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Can men and women be separate but equal? In our modern society, equality of the sexes is generally accepted as a fact. However, according to Separate Spheres Ideology, women and men have different spaces in society where they fit best. This ideology traditionally says that women belong in the home and in situations involving child care, while men are better suited for the workplace (Miller & Borgida, 2016). Can men and women be expected to fulfill separate roles in society and still be treated as equals? What positive or negative effects do gender roles have on individuals and organizations? Are societal roles based on gender unethical, or do they serve a necessary function? Can history teach us anything about gender roles? In this research paper, I will examine common gender roles and stereotypes in American society, their effects on women, and their influence on child development and the workplace.

In any argument for gender roles, functional theory comes into play. Functional theory would argue that gender roles hold a significant position in society because of the purpose that they serve. In a study published in the Journal of Labor Economics, it was found that in cases where the mother stayed at home, the GPA of the children was benefited significantly when compared to cases where both parents worked. Interestingly, their study concluded that this impact on grades was most likely due to the role of the mother in the home, rather than the economic position of the family or the working status of the father (Bettinger, Hægeland & Rege, 2014). This study provides strong support for a functional explanation of gender roles. If

the success of the children can be attributed to the presence of the mother in the home, functional theory would designate the success of children to be the manifest function of gender roles.

Another study on the critical role of mothers in the development of their children was published in 2006 by Dr. Myron Hofer. He researched an interesting perspective relating to the psychobiological development of children and infants by examining infant rats and their mothers. He found that when separated from their mothers, infants experienced serious trauma that was manifested in physical ways. In 80% of these separation cases, the infants developed gastric ulcers. Dr. Hofer concluded that these ulcers were a response to the stress and trauma of separation, as infants who were permitted to stay with their mothers did not demonstrate any kind of adverse effects. He also found that the rats demonstrated the types of complex emotional responses that would be expected in humans. In his own words, "To our surprise, we found that, like primate infants, infant rats show a complex biphasic protest–despair response to maternal separation" (Hofer, 2006). This study indisputably shows the essential bond between mother and infant. This mother-child relationship plays a huge role in child development, and when removed or compromised, the child is very likely to suffer serious adverse effects. This is a very compelling argument for Separate Sphere Ideology.

The backbone of the case for gender roles is found in these two studies. Separate Sphere Ideology focuses on the functionalist perspective to gender roles by emphasizing that children suffer in homes where there is no mother present. The studies cited so far have thoroughly detailed the psychological, biological, and social effects that traditional gender roles can have upon children, but have failed to examine the effects of Separate Sphere Ideology upon women and mothers. These studies have also failed to examine whether the positive effects are a result

of specifically the mother fulfilling the parental role, or if a father can be just as effective in that parent-child relationship.

A study published by the American Journal of Men's Health in 2015 looked at homes where the father stayed at home and the mother worked full-time. This study found something entirely contradictory to Separate Sphere Ideology--they found that children thrived regardless of the gender of the parent in the home. They noticed that parent-child relationships actually improved when the gender of the stay at home parent was a non factor in the decision as to who would be the caregiver. As a result of their findings, they suggested that the decision as to which parent stayed at home should be based on characteristics such as inherent ability and willingness rather than gender. Their study actually indicated that in the best interests of the children, the desire of the caregiver to stay at home is a far more significant factor in predicting their success than gender. In another fascinating result, they found that spousal relationships also improved when the male became the primary caregiver--couples reported greater unity and a more equal distribution of labor inside the home and out (Rushing & Powell, 2015).

This argument against gender roles is powerful when you consider other natural examples such as emperor penguins, seahorses, foxes, marmosets and many other species. In some cases such as seahorses, males actually bear the offspring. All of these are cases where the male takes on primary nurturing responsibilities after the birth of the offspring (Bryner & Pappas, 2011). These natural examples give further weight to the argument that gender may not be as important as previously thought when considering child care.

As we move on to examining other aspects of gender roles, we invariably come to the workplace, where we see that men and women are far from being treated as equals. Currently,

only about 22% of C-suite level executives are women. Approximately 1 in 4 employees have witnessed gender bias against women while at work in the last year. Women are also twice as likely as men to report microaggressions or bias against them in the workplace. These statistics are showing a trend towards equality (for example, +24% growth in women at C-suite level positions in the last 4 years), but they still show inequality and gender bias in the workplace (McKinsey & Co., 2019). In the United States, laws have been implemented in order to protect gender equality, but unfortunately, it seems that the workplace still harbors a considerable amount of sexism.

Where do these gender biases come from? Why does sexism persist in America despite legal efforts to eradicate it? A study conducted in 1982 may give us some further insight as to why Separate Sphere Ideology has been so resilient. This study was a survey of parents of children at a school designed to give equal learning opportunities to girls and boys alike. The results of their survey were very informative. The vast majority of parents expressed equal support for their children to pursue higher education, regardless of gender. However, when it came to careers, Separate Sphere Ideology was very visible in their answers. Parents were asked what things they would like their children to consider when they eventually chose their careers. For boys, the most common themes were making money, being successful, supporting a family, and doing things they were good at. In contrast, girls were encouraged to choose things they enjoyed. This subtle difference is very significant in identifying how negative gender bias and gender stereotypes continue to thrive--while boys and girls are both encouraged to pursue education, the boys are told that it is primarily to be successful, while the girls are told to choose a career based off of their interests (Kelly, et al. 1982)

Recent studies have also found that these gender stereotypes are emerging at early ages. Children ages 5-7 were studied as researchers examined the development of gender socialization. Around age 5, they told children a story about a very smart and successful person. After the story was finished, they asked them if they thought the person in the story was a girl or a boy. The girls said they protagonist was a girl, and the boys said the protagonist was a boy, demonstrating an expected same-gender bias. However, when they repeated the same exercise with children who had already begun to attend school (1st and 2nd grades), that same-gender bias began to disappear. Girls began to say that the protagonist in the story was most likely a boy indicating that they identified the words "smart" and "successful" as masculine rather than feminine. This same study also had a separate section where they asked children to rate their skill levels at STEM related subjects. Boys generally said that they were naturally good at math and science, while girls were more likely to say that they worked hard at those same subjects (Cvencek, Meltzoff, & Greenwald, 2011). This shows that gender bias is playing a powerful role in restricting women in the workplace, beginning the process of socialization when they are incredibly young.

In conclusion, we can see the arguments for both sides. Proponents of strict gender roles often turn to studies about the effects that mothers have on their children in the home. They also talk about the drastic consequences when the child is deprived of a strong mother-child connection. However, we see that these arguments lose a lot of weight in light of studies that have shown that a mother-child relationship is less important than a strong parent-child relationship. Examples in nature also show that fathers can fulfill that area of child development just as well as mothers. The argument for gender roles is further dissolved as sexism in school

and in the workplace is examined. Overall, the research shows that women suffer tremendous

inequality as a result of strong gender roles in society, and that child development does not suffer

when women abandon these traditional roles. Finally, I turn to a historical example to help state

my position on the subject. Brown v. the Board of Education was a pivotal Supreme Court case

in establishing equal rights and protection for everyone, regardless of race. Chief Justice Earl

Warren said this: "The 'separate but equal' doctrine rests on the basic premise that the Negro

race is inferior… we conclude unanimously that the doctrine of 'separate but equal' has no place.

Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal" (Ourdocuments.gov, 2019). To

paraphrase Chief Justice Warren--separate spheres are inherently unequal. Separate Spheres

Ideology creates more obstacles for women in the home, in school, in the workplace and in

virtually every other aspect of their lives. These extra obstacles are having an incredibly

negative impact on women in the United States and worldwide. Racial segregation in the United

States was based on the "basic premise that the Negro race is inferior" (Ourdocuments.gov,

2019). In a very similar way, gender segregation is also based off of the inherent assumption

that women are inferior to men. Because of this inherent assumption, the rights of women in

America are frequently compromised. Women and men cannot be treated as "separate but

equal" in a society if equality is to be held as a core value. Thus, gender roles and stereotypes

have no place in the United States.

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