See also: gender segregation, public/private

FURTHER READING


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double standard

In social life, behaviour is governed by informal norms and rules, as well as formal laws. In feminist analyses, men’s power to define the content of formal and informal behavioural cultures means that the criteria or standards used to evaluate and regulate women often differ from those used for men. In other words, rather than a single standard of behaviour for all, there exist two-fold, or ‘double standards’, one relating to men and the other to women. In the context of an androcentric culture, double standards most often benefit men rather than women.

In a general sense, feminism has long been concerned with problematising the existence of double standards. In striving for formal legal equality between women and men (the right to vote, or equal pay, for example), feminists have argued that women should enjoy the same citizenship rights and rewards as men. The concept of the double standard is, though, more recently associated with the analysis of informal norms and rules of behaviour, particularly within sexual culture. Despite a degree of social change in Western societies, as sexuality has become more liberal, sociologists have argued that there continue to be marked differences between the norms and rules governing men’s sexuality and women’s sexuality (Hawkes 1996). The double standard of sexuality means that sexual behaviour deemed inappropriate in a woman, and for which she is shown social disapproval, may be regarded as appropriate and as praiseworthy in a man.

There are a number of sources of evidence on the existence of a double standard of sexuality. For example, in a nationally representative survey of the British population, men said that they had had a higher number of heterosexual partners, compared to women. This finding was argued to reflect a tendency for men’s prolific sexual activities to be condoned, while women with many sexual partners are viewed much more negatively. The survey also found marked differences between women and men in attitudes to casual sex. While 63 per cent of women surveyed said that ‘one night stands’ were wrong, only 36 per cent of men said so (Wells et al. 1994). Studies of young people’s sexuality show the resilience of the sexual double standard in contemporary Britain, several decades after sexual liberalisation and its supposed effects on traditional sexual morality. Lees’s (1989) research revealed a double standard of sexual reputation within the sexual cultures of young people. ‘A girl’s standing can be destroyed by suspicions about her sexual morality, a boy’s reputation in contrast is usually enhanced by his sexual exploits’ (1989: 19). Terms like ‘slag’ and ‘tart’ were especially important ways through which girls’ sexuality was socially controlled and regulated. Lees found that this language of sexual reputation was applied exclusively to girls and that there was no equivalent label set applied to boys. In their efforts to avoid being labelled as a slag or a tart, girls had permanently to monitor and check their sexuality, including their style of dress, their friendliness with boys and their number and frequency of sexual encounters. Research by Holland and her colleagues (1996) also revealed that similar sexual behaviour by young women and young men tends to result in different sexual reputations. In the words of one of the young women interviewed, ‘If you sleep around you’re a slag, if a bloke sleeps around he’s lucky’ (1996: 242). On the basis of their findings, Holland and her colleagues argued that both young women and young men constructed their sexuality in response to the rules of masculine-dominated heterosexuality. Young women had to safeguard their sexual reputation and avoid being labelled as sexually promiscuous, while young men had to demonstrate their sexual reputation in order to enhance their standing with their masculine peer group.

The concept of the double standard has also been used in the analysis of the ageing process. Sontag (1979) has argued that, as they grow older, men and women are evaluated by different standards, and this is advantageous for older men. The qualities and attributes that women are valued for, especially their youthful physical attractiveness, are threatened by growing older. Men’s value depends less on how they look and more on what they do, particularly economically. Sontag also points to the ways in which signs of ageing in men are less heavily penalised than they are in women. In men, wrinkles and grey hair may be valued as a sign.
of experience and be described as 'distinguished'. In contrast, women are more strongly encouraged to conceal signs of ageing on their faces and their bodies, due to the importance of youthful attractiveness to women's sexual candidacy. Support for this analysis of the double standard of ageing can be found in survey data. Older women may experience 'sexual redundancy' in that they are more likely than older men to have no sexual partner. Men, on the other hand, are more likely to form a sexual relationship with a younger woman (Wellings et al. 1994). Moreover, a sexual relationship between an older woman and a younger man is more likely to attract social disapproval than vice versa.

As a concept, the double standard is most often used to describe a disparity between the experiences of women and men, which is to the benefit of men. More rarely is it used to draw attention to a disparity in which men are disadvantaged. An example of a 'reverse' double standard (where the discrimination is against men) is provided by the issue of winter fuel payments by the state to those of pensionable age in Britain. Because men's state pension entitlement begins at age 65 and women's at age 60, this meant that women also received the winter fuel payment at an earlier age than men. This policy was challenged by a retired man, who took his argument that men should be entitled to the payment at the same age as women to the European Court of Justice. It ruled in his favour and the policy has subsequently been changed so that women and men now receive the benefit at the same age (The Guardian, 17 December 1999). Informal codes of expected behaviour, 'reverse' double standards may also be identified. For example, criminologists have drawn together a range of evidence which suggests that gender stereotypes held by criminal justice professionals influence the treatment of offenders, with the result that women offenders are often treated more leniently than men (see, for example, Gebethorpe and Loucha 1997). However, as argued by Morris, the lenient treatment of women within the criminal justice system is dependent upon their conformity to particular models of femininity. It is likely, therefore, to be reserved for 'passive, unaggressive, remorseful, white, middle class women' (1987: 82).

As understandings of gender relations have become more sophisticated, it has been recognised that double standards are often far from uniform in their application or effects, but vary in the context of class, ethnicity and sexuality, for example. In Connell's analysis of the gender hierarchy of power (1987; 1995), a particular form of masculinity (hegemonic masculinity) is suggested as the dominant force in the production and reproduction of double standards. Those men who do not live up to the hegemonic masculine ideal (particularly gay men) may find themselves disadvantaged by the operation of double standards. Heterosexuality is an important component of hegemonic masculinity and gay men's sexuality is evaluated in relation to it. Thus, while prolific sexual activity by heterosexual men may be condoned, the alleged prolific sexual activity of gay men is vilified and forms an important part of homophobic discourse. Just as some men may be disadvantaged by double standards of sexuality, some women may be able to draw on resources (such as their education or economic status) to minimise the restrictions on their sexual lives they might otherwise face.

See also: (the) Other, sexuality

FURTHER READING

The various publications of the Equal Opportunities Commission report on all aspects of the more formal double standards that continue to exist between women and men in Britain. See their web pages at http://www.eoc.org.uk/ for current publications. The volume edited by Weeks and Holland (1996) reports on a range of sexual cultures in contemporary Britain, while that edited by Arber and Ginn (1995) examines the relationship between gender and ageing.

equality

Equality can be defined as a state or condition of being the same, especially in terms of social status or legal/political rights. (Although satisfactory as an initial definition, the idea of equality as sameness has become a subject of debate in gender studies; see below.) Historically in Western societies, men have had a higher social status and more extensive legal and political rights than women. In late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Britain, for example, 'equal rights' feminists campaigned to extend to women the key rights and privileges (in relation to education, property, employment, the vote) previously enjoyed by men. By the late twentieth century, a range of legislation was in place (including the Sex Discrimination Act and the Equal Pay Act) that aimed to facilitate equality between women and men, through the prohibition