

Osh Rice

“...men are discouraged from expressing their emotional needs by a socially constructed dominant masculinity which emphasises aggression and competition, and are forced to ‘prove’ their masculinity by competing with other men. This need to prove one’s ‘manhood’ spills over into male sexuality and sexual behaviour.”
(Extract from Kirby et al, 2000, p718)

To better understand this quote, it is necessary to look back at the traditional views on masculinity. The term masculinity comes about through gender roles, which throughout history have determined male and female roles within society. The role of the male was greatly influenced by his routines, for instance: finding food, providing for a family, providing warmth and shelter. To be capable of these tasks it was necessary for these male ‘hunter gatherers’ to be strong, healthy, knowledgeable and able to fight with other males for possessions, food and territory, similar in many ways to the apes from which we descended. This view is strengthened by the work of Dr Desmond Morris in his book *The Naked Ape*, in which he describes early human males as “akin to monkeys and gorillas in many ways”. From this early background, gender roles were established and a patriarchal system began to emerge; and still exists to this day.

Up until the 1960s and the rise of feminism, these gender roles were still very much in use. The role of the male was to work and provide and the role of the female was to perform unpaid household work and to produce and rear children. This system was radically changed however with the advent of feminism, which sought to bring women out of the home and into education and professional jobs. This feminist movement is still being felt today through the media and social awareness. In the mid 1980s there was a change in the social perception of masculinity. For years its image was still of the strong provider, who rarely had child rearing responsibilities and did not show emotions. This, it is suggested by Mort (1988) was brought about by a group of ‘cosmopolitan fashion designers and journalists’ in London in the late 70s. What this group did was to make it clear that it could be masculine to take care of your appearance and to look good in ways which before, were totally unheard of; for instance the wearing of an ear stud which became fashionable during the early eighties would previously make its wearer the object of scorn and ridicule by men as well as women as it was simply not in accordance with what society deemed to be masculine.

Another suggestion for the cultural shift in attitudes towards masculinity comes from postmodernist theory and is concerned with the fact that the old ideas surrounding masculinity have faded due to society living in a ‘*media-saturated* environment’. What is meant by this is that ideas of masculinity and femininity are no longer determined by cultural and social values but by the media and advertising. Men are shown what is and is not masculine by advertising such as ‘laundrette’, an advert by the fashionable Levi’s jeans brand in 1985. An attractive man is shown walking into a laundrette (a place closely associated with women and feminine activities), stripping down to his underwear and washing his clothes. This advert works on many levels;

firstly there is the image of an attractive man in advertising which showed that it could be “cool” and acceptable for men to take the same amount of care over their personal appearance and clothes as women do’. Then there is the fact that the character was an attractive man and would appeal to women and lastly that it made the watcher feel that if they were to buy a pair of Levi jeans then they too could be like the model, i.e. being desired by women. This is a very early example of the changing face of masculinity, as before this, it was not deemed terribly masculine to take care of your appearance in order to be found attractive by women. The effect that this had was the ‘sexualisation’ of the male body. It shows a cultural shift in society’s expectations of males to become more like women, who for many years had been told how to dress, look and behave by the media.

A modern day example of the changing face of masculinity is the style and career of the footballer David Beckham. Football has traditionally played the role of the masculine working class sport. The dominant view of football has been of a very masculine, tough sport however, what Beckham has done, is to change the gritty image of the game into an image conscious, glamorous game where footballers are no longer sporting heroes but cultural and style icons. Beckham has been influential in this, through his glamorous marriage to Victoria Adams, a high profile pop star in her own right and his love of designer clothes which stray away from the mainstays of previous generations i.e. suits and sports wear and into high fashion and cutting edge clothing which, as little as five years ago would have been perceived as ‘gay’.

A poststructuralist approach to the changing face of masculinity would be to say that it is not just the media and advertising that has had such an effect, but also an increase in disposable income and increasing dominance of the women in the workplace combining to create an environment where masculinity has to adapt to a changing world where male values and the patriarchal system are no longer as strong as they once were. It now seems the case that male sexuality and masculinity are evolving along with the changing feminine ideals into a state where the boundaries between these two, once very separate roles are becoming blurred. There are now a great number of women who are career minded, going to university and achieving successful careers, thus leaving a gap for a primary carer for any future children. This gap is now more often filled by the male partner, a concept which even 20 years ago, was unusual and clashed with traditional gender roles. With these new moulds for male and female attitudes and behaviour, it is difficult to categorise people into social stratification.

However there are some sociologists who feel that masculinity and femininity are determined through our biological makeup - that there is a fixed gender order that fits into the patriarchal system of males being the dominant sex and the old ideals of masculinity still holding a major place in our society. This view is held by Connell, who states, “The justifying ideology for this organisation of gender relations is the ‘gender hierarchy’, the ranking of masculinities and femininities. At the top of this hierarchy is *hegemonic masculinity*, the culturally dominant ideal of masculinity centred on authority, physical toughness and strength, heterosexuality and paid work”. What Connell means by this statement is that no matter what changes occur that influence masculinity, there will always be this ‘gender hierarchy’ that will control it and dictate the way men and women behave and their relationships with each other.

The ideas that Connel puts forward fit in with the opening quote by Kirby in which he states that “men are discouraged from expressing their emotional needs by a socially constructed dominant masculinity which emphasises aggression and competition”. Connel's ideas explain why, even with the vast and far reaching changes in masculinity and social roles as a whole, there is still a dominant masculine attitude, which seems to be un-taught. This masculine attitude dictates the way men behave and act. Looking at Connel's work, he indicates that at the top of the gender hierarchy, there are the *hegemonic masculinities*, next are the *subordinated masculinities*, an important faction being homosexuals. Finally at the bottom are the femininities. In his view, these are the underlying or fixed gender roles, which will prevail over any current social ideology with regard to masculinity and femininity. This can often be evidenced anecdotally in feminist households where little boys are denied toys, which reinforce male stereotyping, only to find that they build guns with their Lego. Similarly, little girls still pine for Barbie dolls despite their mothers' despair.

To conclude, it is clear that there are many differing views on masculinity in today's society, and that a popular opinion is that the concepts of masculinity and femininity have become a continuum rather than a dividing line. There also appears to be no evidence to support a Marxist view that the change in masculinity is entirely a result of a capitalist ideology, which uses the media to force people to consume. A criticism that could be made of the a lot of theories is that they base their findings upon high fashion and middle class culture when in actual fact, a large proportion of people come from working class backgrounds where 'hegemonic masculinity' is still a very large part of what it is to 'be a man'. Whilst the effects of the masculine revolution may still be trickling down into these groups, they are still dominated by an ideology, which is distrustful of acting in a feminine manner and losing the respect of their peers. This attitude is still the dominant one throughout male society, despite the advances made throughout the last twenty or thirty years. The quote from Kirby really encapsulates the masculine ideals, which have been influenced by social change but are still stuck in a state where they are biologically determined to act and interact in the way they have been programmed to throughout the centuries. To compare masculinity 200 years ago and now, it is clear that although a lot has changed, even more has stayed the same. Males still compete with each other, there is still an overwhelming need to prove one's manhood at every available opportunity and there is still a patriarchal system in place ensuring that males who are willing to fight and compete to keep power.

1591 words

Bibliography

G. Whannel, *Sociology Review*, (2002),

Kirby et al, *Sociology in perspective*, (2000), Heineman, London

D. Morris, *The Naked Ape*, (1967), Triad Grafton, London

D. Abbott, *Sociology Review*, (2000),