of sexual oppression, but without consciousness raising,

without exploration of those oppressive situations, little can be done to

deconstruct that symbolic order.

> "Consciousness raising...inquires into an intrinsically social
> situation, introduces a mixture of thought and materiality
> which is women's sexuality in the most generic sense. It
> approaches its world through a process that shares its
> determination: women's consciousness not as individual or
> subjective ideas, but as a collective social being. This method
> stands inside its own determinations in order to uncover them,
> just as it criticizes them in order to value them on its own
> terms-- in order to *have* its own terms at all. Feminism turns
> theory itself-- the pursuit of a true analysis of social life--
> into the pursuit of consciousness and turns the analysis of
> inequality into a critical embrace of its own determinants. The
> pursuit of consciousness becomes a form of political
> practice."[13]

The assertion here is that not only is consciousness raising

about gender bias helpful to the individual in recognizing her placement

within the system, but it succeeds in causing political change. Not only do

women gain an understanding of gender relations when they learn about

comparable pay issues, but they then begin to grasp the implications of and

the extent to which society is based on gender. They begin to look for it in

other situations, in other places. Then, according to MacKinnon, the

deconstruction can begin to take place. Women begin to apprehend the

elusive realities of issues created when women's sexuality is male defined.

They can then begin to grasp the implications of their internalization of

these distorted definitions. Consciousness raising then becomes a means

of collectively uncovering their own interpretations of their experiences,

and begins to create a more authentic description of their lives. By

defining oneself from the basis of one's own experience, one can begin to

gain perspective and this in turn becomes an act of empowerment.

One of the major problems in MacKinnon's argument lies in the

assumption that women can be shown to recognize the oppression of

society. Class stratifications create different experiences for women.

Additionally, she is relying on the oppressed to not only see their

oppression but then to raise themselves out of it. Bertell Ollman notes:
"People acquire most of their personal and class
characteristics in childhood. It is the conditions operating
then, transmitted primarily by the family which makes them
what they are at least as regards basic responses, and in most
cases, what they are will vary little over their lives. Thus,
even where the conditions people have been brought up in

change by the time they reach maturity, their characters will
still relfect the situations which passed it on."[14]

Ollman suggests here that if women are brought up as members of the

symbolic structure which relegated them to unimportant status,

consciousness raising may be extremely difficult. There may be certain

barriers which must be unlearned in order to achieve desired effects with

consciousnes raising.

For this reason, it is important that we evaluate the messages

we impart to children regarding sex-role and power relationships in

society. Although the consciousness raising of MacKinnon allows one to

evaluate television for such subliminal messages, it would be even better

not to impart them in the first place. If children were not indoctrinated

into a symbolic order based on gender assignment of power and prestige,

we would need less consciousness raising in the future, hopefully.

Analysis of Children's Television Programming

This section of the paper is designed to note the presence of

gender stereotyping in children's programming network channels, as seen in

Saturday morning cartoons. It will then discuss how such gender

classifications both construct and reinforce definitions of masculinity and

femininity, while pre-empting attempts to change it. The paper will then

relate the presence of such stereotyping in terms of political socialization

theory. The political socialzation that occurs in childhood must be closely

evaluated if we are interested in creating lasting change on any level in

society. Lastly, I will discuss ways to enact change in television

programming in order to decrease sex role stereotyping.

Thus, while community action groups analyze the content of

children's television for specific themes like violence and improper

marketing techniques, feminists must redirect the studies to analyze the

programming for larger, more pervasive issues like power and its role in

the hierarchical symbolic order. What constitutes masculinity and

femininity. How those roles are defined in the language and images

presented to children through television are of real concern to those

interested in creating a political system devoid of hierarchical ordering.

While television as a medium cannot single handedly create sex-

role steroetyping in any of us, it has a strong and early influence. In this

section of the paper, I will report an empirical study of Saturday morning

cartoons, critically analyzing network programming for children, looking

specifically at the numbers of male and female characters and their role

definitions based within the programs and the advertisements. This is

not an exhaustive study, nevertheless, it provides results important for the debate of sex-role development and the political challenge to it.

Of course, there are many factors influencing children's acquisition of sex-role classification. The parent's roles within the household have an enormous influence. Children's literature is another important source. Long before a child is able to read, however, s/he is able to classify. Television programming, because it can command the attention of even the very young child is worthy of careful attention. Television programming, as well as family, friends, schools and books, help the child construct 'reality'. It helps the child classify what is right, (that with which s/he is most familiar) and that which is less than right, (the less familiar). Since our definitions of the world helps us ascribe meaning and values to our lives, it is imperative that we look at children's television to understand role definition for women. Marcuse, in One Dimensional Man noted that our wants, our percieved needs, our daily lives are controlled by our place in the capitalistic society. If women's place is invisible or relegated to the non-essential, non-productive place of the females as portrayed in today's children's T.V. programming, how can women then grow up to guiltlessly demand and exact equality from the larger society?

For the initial part of the study, I viewed 24 hours of Saturday morning cartoons. With the use of three VCR's, I taped the three major networks (ABC, CBS, and NBC), from 8:00 a.m. to 12:00 noon on two Saturdays in April, 1988. I analyzed the programs for the following content:

a. numbers of females: males

b. roles of each

c. type of show

d. subject matter of the shows

e. advertisements during the shows-- analyzed for all the above

f. presence and roles of adults during shows/ ads

Findings

In the twenty four hours of programming, there was a total of thirty six shows with 107 main characters. I did not count the characters more than once. If the program was an hour long, and thus comprised of four segments, the main characters were still only listed once.

Of the total, there were 29 female characters, (27%) and 78 male characters (73%). This number is in keeping with findings done for

prime time television programming. Chaneling Children, by Betty Miles,

indicates that

> " 61% of major characters in all shows analyzed are male, but
> in adventure shows males are 85% of the major characters. In
> situation comedy shows, males represent 55% of major
> characters."[15]

While analyses of adult programming are able to list the

occupations of the people within the shows, in children's cartoons this is

almost impossible. In most cases, the shows were about children or

animals. Pound Puppies, Little Clown of Happy Town, The Muppett Babies,

The Flintstone Kids, Popeye and Son, and Dennis The Menace were all

animated shows with some familiar basis. Usually the characters were

portraying the 'normal' childhood experience. The Main characters were

children interacting with each other and with their environment. Often

their themes were the adaptation of other stories or nursery tales. The

Muppett Babies, which airs for an hour on Saturday mornings and has four

15 minute segments, most often employed this technique. Thus, there was

a Muppett Babies interpretation of Alice in Wonderland, The Lone Ranger,

The Wizard of Oz and Little Red Riding Hood, to name a few. As such, they

also reinforced the sexism within those stories, in addition to giving them

a timeless quality to the story which had been adapted.

Another theme of these shows was an effort to familiarize children with unfamiliar experiences. Just in the twenty-four hours of programming that I viewed, there were four segments on 'going to the dentist for the first time' (again, Muppett Babies, Dennis the Menace, the Flintstone Kids, and Little Clowns of Happy Town all did a variation on this theme). This supports the argument that the shows help the child to define and sort out his world. If the child can be shown that the dentist is not a scary place through overt messages in the programming, it follows that messages on sex-role stereotyping can be as easily assimilated.

Although studying the occupations of the characters was fruitless, noting the number of shows where a female had the lead, unaccompanied by a male character proved interesting. The total number of shows viewed was 36. The total number of shows or segments within these shows where females played the lead, unaccompanied by a male was 1, (2.7 %). Yet the total number of shows where females were absent from lead roles was 10, (27.7%). And the total number of shows were there were one or less leading females was 16, (44.4%). In terms of Lacanian symbolic social order, children are being given the message that women are non-existant, invisible or unimportant.

The roles within the programming contribute to the specified

sex role definitions. In almost all the programming, women were shown

exhibiting the stereotypical female characteristics. Dennis the Menace's

mother performed only domestic tasks, although they were upscaled since

my childhood. When I was younger, mother sat knitting while father sat and

read the evening newspaper. In today's cartoon version of the same story,

mother sits in the dining room at her knitting machine while dad watches

the evening news, where else, on television. Mrs. Wilson, the elderly and

kindly next door neighbor still does things the old fashioned way. She knits

by hand, and bakes cookies for her little neighbor. Mr. Wilson does a lot of

puttering about the house, as he is retired, thus leaving more time for

Dennis to annoy him. Dennis' father goes off to work every day, but his

occupation is undisclosed. Dennis mother does not work outside the home.

The Muppett Babies provide equally strong sex-role

stereotyping. This program is about a group of eight imaginary animals.

They are based on the puppets developed in the 1970's. In this show they

are reliving their experiences as babies, or toddlers. They are cared for by

"Nanny" but she is never actually seen. Whenever she makes an entrance, all

the audience sees of her is her feet and legs, and hear her voice. She

provides care and nurturance, ("Fozzie, are you hurt?", "I thought I heard a

crash. Is everyone alright?", or "O.K., time for bed everyone.")

Yet despite the absence of adults in this show, the muppets still exhibit stereotypical behaviors. Miss Piggy is a vain, overbearing pig whose sole aim is to win Kermit the Frog's attention. Kermit, however, spends much of his time avoiding Miss Piggy's advances. Even in the opening song, their lines are stereotypical, with Kermit singing "I like adventure." and Piggy sings in response, "I like romance."

There is one other female in the Muppett Babies Show, and that is Skooter's twin sister, Skeeter,who, for the most part, is indistinguishable from her brother except for the pitch of her voice and the addition of hair on her character. They were counted as main characters, although they are often not part of the main story, but used as support characters, i.e., when they need the computer whiz.

As noted above, there are many shows which do not have leading female characters in them, while there are no all-female shows. The Bugs Bunny and Tweety Show, The Mighty Mouse Show, Alf, and Popeye and Son, are some of the shows where females are used only as support characters. In these shows, females are always victims, or sidekicks. The Smurfs, which depicts a colony of small blue people, has the dubious distinction of having what appears to be hundreds of males in both main and supporting roles, but only two females. The colony is ruled by a kindly old Smurf,

called Papa Smurf, and it has an infant called Baby Smurf, but the parentage of this child is never clear. In fact, for many years, there was only one female character in this program, Smurfette. But they needed a baby Smurf for some show, so they added another female character in order to give the baby a mother. No one is quite sure who the father is!

Some of the newer shows make an effort to include more females. In the show Pound Puppies, about a mean woman and her two daughters who run the city pound, there are more females than males in the show. However, in the Pound Puppy family, the mother still does all the domestic tasks, and the father still gives all the directives. In the Little Clown of Happy Town there are also more females present (33%), but the males are most active. The only show where a female was allowed the action for one whole segment was in a show called the Gummy Bears. In this segment, Sonnie was trying to show her best friend that the woman her father was about to marry was actually a witch in disguise. All the action was performed by the women; no assistance from males was ever called in. However, in the twenty four hours of television viewing, this was the only example that I saw.

Somewhat more interesting was the emergence of very specific

stereotypes in the new show Pee Wee's Playhouse. This show was developed in response to the success of the comedian Pee Wee Herman. The show defies description, except to say that it is pure fantasy. There is a family of dinosaurs featured in segments of it, where stereotypical behaviors prevail. In fact, the adult female dinosaur is differentiated from the adult male by the addition of an apron. There is a talking cow, (Queenie), a talking chair, a talking window, a magic slate, beatnic marionettes and more. However, the cameo entrance of certain characters like Miss Yvonne, "the most beautiful woman in all of television land" feeds into stereotypes of beautiful women. She wears a strapless white dress, has blond hair, smiles constantly, and says things like, "a smile makes everyone more beautiful." She even makes a bet with Pee Wee that she can make the next person who walks through the door more beautiful. Of course the next entrance was made by another stereotype-- a very large woman with curlers in her hair, wearing a large, loud printed caftan. Pee Wee dissolves into laughter, challenging Miss Yvonne with taunts of " No one could make her more beautiful." After much trying, the large woman leaves without having been changed, but believing that she is more beautiful. Miss Yvonne ends the segment by saying that if she believes she is more beautiful, then she is more beautiful.

Another phenomenon worthy of note is the effect of consumer

groups on children's television programming. Violence, as a theme, has

been virtually exorcized from network programming, to a large extent due

to the efforts of groups like Action for Children's Television (ACT) and the

National Organization of Women (NOW), to list just a few of the interested

groups. However, now shows like the New Mighty Mouse Show are free from

the typical violent acts common even five years ago. Villians still

terrorize their victims, who are either small and weak characters or

women, but Mighty Mouse and friends no longer use force to change the

villian's dastardly ways. In the show I viewed, the villians were stopped

from engaging in a life of crime by the use of psychology. Although this can

be perceived as a positive step for children's television, it does little to

change the possible perception by children that power is the domain of the

male. In fact, the New Mighty Mouse Show was one of the shows which did

not have any female lead characters in it. Thus, the females again were

invisible, except for the times when they were victims. The deconstructive

process seems to have been at work in that violence was identified as a

theme and ' deconstructed' from the thematic content of the shows.

However, recognition of the symbolic order present in the show and its

effect in constructing a power relationship that was gender biased could

have allowed the consumer groups named to have enacted a change which

might have redistributed the power between both sexes.

In general, the findings in this brief study were very much in

keeping with other similar, although more exhaustive studies.

"Children's TV tends to reinforce traditional sex-role behaviors
and personality traits existant in society. Thus, females are
portrayed as being more passive in behavior and paying more
attention to social relationships. They rate lower in
aggression and in self-concept and achievement-related
behaviors--i.e., they seem less confident. They also display the
virtues of unselfishness, kindness, and warmth, while being
weaker, more peaceful, more dependent and more passive than
males." [16]

Advertisements during the children's programming proved to be

equally stereotypical. There were a total of 480 ads aired during the

viewing period, averaging 80 per morning. There were marked differences

between the channels on numbers of ads aired, but this had to do with the

length of the commercials. CBS seemed to squeeze in more 15 second ads.

while NBC aired the fewest, using more 30 and 60 second ads and more 90

second spots with personal messages on self-esteem and conflict

resolution.

Despite some redeeming advertisments, most commercial

messages reflected sex-role stereotyping to a greater degree than did the

programming. The additional fact that many more advertisements use real

people as opposed to animated characters could mean that the stereotyping may make more of an impression. In the 480 ads shown, there were 785 males (57.2%) and 594 females (43.07%). There were no advertisements that showed adult males or females aired during this time, except ones that used animation. However, voiceovers were employed to a great degree, lending the commercials an air of authority. There were 211 ads which employed the use of voiceovers. Of these, 170 were male voices, (80.6%) and 47 were female voices,(22.3%). Interestingly, all of the ads using female voiceovers were for 'little girl toys', featuring only little girls in the ads, i.e., My Little Pony, Barbie, and Smooshies. The ads where males were used exclusively were ads where there was only one person featured. Otherwise, there was at least one female present, even if the commercial was selling a typically 'boy' toy, like Hot Wheel Racing Cars. It seems there is the implication that it is O.K. for a girl to aspire to boyhood, or to be a tomboy, but it is a descension in role for a boy to play with stereotypically girl toys.

In addition, there are strict FCC restrictions on the airing of ads pertaining to the programs being shown while the show is actually in progress. In other words, the networks cannot have an advertisement for the My Little Pony product while the My Little Pony Show is airing. This

was due to the pressure exerted by the consumer groups listed above. The

effect of this, however, has been twofold. First, smaller children (less

than age 5) are unable to distinguish between advertisement and show when

such advertisement practices took place. Now, with the My Little Pony ads

airing during The New Mighty Mouse Show, they are able to distinguish

between ad and non-ad. So the producer of the toy acutally fares better

than he did previously. [17] The second effect is less palpable and could

offer an area for futher study. By drawing attention away from the show

and providing a quick ad, the children feel as if they are being taught how

to play with the toys being shown. Reinforced by the show when it airs

later, they are in essece being given instructions for use. Their creativity

in coming up with new uses or new plots for their games themselves is

then diminished. As stated earlier, however, this is just one area which

warrants further investigative study.

These findings, for both the actual programs and the

advertisements, seem to be in keeping with other studies of children's

television programming. (Williams, Miles, etc.) But, as Tannis MacBeth

Williams says,

> "as a representation of some of the real changes taking place in
> the status of women in society, children's television provides a
> distorted mirror, with outdated models for young children. At

this time commercial children's television programs represent part of a pattern of persistent barriers to social change."[18]

Some discussion of how these programs present a barrier to social change can be seen in some of the different types of political socialization literature. Although no one provides specific answers or addresses the problem of television directly, there is indirect allusion both to the input and to the effect in the works of psychoanalytic structuralism, Feminist and Deconstructionist literature. Although each seem to offer very different views, each offers a lens through which we can analyze the significance of cartoons as a contributor and supporter of an asymmetrical power assignment based on gender, and the implications of such an assigment in today's society.

Conclusion

In this paper, I attempted to describe the ways in which political science literature has extended its gaze to encompass seemingly divergent views. Since attitudes and beliefs create motivators for political behaviors, and since the construct of society has a direct effect on one's role within it, theories like psychoanalytic structuralism, deconstruction and feminism are all being recognized for their

contributions to this field of study.

As a result of this brief review of the pertinent parts of the Lacanian psychoanalytic literature, deconstructionist and feminist literature, we were able to get a sense of how the 'personal is the political'. Assignment of power in an asymmetrical power relationship has ramifications in every level in society, both in the symbolic societal structure and in the 'real' world. Our acquisition of language both internalizes the structure, and recreates it. It is also within and through language that subjectivity is defined, acquired and negotiated. The deconstructionists directed us to see the hierarchical nature of the assignment of value to words and images. The feminists engage deconstructive methods (as well as others) to unravel hidden meanings and disguised agendas within the social stucture, again both symbolic and real.

Political power and presence within the symbolic structure becomes one of the issues presented through these three discourses. Apprehending the means by which messages about one's assignment of power was the focus of relating the three theorists to children's television programming. While it would be easy to define power in terms of its exercise in conflict situations, this is assuming that one has to be able to see power in order to study it. Yet Stephen Lukes' definition of a three

dimensional approach to power states that

> "empirical verifiability of power fail to give enough free rein
> to the study of power as it impinges upon the processes through
> wants and preferences are created--processes which, it they
> are to be effective, must be hidden from consciousness. Full
> consideration fo objective as well as subjective interests
> (made legitimate once power is defined as an essentially
> contested concept), allows the investigator to address the
> more broadly defined collective forces and social arrangements
> which exceed the boundaries of individual and group level
> awareness and calculation."[19]

In other words, political science literature is expanding its

definitions of power in addition to changing defintions of how one's

placement within the symbolic order effect the order and one's power in it.

This has been a brief exploration of three theories of politicization and a

descriptive analysis of how the theories are manifested in children's

television programming.

The implications for further study are numerous. Future studies

should be combined with methods that go beyond content analysis to

evaluate any possible effect on actual behavior or demonstrable changes in

attitudes and beliefs. Researchers will need to be aware of the need to

redefine power in order to include attitudinal characteristics so that its

presence in the symbolic order is accounted for. Other studies may wish to

correlate the assignment of power as it relates to violence in television

programming, pointing out that exorcizing the latter does not necessarily exorcize the former.

This brief analysis merely scratches the surface. Because of the pervasiveness of television and because of the changing roles in society, this is an issue which is not likely to disappear. It has important implications in future feminist literature in addition to its current status as a political 'hot potato' as it relates to issues such as comparable pay, reliance on family values, childcare and equally important issues. By evaluating the content of messages on power and gender in society, we may be able to arrive at less conflicting pronouncements. Television may take on a role of a purveyor of positive sociopolitical messages.

Thus, this paper was only concerned with the messages on acquitistion of political roles based on gender as presented in children's Saturday morning television programming. It was not the intent of this brief analysis to create a new theory. Rather, If this paper has provided a new focus for discussion of this important period of political development and how that relates to acquitition of power then it has accomplished its goals.

Footnotes

1.Anika Lemaire. <u>Jaques Lacan</u> . Routledge & Kegan Paul, Boston MA,

1977.pg,73

2. Ibid. pg. 68

3. Ibid, pg. 71

4.Michael Ryan, <u>Marxism and Deconstruction</u> Baltimore: 1982. pg.108

5.Juliet Mitchell, "Introduction -- I" to <u>Feminine Sexuality: Jaques Lacan</u>

<u>and the Ecole Freudienne,</u> eds. J. Mitchell and J. Rose. NewYork: 1982. pg,

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6. Simone de Beauvoir, "The Second Sex" quoted in Catherine A MacKinnon

"Feminism, Marxism, Method and the State: An Agenda for Theory." <u>Signs</u>

vol 7, no. 3, 1982, pg. 537

7. Jonathan Culler, <u>Ferdinand de Saussure</u> New York: 1976. pg 15

8. Ibid., pg. 53

9. Ibid., pg. 15

10. Jacques Derrida, <u>Writing and Difference</u> . Chicago: 1978. pg. 156

11. Catherine A. MacKinnon, "Feminism, Marxism, Method and the State: An

Agenda for Theory." <u>Signs</u> vol. 7, no. 3, 1982. pg. 228

12. Biddy Martin, " Feminism, Criticism and Foucault" <u>New German</u>

<u>Critique,</u> (Fall, 1982) pg. 4

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13. Catherine A. MacKinnon. "Feminism, Marxism, Method and the State: An Agenda for Theory." <u>Signs</u> vol. 7, no. 3, 1982. pg. 543

14. Bertell Ollman. <u>Alienation</u> New York, 1986. pg. 247

15. Betty Miles. <u>Channeling Children</u> Princeton: 1975, pg. 8

16. Tannis MacBeth Williams. <u>The Impact of Television</u> New York: 1986. pg. 269

17. Peggy Charren. Congressional Hearings, Houston: 1977.pg. 10

18. Tannis MacBeth Williams. <u>The Impact of Television</u> New York: 1986. pg. 272

19. Pamela Blake. dissertation on <u>The Politics of Definition: Power and Meaning in Feminist and Post-Structuralist Theory</u> Ithaca:1985. pg.168

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