

The Persistence of Gender Stereotypes in the 21st century and what we can do about it

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Introduction

Query any group of undergraduates and you will discover that most of them do not consider themselves to be feminists and will quickly repudiate the title. They see feminism as either reflective of a man-hating attitude or as an outmoded social cause of the 1970s—the distant past. While the opportunities for girls and women have multiplied in many arenas of life, from sports to academic careers to such professions as engineering, the law and medicine, we still witness rigid gender roles subversively at work in schools, workplaces and society at large. What has changed is the way we speak about it. Now the language emphasizes choice and women declaim that they are choosing to adopt certain pattern of being women, often without realizing the iron fist of cultural expectations on these choices. In this paper we will first examine the gender roles and expectations set upon girls and women in contemporary society. A major force today is the media as we shall explore in its influence through toys, television, movies and the creation and sustaining of a celebrity culture. Secondly we will examine the extent to which the educational system has risen to the challenge of educating beyond gender stereotypes, if indeed it has. We will trace the inherent difficulties in introducing these ideas to elementary and secondary students in an atmosphere of cultural and ethical relativism. The main thesis of this paper will be the claim that we need to construct ways to engage young people in careful and nuanced reflection on gender and that philosophical inquiry offers us just such a methodology. In addition to taking a look at materials already accessible, we will sketch out some ideas for the development of materials that will further the enterprise of freeing young men and women to examine with a critical eye the gender roles assigned to them by their culture. However, in doing this, we acknowledge a need to be sensitive to a multitude of perspectives based on our nationalities, religious beliefs and practice, and cultural “homes.” What directions can and should we explore to work against the juggernaut of media and society’s pressures on girls and boys to adopt a particular view of gender and how can we remain open to plural modalities of gender without succumbing to unreflective acceptance of tradition for tradition’s sake?

Hannah Montana, Bratz dolls and Toys for Boys

Scene: Disney Store in a mall, USA

Players: mother and four year old son.

Boy: Mommy, can I get these cool statues?

Mom: No dear, those are girl toys. See, they are pink and purple!

Boy: But mom, they are really neat. I *really really* want them!!

Mom: (handing robot toy) Don’t you want this great robot instead? You don’t want those silly dolls, do you?¹

This scene is played out in variations across the country. Toys are rigidly gendered as any casual visit to Toys R Us will reveal. The toys for boys are in deep primary colors or black/army green and inevitably involve some mechanical, robotical or tool-of-terror function. The aisles aimed at girls are replete with purple and pink and offer an array of cuddly toys (ponies, cute wild animals, cats and dogs as well as baby dolls), housekeeping toys (ovens, irons (!), doll houses) and toys for training girls to focus on sex appeal and celebrity culture (Bratz dolls, Barbie, Hannah Montana paraphernalia as well as proto-make-up.) Even potentially gender-neutral toys such

as balls, bikes and Leggos are often color-coded or embossed with images that send clear messages as to which gender “owns” this toy.

In Preschools around the country there are stations which mimic home and work. While preschoolers can often be found crossing the boundaries of mommy/daddy roles in these corners, parents and teachers are often nervous if a child spends too much time in an area that transgresses society’s paradigm for their gender. Again, we find it harder on boys to cross over without stern redirection. “Boys don’t iron! They race cars!” And they certainly do not dress up in glitter and high heels. Of course, the children themselves often police their peers in their choices of roles.

When children enter kindergarten and first grade they are exposed to literature and disciplines which are designed to invite girls to compete with boys in math and science, auto mechanics and doctoring. And sometimes you will see opportunities for the children to witness boys and men performing care-giving roles or involved in such quintessential girl activities as ballet, albeit less so than the emphasis on women as crossing gender boundaries in the workplace. But by now, children have firm notions of what is appropriate for each gender and we see the lines drawn in increasingly limiting ways as the children move up into the middle school years (sixth through eight grades.) These years can be the most difficult for boys and girls who wish to explore alternative models of gender roles. Girls who excelled in science and math become less interested and perform under their boy counterparts. Boys who might have been willing to dance, write poetry, interact with younger children are deeply discouraged through ridicule and behavior shaping. The dreaded labels of being “gay” or a “dyke” keep children within the gender lines established by the larger society around them, even while they can see men and women functioning productively across those lines.

If the adults in their lives (parents and teachers) are open to multiple opportunities for all children, how do these rigid lines get drawn? Well, society establishes these boundaries through the media: the television shows, movies, magazines, locker room cultures which reflect media images. Mom can reassure her daughter that looks are not that important and no one should be anorexic thin but every image and message around her says otherwise. Even mom laments every pound she puts on and most adult women have been on a diet at some point in their lives, but very often are always looking to lose weight². As our girls and boys grown into men and women they are confronted with a society that gives lip service to equality³ and open opportunity but which subtly and not so subtly shapes them to conform. We are still struggling with such social issues as sexual harassment⁴, job opportunities for women and men, a continuing suspicion of men working with children and young people, and the iron-fist legislation by the media of appearance guidelines for women (dieting, cosmetic surgery, lookism.) Why have the schools not risen to the challenge of feminist charges for genuine equality and why does that very call sound almost quaint? After 30 years, why are we still so far behind?

Education and the problem with feminism

Given the arguments for equal opportunities for boys and girls, women and men, and the seemingly obviousness of the need for encouraging both genders to explore individual ways of being, why is pre-college education seemingly so silent on this topic? There may be several explanations for this absence of a systematic and education approach to gender equity. Educators are often concerned by trespassing on family values. They may see women’s choices as paramount and legitimizing any choice. Finally, they may be suspicious themselves of a “feminist agenda” which is *perceived* as promulgating a particular form of radical feminism characterized by lesbianism and “man-hating” attitudes. Let’s take a closer look at each of these responses before we attempt to counter argue.

First, educators may be reluctant to wade into the dangers of nurturing feminism among their charges as bordering on private concerns. As an endeavor to explore gender concepts may engage their class in values reflections, educators are concerned that such discussions or general lessons may impinge on the sacredness of family traditions, religious beliefs, cultural practices. Even feminists have criticized their own for casting the debates in language that spoke only to a certain narrow subset of women in *this* country: white, middle to upper middle class, educated women. “Third Wave” feminists have taken their previous generation to task for presuming to speak for all women, everywhere. In an American culture suffused with multiculturalism and ethical relativism, teachers are hesitant to take stands on controversial issues where they may be challenging the beliefs and practic-

es of their students and their families. If Susan's dad and mom think women should stay at home and take care of the babies and that they don't need a college education, can Susan's teacher dare challenge that? Even when educators wish to take a stand on feminism as opening up opportunities for their young men and women, which feminist stance should they promote? Which cultural practices must be condemned or simply questioned? How can we judge when we are taught not to judge but to accept—to live and let live? —To see relativism as a given in morality? Isn't it all personal opinion in the end? Many teachers demur at the thought that they should take a public moral stance on any issue, much less on gender concerns. This stems from a genuine concern for and dedication to tolerance and open-mindedness but can also result in simple neglect of deep inequities.

Secondly, the current focus among young women and men is that women have all choices open to them but that they are choosing the traditional roles. They are not forced to become mothers and put aside a career. That is their *choice*. They are not pressured to wear makeup or high heels but they enjoy it and *choose* to do so. This is a problematic at best or an insidious at worst interpretation of feminism which claims that as long as you are choosing your path (to get plastic surgery, to star in porn films, to diet, etc.) then feminists must support that choice or risk becoming hypocrites. This calls into question a need to explore what we mean by choice here. But on the surface, most undergraduates will confidently claim that they simply like and enjoy the gender roles that society offers them and that they are not interested in exploring alternatives. After all, it is up to them, right? This reflects deeply engrained beliefs which have been acquired and nurtured throughout their elementary and secondary years.

Thirdly, many teachers are themselves a product of this culture and really think that women are *naturally* better nurturers or less capable at abstract reasoning (science and math are boring anyway) or that boys really shouldn't be at home with babies but out in the world making their mark. For example, teachers quite commonly will blame working mothers for the problems that their children are experiencing but seldom hold similarly accountable the working father.. In fact, who even uses that phrase—"the working *father*?" More girls are encouraged to enter the teaching profession at the elementary level while boys are steered towards other careers or teaching the upper grades. Assuming that gender is "natural" can result in the view that it would be *unnatural* to try to change it or simply *impossible*. While we certainly see schools promoting their high achieving girls, those same girls can find their peers less open to their intellectual pursuits.

So, given these three factors: an unreflective acceptance of relativism which denies judgment or challenging someone's beliefs or practices, a conviction that all choices are free choices and as such must be accepted and respected, and finally the hidden prejudices towards maintaining gender roles of the adults who work with young people, this make it extremely challenging to devise acceptable and effective ways to encourage teachers to help children and young people critically examine gender in their experiences. When we see attempts to attend to gender stereotypes, they are all too frequently:

- **Superficial**—an offhand comment that girls can be anything they want to be or that it is ok for boys to baby-sit; in early grades there are story books which offer cross-gender models but these appear too weak and infrequent to really be able to address meaningfully the power of the media in the lives of these young children.
- **Sporadic**—in elementary and middle school grades girls do receive more encouragement to engage in sports and academic subjects wherein boys and men traditionally have excelled and dominated but even here, the push is not sustained and young women too often self-select themselves out of these options. Diverse opportunities for young men are still more absent than present and in some ways they suffer even more from a lack of perceived alternatives. Funding for sports for girls has increased dramatically but the cache of such sports cannot rival those for boys within the community.
- **Contradictory**—the message says that gender can be open and constructed while the teachers themselves demonstrate very clear gender boundaries and the larger culture confirms those boundaries. Even the existence of real role models (Hilary Clinton, Condoleezza Rice, women CEOs) are a pale echo in the face of a celebrity culture which shouts gender role stereotypes loud and clear or even recasts them so that being famous and physically beautiful is itself perceived to offer inherent value for women. Paris Hilton and Nicole Ricci come to mind. And those women of power are mercilessly subjected to scrutiny regarding their age, hair, make-up, clothes in ways that are completely absent for powerful men.
- **Simply non-existent**—finally, too often the topic is never even presented for examination or reflection.

Philosophy for Children and The Community of Inquiry: Tackling the challenge

Where we might find some potent sources for educational models for gender awareness is in the philosophy for children movement. Rather than introducing discussion about gender happenstance (through an occasional story such as the *Paper Bag Princess*) or as a unit in a health class (along with sexuality) we can think of constructing a systematic curriculum which encourages children and young adults to examine critically the notions of gender and gender roles that surround them in their culture. Young people need opportunities in a safe and caring environment to explore the problematic messages with which they have been bombarded since infancy. This does not mean lecturing them against cultural icons nor does this represent the indoctrination of some particular feminist agenda, but an rather open and free inquiry with a readiness to put norms, theories, experiences on the table for careful review and consideration. The model that exists for precisely this approach is that of the Philosophy for Children (P4C) program as designed by the IAPC⁵ and as continually developed world-wide. This methodological approach offers a potent way to engage children and young people in serious and genuine reflection because:

- it happens contextually
- it is open to plurality but not uncritically so
- it respects all persons but holds one accountable for beliefs:

Philosophical dialogue occurs within a *Community of Inquiry* which itself supports cross-gender dialogue and honest examination of given ideas and models of thinking and acting. The topics of dialogue emerge naturally from the interests of the participants as they are provoked or simply offered through some material designed to bring an array of questions and issues to the forefront for the community to consider. “P4C” offers a venue which skillfully suggests topics that can benefit from examination even as if leaves the choice of which topics will be explored in the hands of the community. It calls to mind, brings to attention, problematic aspects of human experience—such as the nature of gender—but these aspects emerge naturally from within the context of a story, film, artwork, musical example, local or world event. The facilitator within the community of inquiry can highlight a particular topic but the ownership of the discussion and the setting of the agenda remains in the hands of the participants. Therefore, philosophical inquiry can build upon the chosen interests of the group without seemingly forcing a topic on them. This empowers the children or young people to own the discussion and that guarantees a level of personal engagement that is too often lacking when the topics are introduced from “on high” and the agenda is set and controlled by the adults in the classroom. This last point is important to avoid charges from the adult community that the school is pushing a “feminist” or “liberal” agenda or is unduly critical of cherished models of gender.

Since the dialogue grows as the community nurtures it, it is open to a plurality of directions and viewpoints. In a functioning “Community of Inquiry” participants can trust that their views will be heard and neither mocked nor slavishly accepted due to the source. Views cannot be dismissed or foreclosed upon simply because they are unpopular or deemed “wrong” by the teachers or facilitator or “alpha-students.” But at the same time, a viewpoint must be placed on the dialogic table for review and consideration. No viewpoint is sacred, no belief is untouchable. For example, a view which claims that only girls can really be good caregivers must be seriously examined and explored for support and meaning. Students learn that anecdotal exceptions are precisely that—anecdotes. They must be rigorously subjected to the criteria for a good explanation or theoretical generalization. Likewise, claims that “girls can do anything that boys and can and better” must be analyzed for its theoretic import and evidence. Discussions acknowledge the role of logic in constructing generalizations and testing theses. But in a community of inquiry, participants find the courage to voice these beliefs and submit them to communal examination, rather than simply parroting platitudes or hostilely ignoring viewpoints different than their own. We can construct a place in which plurality is both welcome and yet each view is carefully deconstructed for meaning, support and implication. A rigorous philosophical dialogue may not result in any final conclusion or universal viewpoint but a plurality of beliefs can surface and receive a critical and caring look by the individual members of that community. Some viewpoints will be found wanting or lacking in a sufficient degree of rigor so as to render them inoperable.

The last point is critical here if the community is to function as a community and if we hope to achieve some sense of conceptual progress in whatever concepts we examine. This dialogue must be suffused with a genuine sense of care, acceptance and trust. ~No easy task in any classroom but certainly a challenge in the middle school years. The key lies in the constructed recognition that respect for persons entails acceptance of those persons for who they are and a willingness to critically challenge their beliefs. Leaving people alone with their ideas is not respect but neglect, disinterest and potentially a failure of community. Our current climate in education is to equate respect with acceptance to the point of isolation or refusal to engage. “Live and let live” or “celebrate differences” too often morphs into an uncritical indoctrination of a relativism which eschews all critical examination of ideas in the name of tolerance or “open-mindedness.” Here we have failed to educate in the sense of “leading out” from ignorance into some movement towards truth. We abandon the person in the “cave,”⁶ saying that we are sure they are right in staying there since that is their opinion and all opinions are equal. Can we respect persons even as we challenge their cherished beliefs, their life projects? Philosophy for children claims that we indeed do both. In fact, true respect means that we take one another seriously enough to listen, reflect, respond. If the community is functioning as a community, participants will be courageous enough to voice what they are thinking or what they have been taught to believe and both they and the other participants will respectfully listen but also challenge beliefs that seem to lack cogent argumentative support or are simply anecdotal.

Finally, the community of philosophical inquiry models a new vision of gender equity which respects differences but gauges them in a context of relevancy. As co-inquirers the boys and girls, young men and women, interact in productive and meaningful way which intrinsically challenge “folk wisdom” stipulations of what boys and girls are like or of what each gender is capable.

“The classroom community of inquiry provides the conditions for the formation of childhood relationships of tolerance, care and even friendship—relationships which are not based primarily on gender. One cannot participate in such a community without learning to take seriously all of its participants and their ideas.”⁷

Therefore the very act of participating in a community of inquiry in which any discussion occurs offers an alternative model for what boys and girls can accomplish, apart from the normative models and definitions foisted upon them by their society through media and the adults in their world. Gender roles are subversively challenged through the very act of philosophical dialogue in which participants are viewed as reflective persons who happen to be male or female as opposed to seeing gender first as definitive and exclusionary of selves. Indeed Ann Margaret Sharp has argued extensively that P4C instantiates a feminist methodology through its emphasis on cooperative reflection rather than confrontation and its stress on care and concern for the other coupled with critical thinking.⁸ In summary, a community of philosophical inquiry models a form of dialogic living that can be taken outside the classroom to be used in the larger cultural environment, where most influence towards rigid gender roles subversively occurs.

Given the potency of the methods used in the P4C model of philosophical inquiry for crossing gender boundaries, what remains to be considered are the topics that might be introduced to nurture genuine and productive reflection on gender concerns within a community of inquiry. Recognizing that no homogenous gender experience exists, we must approach the problematizing of gender from a fluid perspective that takes into account religious beliefs, acceptance and prevalence of media images, beloved and familiar cultural traditions, and the phenomenological experience of the individual as an existential reality within a social reality. Can we even begin to isolate gender experience from the holistic experience of a being in the world, social and natural?⁹ Yet, despite all these fractal notions of the social self, we can affirm that there is to some degree a shared world of being a woman and a shared world of being a man and ultimately the shared world of being human. While these levels of abstraction may be difficult to reach, attempts to move towards them can help us better understand the experience of the whole self. To the extent that I am a woman, that colors my experiences of being white, middle class, American, academic. Of course, those characteristics likewise color my experience of being a woman. These aspects of self inform one another in a multi-layered way that will defy any neat or tidy schematization. However, to abandon hope of any attempt to reflect on gender (or any other category of social being) on the grounds that they are too layered and intertwined leaves one bankrupt of any understanding at all. As long as we remain sensitive to context, open to nuances, we can remain mindful of the partial nature of any abstractions. The abstractions can still remain powerful tools of connection for discourse across differences. Therefore, I would argue that if we can begin to sketch out the parameters of those shared experiences, we can

then overlay our cultural specificities on this common model, even as we begin the process of re-envisioning an enriched meaning of being a man or a woman in the world today.

Topics, Materials, Directions for Philosophical Inquiry

If you peruse the Lipman/IAPC novels for gender issues directly confronted they are not in great evidence. The one major exception is the ball game in **Lisa**¹⁰ where Mikey refuses to let Lisa bat because she isn't good even though she was next in the rotation. Would he have ever done that to a boy? Lisa stands by and doesn't say anything and it is only after the fact that she confronts her friends to ask why they didn't stick up for her. Everyone seems to believe that this was done only because Lisa was a girl. In **Mark**, there is some discussion about Mark's parents where the mother appears to hold a position of more importance and financial status than the father. Despite the lack of systematically overt references to gender roles, throughout many of the novels are embedded opportunities to examine the notions that clearly impact a consideration of gender: the nature of personhood, prejudice and discrimination. But what else might we construct as philosophical prompts for dialogue directly on gender concerns? I would like to offer some seed ideas as possible discussion plans for consideration.

Expanding Stories and beyond

Where do Lipman novels take us in the direct examination of gender? Many of the stories written for young children open with ambiguously named characters and the children are invited to determine the gender of such characters as Elfie, Kio, Gus, Pixie. With the cleverly constructed openness, participants must rely on clues to determine who is a girl, who is a boy. Often stereotypes emerge for examination. Do only girls "twist themselves like a pretzel" or talk so much? Are some names reserved for girls or boys? Could a boy be best friends with a girl? Could a girl be called "Gus?" If the characters hug one another, does that prove that they must be girls? Lively discussions can ensue as the first through fourth graders sketch out and examine the stereotypes that they use to determine gender.¹¹

Secondly, as Laurance Splitter has developed, there are many explicit opportunities to consider the nature of discrimination. Is it always the wrong thing to do? When is discrimination necessary and right? In *Teaching for Better Thinking*, he offers the following discussion plan to provoke nuanced thinking about these issues:¹²

Discussion Plan: Discrimination

- Are all forms of discrimination wrong?
- Can you think of a situation in which discrimination on the basis of skin colour, nationality or religion is permissible?
- Can you think of a situation in which discrimination on the basis of gender or sexuality is permissible?
- What is the difference between prejudice and discrimination?
- Does all form of discrimination involve the formation of stereotypes?, etc.

One project might be to categorize all the points in Lipman novels which introduce concepts involving gender so as to systematically highlight opportunities for a conscious attention to these issues. I am not aware that this has yet been done.¹³

But what other resources might be used to engage dialogue about gender roles? For many young people in Western society today, television, video games, movies and the internet experience dominate and shape their world view. Each of these medium offers a wealth of material for examination. Such TV shows as **Sex and the City**, **Bones**, **30 Rock**, **Hannah Montana**, **The Simpsons**, and of course the ubiquitous "reality" shows could be the basis for an ongoing dialogue on how we depict girls and women in our society. In some of these the women are cast as leaders and independent persons who excel in traditionally male areas. And yet, the women are still portrayed as devoting themselves to finding men who can complete them in fundamental ways. This emphasis on the search for a man is rarely paralleled with male characters as defining themselves by their relationships with women. How are these shows generative of social models for girls, boys, men and women? Video Games in particular tend to be aimed at boys and men and often depict women as subservient and dominated by men. Some feminist philosophers¹⁴ define pornography on the criteria of images of domination and subjection of

women, even when the women appear to be eager and free participants. If we accept this definition of pornography, how many video games aimed at young men would fall into this category?

Movies still feature men in action roles and girls as “eye candy,” even as they karate their way into positions of power¹⁵. Men in movies can be any size and any age and still attract the beautiful [read young and thin] women. The women in films are depressingly similar: thin, blond and under 35, preferably under 30. Rumor has it that most of the young women in the movie industry have a short shelf life and invariably engage in some form of plastic surgery to enhance or “youth-en” their appearance. There is a depressing sameness to the faces of celebrities and models that can only serve to frustrate young women who strive to emulate them.

The world of the internet as owned by young people is mostly foreign territory to the adults in their lives. MySpace and FaceBook are social networking sites which allow people, many of them children and young adults, to display themselves in provocative and sexualized ways, mimicking the media images with which they are bombarded throughout their young lives. Sites such as YouTube offer opportunities to post and view videos which reflect the values of society at large. Many parents are unfamiliar with these types of sites or at best believe that their children are safe on the internet because they are monitoring computer use. In some cases, the value of the computer and internet has been so touted as indicated of intellectual engagement that the mere presence of a computer and the child or young person’s use thereof is viewed benignly and even proudly as a sign of educational advancement.¹⁶



Another form of media that could be introduced for examination is the print media. Magazines abound for girls and women which present the self as completely an exterior creation. Even when magazines include articles that reference career options or important health and safety issues that affect girls and women and life outside the cosmetics counter at Macys, these articles are counterpointed by the dramatic array of ads for clothes, makeup and diet strategies. These advertising images offer a disturbing model for young women as they depict women in prone positions, with vacant stares and dressed in fantastical and sexualized clothes. Young girls read one text but absorb a quite different text of the image, a text which defines them by their appearances in the gaze of the other, a man.¹⁷ The print media thrives on

and promulgates a celebrity culture that delves into the lives of celebrities, focusing on possessions and looks as definitive of who the person is. Here the media holds up these celebrities, some of whose claim to fame is simply that they are celebrities (example redux: Paris Hilton) as the ultimate role models for young people. The sheer dominance of the visual media with these images establishes an atmosphere of unavoidable longing to emulate these images.

No attempt to engage children and young people in reflecting on gender and society can ignore these types of influences. Their power is absolute and trumps any feeble lecturing from teachers or parents and indeed in most cases these media are equally dominating of the adults themselves. Any curriculum in gender inquiry must put these forces on the table for deconstruction and critical examination. It is not a matter of wholesale condemning but rather problematizing them. We might wish to explore such questions as:

Why do images entrance us?

How do images serve as text?

How are images constructed?¹⁸

What constitutes celebrity and what about it is important for us today?

What is the relationship between appearances and fame and happiness?¹⁹

How do movies depict men and women in the workplace? In their personal lives?

Are cartoons more real than reality shows?

Examine the language that men and women use respectively in movies and on television.

How do they refer to themselves and to others?

What constitutes entertainment and how does it function within our lives as individual

and as communities?

Can we learn something without intending to do so?

How are women defined by appearances? How are men defined by appearances?

Similarities/differences?

What does fashion mean for men? For women?

What role does ethnicity, religion, personal belief systems play in the presentation of men and women in the media?

How do music videos portray women and do the videos featuring male artists differ from those of female artists?²⁰ What constitutes the world of the music video as fairy tale, fantasy, aggrandizement of the mundane?

Another source for philosophical prompts could be art. While there are many women artists and musicians, most young people have a difficult time thinking of women in the arts prior to the mid-twentieth century, even in literature. Galleries, museums, concert halls can serve as venues through which to engage students in encountering art and discussing how art constructs gender and how men and women construct art. Contemporary artists like Judy Chicago²¹ or Kiki Smith²² can serve as provocative catalysts for discussions on the silence of historians on women's role in societies in the past as well as the natural world as seen through a feminized lens—a potent contrast with the mechanical, technological world defined and controlled by men. Chicago's work is self-styled "feminist" and she directly confronts and corrects the absence of women in history, developing a visual meditation which could be perceived as complementing the much earlier but still powerful essay by Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*. In viewing her *Dinner Party*, one takes in the scope of the presence of women in history even as they are all but ignored in the traditional sources. Mythical mingle with the real and each character, symbolized visually with a place setting on the table, represents an aspect of human experience that too often is denied or denigrated. We find women in traditionally male roles—priests, philosophers, politicians, artists—but associated with the womanly tasks of food and eating, presence in the home around the table.

For another example, consider this image from Kiki Smith²³



What does this image say about women, nature? Our relationship with the wild? Could we imagine a man in the same situation?

All of the above suggestions are rooted in American, Western culture. One of the challenges for meaningful philosophical dialogue is the charge to avoid foreclosing alternative models of being a man or a woman. Other cultures and religions cast gender in quite different ways from the secular social model assumed above. To what extent can we submit beliefs from other cultures to philosophical scrutiny without running the risk of misunderstanding and misrepresentation? If men and women embrace their cultural heritage, can we dare to critique those heritages or are we simply repeating the mistakes of the West in its colonization of the other? Jennifer Mather Saul argues persuasively that the task of philosophical inquiry is to avoid the Scylla and Charybdis of imposing values on one side and blindly accepting all values on the other. In her text *Feminism: Issues and Arguments*²⁴ she makes the case for dialogue which includes a careful and nuanced listening to others and an openness for shared, as opposed to unilateral, critique. In many ways she echoes the methodology of the Community of Inquiry as she weaves notions of cooperative questioning, plurality, the development and implementation of fluid standards into her model of dialogue. The conclusion is that we can and should subject the practices and beliefs of other cultures, both within and without our own, to careful scrutiny. In doing so we demonstrate genuine respect for the other as well as open up a possibility for a more objective reflection on one's own accepted standards and practices.

There is much potential in adapting the methodology of the P4C movement in education to focus on gender questions which can help children, young people and adults begin to move beyond simple socialization into their roles towards a more reflective instantiation of our being human beings.

Endnotes

- 1 Anecdote related to me by Heidi Eisenhardt, a student in my Philosophy and Woman class, spring 2008
- 2 Some studies claim that 83% of young college age women diet, whether they are overweight or not. See: http://news.med.cornell.edu/nyp_health/nyp_health_2006/most-college-women-diet-o.shtml
- 3 Still about 77 cents to a man's dollar.
- 4 My 24 year old daughter reports that she can not walk along a New York City street without a barrage of comments from men about her appearance. This constant low hum of male aggression colors and shapes young women in our urban societies.
- 5 This proposal is far from original since Ann Margaret Sharp of the IAPC has been championing this idea for a while. See her autobiographical essay "Women, Children and the Evolution of Philosophy for Children" in *Studies in Philosophy for children: Harry Stottlemeiers's Discovery*, edited by Ann Margaret Sharp and Ronald F. Reed, Temple University Press, 1992. Here I am simply attempting to trace out and develop further her ideas.
- 6 An allusion to the allegory of the Cave in Plato's *Republic*.
- 7 Ann Sharp, Laurance Splitter, *Teaching for Better Thinking*, ACER, 1995, p. 208.
- 8 This builds on the extensive writings of Nel Noddings on an ethics of care and its role in re-envisioning the classroom environment.
- 9 This is a serious issue that I sidestep here but which has received thoughtful treatment in the hands of Elizabeth Spelman in her essay, "Woman: The One and the Many", found in *Philosophy of Woman*, edited by Mary Briody Mahowald, Hackett Publishing Company, 1994, pps. 369-398.
- 10 See Lisa, pps. 47.
- 11 These episodes occur in the novels, *Elfie*, *Kio and Gus*, *Pixie*, *Nous*.
- 12 See Sharp and Splitter, op. cit., p. 211.
- 13 This represents a 'talking point' for NAACI participants in case there are materials out there of which I am unaware.
- 14 Catherine McKinnon, Andrea Dworkin, Rae Langton have all written against pornography as a form of silencing and subjugating women in a systematic way, even when the women involved claim to be empowered and choosing to display their bodies and selves.
- 15 *Charlie's Angels* were all gorgeous young women, as are all lawyers, doctors and forensic anthropologists on TV and in the movies.
- 16 The thoughtless championing of computers in education, even down to the preschool level, is a topic beyond this paper's cope but bears need of attention. Why do we assume that using a computer is a sign of

educational advancement and intellectual engagement? “Computers in the classroom” have become a mantra for advocating educational improvements. This merits examination.

- 17 See Griselda Pollack’s “The Visual” in
- 18 For example, view the Dove commercial available online which reveals the amount of photoshopping that goes into an advertisement image: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hibyAJOSW8U>
- 19 Aristotle’s Book I of the *Nichomachean Ethics* comes to mind here.
- 20 For example, contrast videos produced by Luducris and Sean Paul, Black Eyed Peas with those of Madonna, Gwen Stefani and Missy Eliot. How different are these styles? Is gender messaging evident here?
- 21 One of her most famous works, *The Dinner Party*, is on permanent display at the Brooklyn Museum of Art in New York City: http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/dinner_party/
- 22 Kiki Smith is an incredible draughts-person whose prints echo mythic and fairy tale themes even as they invite a studied reflection on women and the natural world: <http://www.moma.org/exhibitions/2003/kiki-smith/>
- 23 found at www.pbs.org/.../artists/s/smith-draw-001.jpg
- 24 Saul, Jennifer Mather. *Feminism: Issues and Arguments*, Oxford University Press, 2003. See chapter nine for an extensive analysis of the options of cross-cultural critique.

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