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Final Paper: Gender Social Groups, and Oppression

In his article, “Barbie Girls Versus Sea Monsters: Children Constructing Gender,” Michael A. Messner analyzes the construction of gendered social groups through interactional, structural, and cultural perspectives (Messner 765). (Please note when I use the term “gendered social groups” I am referring to social groups within which members are united by shared gender identity.) Messner’s insight provides sociological analyses of gender construction which support Iris Marion Young’s argument in “Five Faces of Oppression” that oppression is structural because oppression is a condition of social groups. Before I can demonstrate the ways in which Messner’s discussion supports Young’s argument, it is important to understand Young’s argument and Messner’s article separately. So, first I will provide an explanation of Young’s argument and summaries of Messner’s three levels of analysis, then I will justify my choice to relate these two sources, and finally I will discuss how Messner’s analyses support Young’s argument.

Young argues that oppression is structural. “Oppression,” in this context, refers to the disadvantage or injustice of a group (Young 42). By claiming that oppression is structural, Young is saying that oppression in contemporary society is not created/perpetuated by a dominant group ruling over a subordinate group (though historically that is what oppression

was). However, Young does believe that for every oppressed group there is a privileged group, but that is drastically different than an oppressing group. Oppression is created/perpetuated through “the everyday practices of a well-intentioned liberal society” (Young 41). Basically, Young argues that oppression is created and maintained through people carrying out their daily social and cultural practices, unaware of their roles as agents of oppression.

Young justifies her argument that oppression is structural by asserting that oppression is a condition of social groups (Young 42). In order to understand why oppression as a social group condition reasonably defends Young’s claim, it is necessary to understand her concept of a social group. My following description of how Young defines social groups is rather thorough because it is imperative to my later analysis of Messner’s study. I will now present three important aspects of social groups according to Young which demonstrate how oppression exists as a condition of social groups, and then I will to discuss *why* oppression as a condition supports Young’s argument.

First, a social group is “a collective of persons differentiated from at least one other group by cultural forms, practices, or ways of life” (Young 41). For example, women are a social group. If, hypothetically, everyone had the same gender identity, social groups differentiated by gender (namely, the social group: women) would not exist.

The next aspect of social groups to note is that members of a social group share an affinity for each other because of their shared experiences and cultural practices (Young 43). For example, women are united by shared common experiences and understandings regarding the sexual division of labor. Thus, members of the social group, “women,” develop affinity for one

another because they are subject to similar social treatment as consequence of their membership in said social group.

The aforementioned sexual division of labor exemplifies the third important aspect of a social group: social groups are differentiated in a society through social processes (Young 43). Members of different social groups are treated differently by the society they navigate. If people were not treated differently because of gender identity, women, or any genders for that matter, would not be social groups because gender would not have any social consequences.

So, we can see now how daily social and cultural processes create social groups distinguished from one another within which members share an affinity for each other. Different groups, then, receive different treatment from others as they navigate society and are encouraged to fulfill certain roles, behave certain ways, and interact with certain things all in accordance with the social group with which they are affiliated. All three of these features of social groups work together to create a common identity within members of a group that contains implications regarding one's social status (Young 44).

So that is what social groups are and how they determine one's operations in a society. But, social groups would be inconsequential if group membership was entirely voluntary. Young believes that social group membership often is not an individual's choice. People are "thrown" into social groups by how others perceive them (Young 46). Since social groups have meanings which impact the social statuses of its members, and since said members often have no choice but to operate as a member of said group (a claim which is made more explicit by Sally Haslanger in "You Mixed? Racial Identity without Racial Biology."), social groups can serve as oppressive agents. For example, women are an oppressed a social group because meaning is

ascribed to their membership of said group associated with physical and emotional frailty. Such ascriptions certainly impact women's career opportunities.

Since individuals do not get to choose their group affiliation, and since membership within certain groups can cause individuals to be marginalized or exploited, we can see that social groups are able to be oppressed. Aggregates in which affiliation is voluntary cannot be oppressed, nor can individuals except as members of a social group. This, combined with my earlier point that oppressed groups need not have a correlating oppressing group (though there is often a privileged group (Young 41)) defends Young's claim that oppression is structural. Oppression is not one group oppressing another. Oppression is a population going about their business unknowingly sorting, organizing, and judging others based on their involuntary social group affiliation.

Now that I have discussed Young's argument and concept of a social group, I will change gears and talk about Michael A. Messner. Messner's article is a multilevel analysis of gender construction that is organized around an isolated incident that took place during the opening ceremony of a youth soccer league. During said event, Messner observed children and parents constructing gender. He viewed two 3-5 year old soccer teams, one team of all girls and one of boys (the Barbie Girls and Sea Monsters, respectively). During the evening's festivities, the two teams interacted with each other in a way that confirmed observing adults' beliefs that boys and girls are innately different. Messner analyzes the incident through interactional, structural, and cultural perspectives, and he draws conclusions from each one about how gender group formation works. Messner's conclusions for the three perspectives are as follows.

At an interactional level, Messner concludes that people “perform” gender for those around them, and the degree to which gender impacts interactions varies greatly in salience from circumstance to circumstance (Messner 780). To say that one is “performing” gender means that they are aware of differing genders around them and are ensuring their own identity is separate from other genders by behaving how their gender is “supposed to.” Messner found that this “performance” is often used in justifying supposed natural boundaries between genders, but I will discuss that in detail later.

In his discussion on the structural nature of gender, Messner concludes that instances in which gender is highly salient (meaning instances in which involved parties are performing gender with high intensity) are made possible by informal and formal sexual segregation. Informal segregation often influences what roles people voluntarily fill. For example, in the volunteer-based soccer league Messner studied, 85% of head coaches were men, and 86% of “team managers” (parent in charge of snacks) were women. From this observation Messner concludes that adults have observed what roles their gender typically fills, and that is where they are most likely to volunteer. (Messner 774-780). The children, however, are formally segregated, into boys’ teams and girls’ teams. This formal sexual segregation sends a clear message to the children that the boys and girls are two different groups. Thus, when these two formerly segregated parties clash in a context in which the division of labor is sexually structured, their gender identities grow extremely salient in an effort to solidify group identity.

Then, in his cultural analysis, Messner concludes that popular symbols in culture (like Barbie) are analyzed differently by individuals of various backgrounds and therefore can be used to reproduce gender binary conceptions of the sexes (Messner 781). So, as boys and girls see

each other as separate groups, they come to associate icons as either an affirmation or an attack on their identity. Barbie is a feminine icon, and therefore viewed as an outgroup icon by boys.

Lastly and most importantly, Messner concludes that to fully understand the creation of gender, one must examine all three frameworks in relation to one another. Structural construction and interactional construction of gender would not exist without each other. Messner's cultural gender analysis only pertains to the perpetuation of gendered social groups and thus would not exist if gender wasn't formed through interactional and structural means first.

My last order of business before I can discuss how Messner's article supports Young's argument is to justify my choice to compare these two sources. Young's argument is that oppression is structural because it is a condition of social groups. Messner's article is a discussion of the processes by which young children learn to identify as members of gendered social groups and how said social groups perpetuate beliefs in adults about innate differences in binary genders.

Messner also discusses how interactions between groups (along with various cultural symbols) solidify and define group identity. In short, Messner's article provides detailed observations and analyses that can be used to demonstrate Young's understanding of social groups as entities that can be structurally oppressed. To communicate how Messner's article backs Young's argument, I will correspond each of Messner's three levels of analysis with various aspects of Young's conception of social groups.

Messner's discussion on the interactional nature of gender strengthens Young's claim that social groups form in relation to other groups. In this section of his article, Messner states that gender is situationally constructed, and he refers to gender as a "performance" (Messner

769). And what does every performance need? An audience. (Finally a use for my theatrical training in philosophy!) The degree to which gender is performed is determined by several factors, the most important of which is the presence of people of other genders. In Messner's example, the Sea Monsters formed a sense of identity in relation to the presence of the nearby Barbie Girls. In this specific instance, the Sea Monsters observed the Barbie Girls performing what Messner calls a "feminine ritual," in which the girls danced around to Barbie music with a large Barbie doll and thus celebrated their group identity. (I recognize that Young does not discuss group "rituals" in her argument but I think they are relevant here. Rituals and behavior are two key ways in which social groups influence behavior.) The boys, then, felt threatened by the presence of an opposing social group and, to solidify their own group as different from the girls, began chanting, "NO BARBIE" (Messner 769).

Clearly, this event exemplifies groups existing in relation to other groups. It also demonstrates the affinity group members share with one another. In the process of becoming members of their social groups (boys and girls), the children have learned to interact with Barbie differently. The girls see Barbie as an icon of their social group and the boys see it as an icon of an outside group, even perhaps as a threat to their own identity. Therefore, each group's identity is strengthened by their varying perceptions of Barbie.

Messner's structural analysis of gender relates to Young's point that oppression is carried out by well meaning individuals living their lives, and not by an oppressive group. In this analysis, Messner reflects on divisions of labor and power even in volunteer positions. The mothers of the soccer league typically filled caretaking roles, and the fathers took on positions of authority. These parents voluntarily segregated themselves by what roles they fill in the soccer

league. While the stakes are low in this scenario, one can assume that due to differing socialization of men and women, a similar process occurs within professional contexts (like what careers different genders are typically associated with). Thus, we can see how, even though there are no “formal” oppressive restraints placed on women, individual’s choices are strongly influenced by their perception of who fills said role (Messner 771). So, oppression exists within unquestioned norms and interactions just as Young argues.

In his cultural discussion, Messner elaborates on my earlier reference to the varied readings of Barbie as a cultural icon. This discussion supports Young’s understanding of social groups insofar as the fact that group members do not voluntarily join groups, rather individuals find themselves as members of a group after being subject to the same social processes as their fellow group members. Boy and girls reacted to Barbie differently and it is likely that up to this point, boys have been discouraged from playing with Barbie, while girls have been empowered to do so (Messner 775). There was no meeting in which the boys decided that they all hated Barbie and the girls decided the opposite, nor is there any biological phenomenon which predisposes one to view Barbie a certain way. The kids suddenly found themselves in two groups, pro-Barbie, and anti-Barbie, girls and boys. Nonetheless when the boys and girls reacted differently to Barbie at Messner’s observed incident, parents used that to conclude that boys and girls are innately different. This belief is easy to confirm based off supposed “empirical” data.

The parents’ conclusion that boys and girls are naturally different demonstrates how easily and haphazardly social groups are defined. Their conclusion and rationale are troubling to me because if it is so easy to separate people into binary genders that are biologically different on the basis of one event involving a Barbie doll, it is even easier to do so when looking at the

entire American workforce. Using similar reasoning to that used by the parents in the Barbie incident, one could easily draw false conclusions about who should fill what roles in society (like concluding that men are typically doctors and women are typically nurses because the two genders are different).

Alongside demonstrating the involuntary nature of social groups, Messner's cultural discussion shows how the ascription of attributes to social groups (noted by Young) can make a group oppressed. Messner presents examples of how different social groups watch society and learn what roles they are supposed to fill. Said observations then either suppress or promote various life choices and behavior in individuals. This process is oppressive because it limits one individual's perceived realm of capabilities. Charles Taylor provides more information on the consequences of this process in "The Politics of Recognition".

Iris Marion Young's argument that oppression is structural because it is a condition of social groups is strengthened when examined with an advanced understanding of social groups and what it means for oppression to be structural. In "Barbie Girls Versus Sea Monsters" Michael A. Messner provides a multilevel analytical framework which presents real-life examples of Young's understanding of social groups as entities which can be (and are) oppressed and, therefore, makes Young's argument all the more convincing.

Works Cited

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