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An Investigation of Discourse on the Stereotype of ‘Manliness’

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses accounts of the historical development of stereotypical behaviour as preoccupation with classification which, it is argued, became particularly accentuated in modernity as the result of growing social interdependency and group formation. It is argued that during this period a modern stereotype of ‘manliness’ emerged as a positive effect of the bourgeoisie seeking to proclaim their own self-worth. In this respect it is argued that ‘manliness’ was not simply retailed through verbal schemata but became embodied and reflected as an exemplar for the normative prescription of ‘proper’ behaviours (such as gentlemanly conduct) which range from the manners thought appropriate to eating one’s food to the manner by which one evacuates one’s nose. It is suggested that what are commonly considered to be stereotypes are perhaps more properly considered to be countertypes to this ideal image of manliness. Finally some speculations are offered concerning what some might see as the dissolution of ‘manliness’.

INTRODUCTION

In the era of political correctness the idea of stereotyping is repugnant to most people. The term carries the label of a crude and pejorative ascription which reduces the lively diversity of the individual to the monotone of the group. An additional aspect of its everyday use is the manner by which stereotyping relies on the observation of some superficial characteristic or image which is used as a cue to interpret the moral and cognitive ability of the group, by which the individual is assigned to that group. On the face of it the common usage of the term is not all that different to that employed by social psychologists. For Brown (2000: 82) a stereotype is “an inference drawn from the assignment of a person to a particular category”. While the definition refers to the assignment of individuals to groups, it lacks the negative or pejorative sting which the common usage implies. The idea is still based on the aspect of the printing analogy used by Walter Lippman who first used this to describe how people use cognitive moulds to reproduce images of people or events in their minds – the ‘pictures in our heads’ as he called them (Lippman, 1922: 4). In this view stereotyping is a form of classification which is drawn to the visual register. The question thus arises as to whether stereotypes are invariant and inevitable, part of the mind’s sensory apparatus which seeks to induce order and sense into an otherwise chaotic world? While this has been addressed up to a point by psychologists using experimental techniques, as we shall
see in this paper, it is also a point which ought to be addressed through historical research. Psychologists have found that stereotyping can have positive effects in engendering group cohesion, loyalty and in furnishing the materials for identity work. However what is significant and indeed frightening is the extent to which any form of classification can be taken as the basis for stereotyping. Horowitz & Rabbie (1982) initially felt that it would be extremely unlikely that individuals would stereotype complete strangers on the basis that they were allocated to a ‘green’ or to a ‘blue’ group. To their surprise they found that simply placing people into one of these almost meaningless categories had predictable effects on their judgement of real peers. This gives rise to sociological questions which would suggest that historically when a group develops a clear understanding of its identity which effectively classifies it and marks it out from others, stereotypical effects should become more pronounced.

The concept of stereotyping has been an abiding concern for marketing academics who have investigated the representation of stereotypes through the portrayal of sex and ethnic roles in advertising. In relation to ethnicity, Jamison Jr. (1990) argues that variants of the offensive ‘Sambo’ image of Afro-Caribbeans are still be used to portray a number of products while Weaver (1990) argues that most ads continue to be mono-ethnic. There are at least two pertinent discourses surrounding stereotyping in relation to gender. The first concerns the transmission of perceived negative and unrealistic portrayals of female role portrayals in advertising. Several (generally quantitative) studies indicate that that women in many countries around the world are generally critical of advertising messages which convey images that do not reflect life as it is lived and experienced by real women. (Lyonski & Pollay (1990); DeYoung & Crane, (1992). Other qualitative studies have sought to explore the paradox underlying Wortzell & Frisbie’s, (1974) study. These authors concluded that on the one hand, their findings could provide support to the traditional view which argues that women are perfectly satisfied with the range of roles which are offered by advertising; on the other hand advertising may itself have socialized women to expect and to accept traditional role portrayals in ads. Subsequent research has sought to examine in more detail the differing interpretations and cognitive schemata which readers use to organize advertisements (Williams, 1995; Elliott et al. 1993).

Another line of research has explored advertising stereotypes in relation to the projection of ‘unrealistic’ body-images in Western culture. Ewen (1976) looks to the beginning of the twentieth century where he argues, advertisers targeted women in order to accentuate the ‘social self’ through creating feelings of shame and embarrassment. Marshall McLuhan (1967a & 1967b) also focuses on the tendency in early twentieth century advertising which acts to fetishize female body-parts. The concern with body-image has attracted considerable attention from researchers in the past ten years (c.f Grogan, 1999; Monteath & McCabe, 1997). Some authors have noted the steep increase in diet-related articles in women’s magazines and in the popular press since the 1960’s (Garner et al, 1980). Other studies have shown that models in women’s magazines have become slimmer (Silverstein et al, 1986). Further research indicates that in Western
culture the view that “fat = bad” is generally shared as are idealizations of thinness (Harris et al, 1991). Recently there has been much speculation in the media that stereotypical images of the body are having an increasing impact on men (Mort, 1988), which is evidenced by the rising incidence of the anorexia nervosa and bigorexia (Pope, Phillips & Olivardia, 2000).  

The above brief summary illustrates five points which are relevant to this paper. Firstly the investigation of sex-role portrayals in advertising is comparatively recent, apparently coming to the attention of researchers in the ‘post-sixties’ era. Research into body-image pre-dates this to the early twentieth century. However, until recently none of the research has been longitudinal or historical but has confined itself to cross-sectional studies investigating contemporary trends. Secondly the general assumption underlying research is that stereotypes are negative and should be countered or avoided. Thirdly, the focus on stereotypes as essentially cognitive phenomena tends to mask their insinuation into bodily expression. Fourthly, while men have been included in studies for purposes of comparison women have comprised the overwhelming focus of research. Finally there appears to be a generally accepted narrative which seems to underpin a number of texts, that women were the first and most vulnerable targets for the portrayal of stereotypical idealised images; that men were until recently, relatively immune to such images and are only now succumbing to their power.

This paper develops a broad historical focus in considering the rise of stereotyping as an inevitable of the increasing tendency to classify which accompanies modernity. In this respect any stereotype, including the ideal image of ‘manliness’ discussed below can only adequately be understood as the outcome of the changing relations between groups. The focus thus shifts to consider those forces which lead to increased classification and to explanations which locate the development of the modern ideal of manliness as the positive aspiration of the bourgeoisie.

GENDER RELATIONS: FROM WARRIOR CLASS TO THE COURT SOCIETY

The scope of Norbert Elias’s (1994) work is immense, taking as its focus the gradual civilization of European society in the period from the fall of the Roman empire to the early modern period. Elias contends that during this period patterns of growing interdependency between people especially following the establishment of court societies led to a fundamental change in human affairs which was embodied in the removal of violence from the social scene to the interior of the individual psyche. The society which predated court society was a warrior society which encouraged and took great pleasure in killing and in torturing others. Elias notes that with the (few) exceptions of those women who chose to emulate men, the role of women was difficult in this warrior society; women were regarded as the property of the warrior class, useful for procreation and enjoyment but little else. Strangers were not regarded as human - it seems that the only

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‘humans’ recognised by peasants were their own nobility—while strangers had a particularly bad time “The others stare at him fixedly as if he were a fabulous animal from Africa.” (1994: 57/8). Elias reminds us that in addition to aggression and brutality there was much gaiety and joy during this period which was characterized by an intensity, openness and lack of constraint of human behaviour that most modern “civilized” people today would find shocking. A transition came about as new forms of consolidation centred around the development of court societies emerged in the Middle Ages. Within the strictly hierarchical and restricted court circle, and encouraged above all by the presence of the lady, who was the wife of the lord or ruler, more peaceful forms of conduct become obligatory. While knights or troubadors (musicians) could act with brutal violence towards their own wives, or women of lower rank, they were expected to act delicately with respect to those above them in rank, and particularly with respect to the lady of the territorial lord, who was regarded as the ideal of ‘courtly love’. Ideals of chivalry and courtly love were developed in an atmosphere where acute attention was paid to the development of manners through the disciplining forces of shame (at having one’s own ‘unseemly’ behaviour exposed) and embarrassment at the behaviour of others.

THE DRIVE FOR CLASSIFICATION IN MODERNITY

As court societies developed so power became centralized in the hands of kings rather than regional overlords. Gradually the warrior class became transformed into courtiers who were reliant upon the king for patronage. As major administrative centres, court societies required a supply of skilled administrators and as the size and complexity of these centres grew, so the administrators developed into a separate class, the bourgeoisie. Elias links the subsequent development of systems of manners to a kind of mimetic dance engaged in by the court nobility who sought to distance themselves and the bourgeoisie who sought to emulate the nobility. The categories of ‘courtier’ and ‘bourgeois’ progressively hardened and formed types as the former sought to maintain its distance and the latter sought to emulate in a constant cycle of ‘catch-up. Elias’s work has been instrumental in influencing Bourdieu (1988) and Mennell (1991) among others, each of whom vividly demonstrates the manner by which such classifications are not simply cognitive but are insinuated into the minutiae of bodily behaviour. However at this point Elias’s account peters out and so we switch to Foucault’s (1976) account of the development of classification in modernity. Focuault notes that in seeking to maintain their distinctiveness the nobility had an ace up their sleeves with respect to the bourgeoisie; “breeding” or ‘blue-blood’. How could the bourgeoisie compete against such pedigree? Foucault argues simply that: “It converted the blue blood of the nobles into a sound organism and a healthy sexuality”. The bourgeoisie thus became preoccupied with ensuring and increasing the normality, health and longevity of their stock. The creation of a ‘healthy’ sexuality involved the identification and rooting out of all that was ‘unhealthy’ in the social body of the bourgeois class. This involved the construction of a ‘body’ of knowledge by medics and other experts (who were of course themselves bourgeois). The

2 Source: Foucault, 1976: 126
mechanism for revealing this knowledge was borrowed from the Church in the form of the confessional. People confessed their diverse problems to the medics and the medics in turn came up with a range of perversions and other ‘unnatural’ sexual identities. Sexuality thus began to be seen as the object of medical attention, via the understanding of the etiology (cause) of ‘nervous disorders’ and of psychiatric attention via the labelling and understanding of ‘mental illnesses’. The role of the expert was to identify the ‘unnatural’ or ‘perverted’ in the same way that a surgeon might identify a lesion. An entire mechanism of power was thus brought to bear on the body, on identifying what was ‘normal’. There was an important difference between the way in which perversions were treated by Christianity and by the new medicine. The focus of Christianity was upon the act or the sin; ‘buggery’ was thus a repugnant act for which a person should confess and do penance. Medicine on the other hand located the act as an essential part of the identity of the person. We see here what was scattered (the sin) becoming solidified and essentialized in the construction and classification of an identity for the person. As a result the person becomes identified on the basis of his or her sex; ‘homosexual’. As Foucault notes ‘the sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species’.  

The drive for ‘normalcy’ which is productive of stereotypical behaviour may be seen in Foucault’s account as the expression of the ‘will-to-power’ of the bourgeois class, which partially explains the relentless drive towards classification in modernity. Another possible reason is as an attempt to create certainty amid the bewildering flux of modernity where rapid industrialization and rural change led to more frequent exchanges with the ‘other’. Beforehand as Elias (op. cit.) has noted, otherness had a remote and fantastical quality. Now that people came more frequently to live with the ‘stranger next door’ there was a desperate need for the safety guaranteed by a knowledge of the other. Thus Baudrillard (1993) argues that in the age of modernity radical otherness became reduced to (knowable, classifiable) difference. In Foucault’s (1976) account the medical discourse of the body is not negative but productive in that it seeks to create ‘normal’ healthy bodies in relation to an ideal, in acting to positively define the image of the bourgeois class. However Foucault does not go into any detail about the nature of the ‘normalising’ image itself, nor how it might have been created.

THE IDEAL OF MANLINESS: ‘HEALTHY’ MINDS AND BODIES

What is the nature of the stereotypical ideal of ‘manliness’ and how did it come to dominate Western sensibility? Mosse (1996) offers an account which can be read alongside Foucault’s (ibid.) in that he links the creation of the ideal of beauty enshrined in the stereotype of manliness to the bourgeois society that was in the making at the end of the 19th century. Mosse argues that while the

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3 Source: Foucault, 1976: 43
4 It is worth noting that Foucault differs in some respects to Elias in relation to the mechanism by which this is achieved. While the latter argues that normative pressures are exerted as the result of processes of shame and embarrassment. Instead Foucault argues that the human subject is effectively disciplined through being constantly monitored through a hierarchy and in being subjected to examinations and rewards and/or punishments.
aristocratic ideal of masculinity offered many important attributes for the bourgeoisie to emulate, it lacked the hard edge and moral imperatives essential to modern masculinity. The bourgeoisie borrowed many aspects of the chivalric code of the nobility, including loyalty, righteousness, prowess, sobriety and perseverance, but ‘stripped of their violence’ (the duel).5 A central theme of the new masculinity was the image of an idealised physical appearance which developed at a time when the western European populace was becoming more visually literate exemplified not only by national symbols but by the effects of sciences such as physiognomy and anthropology with their classifications of men according to standards of classical beauty. Mosse argues that the key to this middle class creation of the ideal of beauty enshrined in the stereotype of manliness lies in the Enlightenment belief that body and spirit are united. This argument, which predates that developed by the eugenics movement by almost a century, holds that one can ‘read’ a person’s character from their physiognomy. James Kaper Lavater (1781) introduced a new way of seeing men and women through their physical profile, the shape of the nose, the colour of the eyes and bodily structure, which supposedly expressed true character. In this sense he sought to found a science which was based on the recognition of the hidden character of a human being through their outward appearance. Lavater was explicit about the kind of morality that makes man physically beautiful: love of work, moderation and cleanliness are conducive to bodily health and clean-cut limbs.6 Medicine encouraged the linkage between spiritual and bodily characteristics and in encouraging moderation. Tissot’s (1761) work on masturbation asserts that those who practice the vice of masturbation will not only become pale, effeminate and devoid of energy but also melancholic and lacking in self-control.

Mosse contends that in the second half of the eighteenth century the Greek ideal of beauty which was advocated by and popularized by John Joachim Winckelmann (1717-1768) did much to shape perceptions of the ideal male body. Winkelmann was obsessed with the need to rediscover the beauty of Greek sculpture and in particular those which depicted young male athletes which exemplified harmony, proportion and self-control.7 According to Mosse, Winckelmann’s work struck a general chord at the time such that his ideal of beauty became a paradigm. Thus ‘timeless’ classical figures signifying ‘noble simplicity and quiet greatness’8 came to adorn new buildings and were also represented in the paintings of the time.9 Winckelmann’s ideas spread throughout Europe where while essentially unchanged they were revised.10 Mosse notes that this

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5 In Mosse (1996: 19)
7 Mosse notes that Winckelmann’s own homosexuality is not irrelevant in this regard and that a homoerotic sensibility stood at the start of an image that was to inform the ideal of normative masculinity such as the clean-cut Englishman or the all-American boy (1996: 32).
8 Ibid. 36
9 For example in Jacques-Louis David, held to be the most important painter during the French Revolution.
10 Thus in England the manly ideal came to be influenced not only by Winckelmann’s Appollo of Belvedere but by the Elgin Marbles which are shown in active postures. In fact two criticisms of Winckelmann stood out by the end of the nineteenth century: that they are immobile and are not close enough to the reality of life. However despite this the emphasis on proportion, on the character of the
standard of male beauty which had been set in place by the second half of the 18th century was co-opted by those stressing racial or national peculiarities without realizing that other nations shared the same ideal.

While the standard for male beauty had been set, how was this to be reached? Mosse argues that different countries favoured different methods. The gymnasium played a major role in much of central Europe including Germany, where, following the French Revolution, gymnastics became part of the reform of the schools. On the other hand in Italy and France gymnastics took off slowly and was not really established until the mid-19th century when it became institutionalised in the Italian military training programme. As Mosse describes it:

“As the nineteenth century progressed, gymnastics became a social hygiene that might even serve to transform feckless proletarians into virtuous citizens and keep socialism, internationalism and nihilism at bay.”

In England on the other hand, the idea of manly virtue became linked to team sports; thus it was said that ‘a truly chivalrous football player’ is never guilty of lying deceit or meanness. Mosse notes that this ‘steeling’ and ‘sculpting’ of the male body had a significance which went well beyond matters of health and hygiene or acquiring strength and motor skills. It created manly beauty and character. It forged a stereotype.” Through being taught in religious and military contexts the characteristics of moderation, harmony and self-control were co-joined by those virtues embodied in the ideals of ‘fighting the good fight’, the camaradie of the ‘band of brothers’, heroism, and the necessity of the need to fight and to die to maintain one’s freedom (usually defined as the freedom of the nation). All of these attributes were pinned to the image of the sculpted body; against which the real body was seen to betray its strength of character, or the lack of it.

THE OTHER IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE MASCULINE IDEAL

The new masculine ideal expressed itself in the sharpened and accentuated boundaries between what was ‘manly’ and what was ‘other’, namely women and those marginalized groups which formed countertypes to the stereotypical ideal. Mosse argues that such sharpened divisions had material effects for the position of women; for example the Code Napoleon regarded women as chattels and excluded them from the active world of men, acting as a corollary to changes already taking place in the development of the factory system and the nuclear family. However the extremely potent normative power of the ideal made itself felt in distinction to those other men who formed countertypes to it. Against the image of manliness were cast all of those who could never live up to this ideal; gypsies, vagrants, Jews, habitual criminals and sexual deviants. The same systematization which defined the ideal was also applied to the countertype which came to symbolize physical and moral disorder. The countertype differed in every detail from the manly ideal incorporating restlessness, shiftiness and a lack of harmony in bodily form which together were seen as the counterpoint to a mind that lacked control over the passions., where

whole figure and in keeping passion in check remained.

honour became cowardice, where honesty was unknown and lustfulness had replaced purity. Such images were concretized through mythical forms such as the Wandering Jew. Additionally those men who did not live up to the ideal, perhaps because they were slight of build or suffered from poor health were labelled as being effeminate, a term which came into general usage during the eighteenth century, “indicating an unmanly softness and delicacy”. There also arose the fear of pollution from the countertype which could infect the manly ideal. This was bolstered by the social Darwinist flavour of scientific wisdom of the time which became increasingly concerned with the classification and control of deviant sexuality. Those who were considered to be ‘loose’ living were perceived to cut at the roots of modern society, threatening to destroy its tender fabric. Mosse notes that modern masculinity prescribed the norm, and those who lay outside of its prescription were regarded as the enemies of society. However during at the turn of the 19th century social changes including labour unrest, the rise of the socialist movement and prolonged economic difficulties were interpreted as being signs of decadence and indicators of degeneration inspired by the increased visibility of ‘unmanly’ men and ‘unwomanly’ women.

THE DISSOLUTION OF MANLINESS?

There is no space here to chart the early twentieth century preoccupations with eugenics which while finding its apogee in the Nazi extermination programme was also strong in England, where the Eugenics Review was published until the late 1930s, and in other European countries. Nor is there room to document how the middle-class ideal of manliness came to be incorporated as the ideal for the upper and working classes and those to the left and to the right of the political spectrum.

This final section considers very briefly the extent to which the ideal of manliness remains with us. Mosse (1996) argues that the main force of the concept has indeed been dissolved and that this is due in great part to the growing hegemony of the USA. He suggests that that one reason is the expression of the female ‘will-to-power’ which presented itself in the early twentieth century and later in the 1970s and thereafter.

One might also conjecture that changing patterns of work and dependency have played a major role in the definition of the imaginary ‘new-man’. Mosse prefers to accentuate the influence of cultural factors arising from the growing hegemony of the USA in the post WWII period, including the development and export of the category of ‘teenager’, the influence of Beat and 1960s counterculture which deliberately obfuscated gender divisions. In my view he underplays the role of marketing programmes. For example chapter five of Ewen’s (1976) account of the development of US consumerism in the 1920’s argues that advertising supplemented the power of women while reducing that of the male:

“Thus while women were cultivated as general purchasing managers for the household, the basic definition of men in the ads was as bread-winners, wage-earners. Man’s role was divested of all social authority, except insofar as his

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12 Ibid. 9.
It is not difficult to understand why in the US of the 1920’s advertisers cleverly associated the appeal of their modern new products with modern liberated women, for while both may have had quite different reasons, they had a common aim, the defeat of traditional values. Mosse does observe that during the 1980s and 1990s advertisers employed a similar logic in promoting the (once monstrous) image of the androgyne.

Yet Mosse notes that despite these changes the image of the sculpted male body is still with us. According to him the male ideal has not been banished but eroded and contains to function as a force in society.

CONCLUSION

This paper has sketched with a broad brush in seeking to demonstrate the usefulness of situating an account of stereotypes in an historical context. Using a term devised by Foucault (1976) it constitutes a modest attempt to trace the genealogy of the stereotype of manliness and in so doing, to provide a context for the discussion of contemporary explorations of gender. In contrast to the concern of much current marketing enquiry into stereotypes the paper seeks to demonstrate the positive role which they can play with respect to the securing of identity. Instead it is the portrayal of the countertype, the other of the stereotype, which promotes most concern. Another aspect which was raised, but which could perhaps have been discussed in more detail is the embodiment of stereotypical classifications in the finest nuances of human conduct. For example Elias (1994) discusses how the handkerchief was progressively introduced to the different echelons of society through the ages. Bourdieu (1996) brings Elias’s story more or less up to date in recounting below the differences in which a woman is supposed to use a Kleenex and a man a large cotton handkerchief in twentieth century France:

“It would be easy to show, for example, that Kleenex tissues, which have to be used delicately, with a little sniff from the tip of the nose, are to the big cotton handkerchief which is blown into sharply and loudly, with the eyes closed and the nose held tightly, as repressed laughter is to a belly laugh, with wrinkled nose, wide-open mouth and deep breathing (‘doubled up with laughter’), as if to amplify to the utmost an experience which will not suffer containment, not least because it has to be shared, and therefore clearly manifested to the benefit of others.” (1984: 192)

There are two lessons to be learned from the above. The first is that even the most mundane and apparently trivial physiological function may be used to mark complex social differences. Second such markers change over time and are related to control over bodily expressions. From the passage above the degree of bodily control expected of women with respect to the use of the handkerchief is more rigid than that for men. One might suggest that this observation can be generalised across the range of bodily expressions for men and for women and that is not limited to Western societies. Within society gender is thus an important factor in determining the degree of self-control that is to be expected of a person in a given situation.

The paper also seeks to raise some questions about the nature of
stereotypes. It challenges the contemporary view that males have only recently succumbed to stereotypical mass-mediated images in showing that a powerful image lay at the foundation of the modern conception of masculinity. A number of question arises with respect to the relations between social classification, group behaviours and the formation of stereotypes. If the modern stereotype of manliness arose as symbolizing the ideal type of the bourgeoisie at a time when they sought to exalt their position to that of the nobility and to attain a sense of stability and self-worth in the face of the flux of modernity, then would the decline in the force of such stereotypes lead logically from the reduction of the classifying power of socialization and the return to what Bauman (1993) calls the spirit of sociality or the crowd and which Maffesoli (1997) celebrates as the return of Dionysus?

The discussion also recognizes a number of interesting parallels and differences between authors. While Elias, Foucault, Mosse and Bourdieu constitute admirable sources for the reconstruction of the stereotype of manliness and while they often concur on matters of fact there are a number of important differences between the explanations which they advance. There is obviously room for a range of studies which seek to develop more plural accounts of the concept of ‘manliness’ (much in the flavour of Elliott et. al.1993, or in Thompson & Hirschman, 1995).

REFERENCES


The power of men to control the management of family finances in Western society was considerable until fairly recently. The management of finances posed a major problem for many women whose husbands predeceased them as their husbands retained rigid control of the family finances until they died. A major Scottish Bank only recently closed its “ladies” branch, which was specifically designed to help such women.