

Gender in organisations and its representation in pop culture

Protected: Gender Interaction



One of the major processes that produces gendered social structures, both internally and externally to organisations, is the way in which genders interact with one another (Acker, 1990). The various forms of gender interaction can both reinforce and subvert the social patterns of dominance and submission, although within organisations it is more often found to be reinforced. Research has found that this tends to manifest itself in the replication of the societal norm that “men are the actors, women the emotional support” (Acker, 1990, p. 147). Thus, although organisations attempt to represent themselves as gender-neutral, the established hierarchies and norms predispose individuals in

organisations to interact in manner in which masculinity overrides femininity. *Scrubs* uses these interactions in a type of surreal parody, overtly exhibiting the male dominance in organisations through the callousness of its male characters.

In the world of *Scrubs* the two characters with the most power within the hospital are the Chief of Medicine, Dr Robert 'Bob' Kelso, and Dr Perry Cox (although Dr Cox does not have as much formal power for the majority of the series, his competency as a doctor and ability to strike fear into most co-workers allows him greater privileges). Both doctors strongly utilise fear as a form of dominance and power, both over other male and female co-workers, however it is their interactions with Elliot that most strongly highlight the use of domineering language and hierarchy in their attempt to continue the status quo of doctors adhering to masculine qualities. The dichotomy between these interactions and the way that both doctors interact with the nursing staff is another example.

Workplace hostilities and sexism often arise when men feel women are deviating from the traditional feminine gender roles and invading the traditional masculine gender roles (Fraser, Osborne, & Sibley, 2015). Concurrently, the preservation of presumed gender roles tends to result in benevolent sexism (Fraser, Osborne, & Sibley, 2015). That is, female employees in organisations that continue to uphold their expected gender roles are encouraged and rewarded for this, while those that attempt to enter different gender roles are suppressed.

Throughout *Scrubs*, Dr Cox refers to Elliot as "Barbie" and constantly demeans her verbally, both as a way of teaching her as a doctor and for his own personal amusement. Dr Kelso is even more blatant and open with his sexism and derision of Elliot as a doctor, characterised in the following exchange:

Elliot: Dr. Kelso, I need to present a patient: Nineteen year old complaining of abdominal pain – turns out she's at least eight months pregnant. I'm just gonna let one of the Family Practice people handle it.

Dr. Kelso: Well, that sounds like a wonderful idea, sweetheart; except I heard your smart-aleck remark a second ago, so why don't you just keep your little pregnant girl. It'll be good practice for you, since you'll probably end up in a female specialty, anyway.

Elliot: What do you mean by that? I'm Internal Medicine.

Dr. Kelso: Well, of course you are. But numbers don't lie, and most women end up in OB-GYN, Family Practice, or Pediatrics. It's like a rip-tide, sweetheart – pulling and pulling, and you can swim against the current all you want; but when Mr. Stork comes a-calling, you're not gonna be thinking, "I'm Internal Medicine" – nope. It's gonna be, "Ohhhh, look at the baby!"

Elliot: Sir, I have to say, I'm offended!

Dr. Kelso: Oh, no. Now I have to go buy flowers to make it right.

"My Own Personal Jesus" Episode 11, Season 1.

Dr Kelso's blatant and callous dismissiveness of Elliot's chosen field of work, and assertion that her change of career path to a female dominated speciality is inevitable, exemplifies the manner in which males in organisations suppress women that attempt to work in roles that are male dominated. Dr Kelso's insistence that Elliot should pursue a "female speciality" also highlights the way in which male dominated hierarchies are able to continually hold power, even with females attempting to break down these hierarchies (Fraser, Osborne, & Sibley, 2015). In contrast to these interactions, both Dr Kelso and Dr Cox are, more often than not, kind and supportive of the nursing staff (which is almost entirely female).

Another contrasting example of male and female interactions occurs between Dr Cox, Dr Kelso and head nurse Carla, who embodies many masculine characteristics, such as assertiveness and independence, while also having feminine traits such as being nurturing and caring. Carla often uses her assertiveness within the hospital, fighting with Dr Cox and Dr Kelso on matters that she deems

important. However, unlike with Elliot, Dr Cox and Dr Kelso do not demean Carla, but instead interact with her in a manner comparable to being on the same level of the hierarchy. The way the show depicts the two different forms of interaction between genders can be read a number of ways.



For instance, Carla's masculine characteristics may garner respect and admiration from the two male doctors, masking her gender in the idealisation of the masculine role (Rickett & Roman, 2013). The extension of the feminine employee into a more classically masculine identity perhaps is deemed as satisfying the necessary characteristics of masculine hierarchies in organisations, allowing Carla a usually restricted status amongst females in the work environment (Rickett & Roman, 2013).

However, an alternative view can be made in which Carla is only granted such an identity due to her position as a nurse. While Elliot is deemed to be invading the masculine space of being a doctor, Carla is on the outer as a nurse, her lack of formal power balancing the informal power she gains from her masculine characteristics. Thus, she is unable to genuinely affect the masculine hierarchy, leaving the male doctors unthreatened. Female professionals that have a stake in challenging the status quo are more likely to disrupt the presumptions of masculine hierarchies, such as in the case of Elliot, resulting in a more definitive protection of these presumptions by the males in which it benefits (Dick & Nadin, 2006).

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