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What does gender mean?

Prix Jeunesse producers share their opinions and experiences[1]

According to feminist theories gender differences are – unlike the biological differences – socially constructed and modifiable. What could a gender-equitable world in children's TV programmes look like? Producers from all over the world were interviewed, and their views are paralleled with the development of feminist thinking.

For two decades I have been researching gender stereotyping in media texts, teaching critical analysis skills, and working at consciousness-raising in students, media producers, and the public at large. I have learned that the many studies that have examined the portrayals of women and men on television point to a social world that differentiates between the two quite systematically. On the whole, men are identified with "doing" in the public sphere and associated with characteristics such as activity, rationality, forcefulness, independence, ambitiousness, competitiveness, achievement, higher social status, and the like. Women are associated with "being" in the private sphere and are characterised, generally, as passive, emotional, care-giving, childish, sexy, subordinate to men, of lower social status, and the like. Television, as a general rule (there are many exceptions, and these are growing gradually in number and scope), defines men by their action, and in contrast, women by their appearance. The external appearance of women is still perceived as the most central characteristic of a woman's essence.

Dominant media messages continue to promote restrictive ideologies of femininity

This emphasis is most commonly expressed through glorification of a particular beauty model, the "beauty myth", that is highly European in orientation and practically unattainable. External appearance is directly related to television's over-emphasis in portrayal of women as sexual beings whose central function is relegated to being objects of male sexual desire and pursuit. Thus, such dominant media messages continue to promote restrictive ideologies of femininity, glorify heterosexual romance as a central goal for girls, encourage male domination in relationships, and stress the importance of beautification through consumption, while dismissing the validity of girls' own sexual feelings and desires apart from masculine desire; and say nothing about all the many other aspects of women's essence, capabilities, and potential contributions.

Even children's television offers a significant under-representation of female main characters and under-development of female characters (see Götz et al. in this issue). Males – both younger and older – are the main heroes of children's programmes. They succeed in overcoming everyday problems, deal successfully with all sorts of dangers, and have lots of adventures. Even non-gendered imaginary characters – such as creatures and animals – are considered "naturally" to be male, unless they are specifically marked as female through processes of sexualising their appearance (e.g. hair ribbons, long eyelashes, coloured lips, short skirts). In this way, female characters continue to symbolise a deviation from the dominant male norm and remain the "second sex" in the classical sense, as portrayed by Simone de Beauvoir. Female characters in many media texts for children are there to be saved and protected by the males and provide the background for the adventure. Above all, their position is defined by their meaning for the male heroes. Certain symbols, such as horses, dolphins jumping in front of a sunset, bunnies, and flowers are gendered in our societies and reinforced by the market forces as "girlish". Other areas, such as technology, action, or fighting are almost always framed as male themes and pre-interpreted as masculine. Television advertising for children applies gendered clichés excessively in presenting goods for consumption by signalling gender intention via glittery or pastel colours for girls and action-packed dark hues for boys. Even educational programmes were found to have an under-representation of females as well as employment of traditional stereotypes.

Based upon the intellectual contributions of feminist theories, there is a growing recognition in the social sciences that gender differences (in contrast to biological differences in the reproduction organs) are socially constructed, learned sets of behaviours and perceptions. For example, while it is a biological fact that women can give birth, it is a social construction

that women should be expected to be the dominant caregiver of children. Thus, learning the characteristics and behaviours that are "accepted" as masculine and feminine in a given society is a process that starts at birth. The role of television in such a construction of gender schemes is particularly important, as most of the content of television presents characters that can be assigned to one of the two gender categories, be they humans, cartoon figures, animals, or science fiction characters. Such characters supply a varied pool of models for identification and imitation. They define for the young viewers what is "normal" and accepted in their society, and, therefore, win positive reinforcement, as well as what is deemed exceptional, even deviant, and therefore negatively sanctioned (Lemish, 2007).

How can these images be changed? What indeed could be alternative portrayals of male and female role models for children, models that will offer children as well as the adults in their lives, a vision of a possible more gender-equal world?

The study

My search for satisfying answers in the academic and intellectual literature left me confused and frustrated. So I decided that perhaps the best answers would come from producers of quality television for children whose professional lives are devoted to the well-being of children, to offering them a better world, and helping them make the most out of themselves. I wanted to seek the advice and accumulated knowledge and expertise of these professionals. The result of this initiative is an ongoing project on changing gender images in quality television for children that is based on personal interviews with producers from around the world. So far I have interviewed 99 producers from 52 countries from all continents. A majority (but not all) of these interviews have been conducted during the Prix Jeunesse International festivals of 2004 and 2006 in Munich,[2] and the rest during the Japan Prize in Tokyo in 2006, the Basel-Karlsruhe Forum in Basel in 2007, and the 5th World Summit in Johannesburg in 2007.

Interviews included questions about the producers' own personal career development, their current work, their perception of gender issues in their culture and in television for children in their country, their impressions of gender-related issues in their own work and in other entries in the Prix Jeunesse, their suggestions and aspirations for change, and the like. Almost all interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim, and since most interviewees were not native English speakers, the texts were also lightly edited for English, trying to preserve the style and flavour of the original conversation. The transcripts were later submitted to a grounded thematic analysis of the main issues that surfaced in the interview. In the following pages, I briefly outline some of these central issues.

Producers from all over the world in a conversation at the Prix Jeunesse Festival in Munich

Gender and culture

Gender issues are quite different for producers of quality television for children around the world. When asked about the most burning gender issues in their societies, those issues to which they feel quality television for children should make an effort to address, producers brought up a wide list of topics and concerns. For example, in Africa, HIV-AIDS was highlighted as one of the most burning gender issues of concern for producers. One South African female professional explained: "For some of the young people it was an act of bravado of 'I am having sex and who is going to tell me to use a condom, it won't happen to me' and there were others saying that 'we have been pressured, the media are portraying one thing and you are saying something else;' and 'everybody is telling me be careful of HIV but everybody is having sex on television'."

For producers from the Nordic countries, the most important gender issue was the effort to "rescue" boys, who seem to be neglected and left behind in their societies: they seem to be failing in school, involved in violence and substance abuse and have growing suicide rates. A female head of a children's TV department in the UK related similar symptoms, and added the high rate of divorced and single-parent families and absence of masculine role models for children: "Boys do not have enough role models because of the whole issue of absent dads and the fathers playing less of a role in their lives … I think this is probably an issue in Western cultures where there's been a higher incident of divorce and separation, and where fathers have sometimes stayed very involved with their children but sometimes not, sometimes they are gone to make new families … So I think for boys, the absence of fathers is a huge issue … maybe for girls as well … So, do we in our dramas address enough the issue of good male role models?"

Latin American producers were very conscious of the "macho" values

dominating their societies, and their effects on violence perpetrated against women. In the Philippines, gender worries were entangled with girls desperate striving to achieve the Western "beauty myth" – whitening of the skin, plastic surgery of eyelids and nose to attain a Caucasian look. A female producer shared: "In our programmes we are confronting the concept of beauty, what does it mean to be beautiful … slim, big-breasted, with a nose … most noses here are flat but they [the young women] want the one with the bridge. They wanted rounded eyes not slit eyes, in the last 5 years there have been a lot of cases of malpractice … it is such a business." An Egyptian female producer identified the struggle for girls' rights for schooling as the most important gender issue, and producers in several countries, such as Kenya, Nepal, and Syria, expressed concern over girls' dropping out of school and early marriage. For example, a female producer from Nepal explained: "In some families, in the villages where there is a lower level of literacy, if they have to choose between a boy and a girl, they will choose the son to go to school. The girls who don't go to school help their parents, help in the farm, get married at a younger age … even though it is changing slowly." Interviewees in the USA and Germany discussed the over-occupation with body image and eating disorders. One German female producer suggested: "The most popular topic for girls at the moment is having to look good … girls need to learn to accept themselves. Look around, they do horrible things to themselves, like piercing here and there … they want to look attractive and sexy. They need role models nowadays that will help them accept the fact that they are not perfect, that they cannot be perfect, and that looks are not everything." In Australia the traditional pressure on boys to perform in sports highlighted a female professional as the cause of much frustration. A male producer from Serbia and Montenegro expressed concern for the specific weakening effects war has had particularly on the girls.

Clearly, gender, as a socially produced and organised set of meanings and practices, is very differently constructed in different cultures. The issues producers prioritise are very different and seem to be a function of their traditions, religions, regimes, economical development, literacy rates, democratisation, and the like. Clearly, gender differences and the vision for gender equality are not a monolithic entity around the world, and thus cannot be treated uniformly in any form of intervention, including the production of quality television for children.

Recapitulating the development of feminist thought

Interviewing producers from around the world provided me with unique insights into the localisation of different societies in regard to their stance toward feminist ideas, and to their struggles for gender equality. Risking over-generalisation, one could locate the discourse offered by the representatives of the various societies on a continuum ranging from pre-feminist awareness to popular post-feminist notions. Using wide brush strokes, the development of such a span of ideas could be traced through the following stages, following very much the development of feminist thought and activism in the second part of the 20th century (see for example Hooks, 2000; and in application for media studies: Cirksena/Cuklanz, 1992; van Zoonen, 1994):

Pre-feminist awareness

A few interviewees ignored the issue of gender inequality in their societies as a whole, and in television for children more specifically. Consider, for example, the following excerpt from an interview with a male producer in a small Muslim-dominated Arab country who said: "It's the same for boys and girls, there is no difference. Boys and girls are together, they are free, the same." Or a producer from a communist society who insisted that there is full equality for boys and girls in her country, and no difference in the way they are portrayed on television. While being fully respectful of multi-culturalism and considering the multiplicity of meanings gender takes in different societies, as discussed above, I chose to frame this as evidence of "pre-feminist awareness" as it represents a form of ideological "gender blindness", characterised by discounting the obvious differences in the lives of boys and girls and in the way they are portrayed on television in those various societies.

Numerical equality

The most basic and obvious effort at dealing with gender inequality on television is to make girls and boys visible to the same extent, in all genres, and for all ages. Traditionally, girls were usually excluded from many television programmes and appeared as a "token" small minority in many others, hence conveying a message of their marginality and lower social status. Their mere visibility on the screen brings girls into consciousness, gives them a possible voice and calls our attention to their place in society. Clearly, the issue of equal numeric representation is deeply conflated with other forms of exclusion and a need for a diverse television world, where children of all races, religions, and social classes can find themselves. In many countries, the expectation for equal numbers of boys and girls in children's programming was taken for granted, but in many others it was still an unattainable goal.

Role reversal

Most interviewees were very much aware of and explicit about gender

inequalities pervasive in their cultures and held to the line of argument popular in liberal feminism as they described attempts to offer viewers typical role reversals on television. The main motto repeated in the interviews was "everything you can do – I can do better"; meaning that the women and girls portrayed on television can take on roles usually reserved for males, and that men and boys can do anything that is traditionally associated with females. As a result, some interviewees shared with me many of their experiences in advancing explorations of role reversals in children's television: a Korean preschool programme presented fathers caring and playing with their little children; a Brazilian series featured female scientists; a drama from Venezuela had boys cheering from the sidelines for an all-girl sports team; an Iranian boy exposed his emotions over losing his mother; an American animation featured a mother working at her computer while dad fixed dinner; in Estonia, a mother was busy under the car's hood while the father kept her company; in Norway, a girl practiced boxing while a boy excelled at ballet dancing. Many varied examples were shared with me, but all attempt to break with the traditional roles assigned to males and females, and the traditional stereotypes they foster.

One of the most important associated issues raised by many of the interviews is the discrepancy between the reality of gender inequality and the challenging images presented on the screen. How can we find the right balance between stretching our social imagination by presenting gender-role reversal that is still believable and acceptable, and not crossing the thin line of offering a television reality that seems completely irrelevant or even threatening? The answer to this important question varied greatly among cultures represented by the interviewees. In some countries presenting a girl who wishes to excel in her studies and to continue her higher education or a father who feeds a baby with a bottle was a brave diversion from accepted norms. In other countries, stretching the line required more dramatic narratives such as presenting a father raising his children on his own or girls competing with boys and winning in a technological project. Here, too, we are reminded that we cannot use the same measuring tape for our many and diverse cultures.

Different but equal

Interviewees from several countries where practising role reversals has been part of their programming for many years often expressed a need to go one step further in their attempt to challenge gendered societal norms and expectations. Rather than being concerned with girls' capability of doing anything boys can do, and vice versa, they emphasised recognition of the inherent differences between boys and girls, and recommended that these be respected and celebrated in television for children. A female UK manager expressed this requirement: "Girls want to see strong girls – but not an imitation of boys in the way they use their strength, but [rather a search for] their own way of exerting power and influence. Fundamentally, children feel powerless most of the time, so for girls, you know, in the old way you might have shown them using their so-called feminine or sexual or manipulative powers. Well, of course, we try not to do that anymore, but you don't want girls to just be bullies, or imitate what used to be classic masculine behaviour either. So we try to show complex heroines, heroines that have tough sides, sensitive sides, who deal with things with intelligence."

Similarly, a director of programming from Sweden explained her position: "…and you mustn't take strength away from boys by promoting the girls, you mustn't make them ashamed of themselves for being who they are. I want to change the system, not to make it as difficult for boys as it was for girls. I don't want to change the way you feel as a boy or as a girl. We need to understand each other and the differences between us. Boys being girlish is not the solution, because boys have to understand how girls think and girls have to understand how boys think."

The discourse surrounding the "different but equal" motto brings back to the table the discussion around the complementary explanations that "nature and nurture" offer to gender differences, suggesting a need to accommodate both, as long as the principle of equal opportunities and equal rights is being preserved and nourished. It argues that it is OK for girls to "play house" and be occupied with relationships and their appearance, as long as they are also allowed the whole range of choices and human qualities; and it is fine for boys to be rowdy and sporty, if they are also able to express their emotions, be nurturing and romantic, and care for others.

Post-feminism sentiments

A few of the interviewees represented what has become known as "post-feminist" sentiments – the argument being that since gender equality seems to have been mainstreamed and accepted as a given in some societies, feminism has aged and become irrelevant (see for example McRobbie, 2004). Such views are particularly evident among some producers in Western countries who believe that their television screen offers a fair portrayal of gender equality and feel that they are ready to move on to other concerns, mainly those of cultural and racial diversity. It is interesting to note that we find among them a move towards an open occupation with the human body – sexuality, gender dysphoria, bodily secretions and the like – issues that in most of the countries represented by the interviewees in this study are considered taboo.

Television strategies for changing reality

So what do producers of quality television for children envision as their ideal gender portrayals on the screen? Two main themes underlined much of their discussion with me: complexity and diversity. More than anything else, producers believe that the best way to break stereotypes and traditional gender roles is to offer children a wide variety of complex characters.

The best way to break stereotypes is to offer children a wide variety of complex characters

A female US director of programming for preschoolers suggested: "[It is] very important for kids to see a variety of characters, a variety of ways of behaving … no one should be a stereotype of any kind. The strongest, most loveable characters are the ones that are really integrated and interesting and aren't just perfect, or just beautiful or stupid or fat." Enabling children to explore the full range of experiences, emotions, and possibilities, regardless of their gender, was highlighted as a central goal for producers. Most importantly, as a female head of department from Singapore suggested: "I think we need programming that is positive, programming that has a clear message that encourages, and inspires." A producer from Ireland added: "… to show stories with children that have an experience of some kind, being in charge of their own circumstances." And a female producer from Botswana, concerned with children finding their identity regardless of their gender, called for "a programme that the individual child can look up to and hope to say 'Oh, I can make my situation – whatever the situation – I can take a chance in my situation, and not everything is hopeless, there is life out there' … and if they see from an early age, women or girls – children – as having their own minds, that have the same possibilities as boys … they will grow up a better person, as somebody assertive, who knows what is right, what is mine by right, or what is mine that I should work for … let's give everybody equal opportunities."

Children's television, so it seems, offers a unique space for an alternative discourse of deeply entrenched gender inequalities and an opportunity to explore the possibility of a different world. It can present children with a range of possibilities relevant to their own lives and challenge the way they are brought up to think of their own gendered identity. It can offer a diverse range of gender possibilities for children and complex characters that are not bound by stereotypes and can give a voice to their gender perspectives. It may constitute a safe environment in which to explore the full range of roles they might wish for themselves and learn to aspire for what may seem impossible in reality. ■

NOTES

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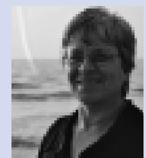

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