Chapter 9
Heteronormativity Revisited:
Adolescents' Educational Choices, Sexuality and Soaps

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this chapter is to explore to what extent heteronormativity, the norm that man and woman are attracted to each other because of their presumed difference and complementarity, can offer an explanation for the persisting association between masculinity and technological/computer competence. Two aspects of heteronormative gender relations, namely sexual attractiveness and the heteronormative division of labour are particularly explored. The main focus in this chapter is on how technological competence and the gendered division of labour and of sexual attractiveness are represented in mass media. Along with this, some examples of the consequences of these heteronormative imaginaries and ideology for people's lives will be given. Amongst youth popular soap operas, stereotypical images are repeated of technologically competent men and socially competent women. For some women, this image also seemed to dominate in their personal lives, where they seemed to want to stay away from technologies as soon as there was a man around. Being (hetero)sexually attractive and being computer competent did not go well together in several block buster movies. The adolescents included in this study clearly shared this notion. These two aspects of heteronormativity do seem to strengthen the understanding of why it is so hard for women to choose a career in technology and particularly in computing science.

INTRODUCTION

In most Western (oriented) countries, like the USA, Japan and some European countries, the gender-segregation of Science, Engineering and Technology (SET) education and professions continues to exist. Especially in the Netherlands, girls hardly ever want anything to do with what they see as science or 'technology', nor do they imagine themselves in a career in SET. The European project 'Motivation' studied pupils of around 15 years in Germany, France, Slovakia, Austria, Sweden, Spain and the

Netherlands. Interviews with around sixty pupils in these countries showed that the Dutch pupils and especially the girls were least interested in SET. Only 21 percent of the Dutch girls in the study were interested, whereas 80 percent of Slovenian young women seemed interested (Els Rommes & Schönberger, Forthcoming). Indeed, in academic studies, the percentage of female Dutch students in technological subjects is 17, which is only half the number of other European and OECD-countries (Buis, 2003). Similarly, a recent European study shows that of pupils in the countries France, UK, Italy, Poland and the Netherlands, the Dutch pupils and especially the Dutch girls are least interested in a study Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). Only 8 percent of Dutch girls expressed an interest, whereas these numbers were for instance 48 percent for the UK and 43 percent of the girls in Poland indicated they were interested (Gras-Velazquez, Joyce, & Debry, 2009). Indeed, only 12 percent of computing science students is female in the Netherlands, which is again the lowest number in the EU.

There are some possible explanations for why these numbers are particularly low in the Netherlands. A majority of the Dutch women has part time employment rather than full time, making paid part time work by women in the Netherlands by far the highest in the world. Only recently, child care provisions have picked up in quantity and quality. As SET and ICT work is usually regarded as having long working hours and a bad work-life balance, these bad child care provisions and a culture which encourages women to stay (part time) at home to care for their children may offer one explanation for why Dutch women lag behind in choosing SET as a career. On the other hand, the same notions of bad work-life balance exist in other professions such as medicine, which is particularly popular amongst young women nowadays. Another consequential difference between countries can be found in their educational systems: If girls are obliged to follow SET subjects

until a later age, they are more likely to develop a stronger interest in SET (Langen & Vierke, 2009). Again, this may offer only a partial explanation, since there are more countries in which children are given the choice to drop SET subjects at a younger age, and which do not have as low numbers of girls in SET as the Netherlands. Finally, the comparison between (post)capitalist and (post)communist countries offers additional explanations: The presence of a political system enforcing careers for women, providing child care and offering non-sexist education has been identified as a main factor in explaining the higher numbers of women in SET in (post)communist countries than in countries with a capitalist background (Blagojevic et al., 2004). This does, however, not explain why the numbers in the Netherlands of all (post)capitalist countries are so particularly low.

The main explanation for adolescents' gendered occupational choices, underlying other explanations, seems to be that masculinities and technologies have become intertwined, so that being technology or computer competent is 'gender inappropriate', or 'gender inauthentic' behaviour, as Wendy Faulkner has called it, for women (Faulkner, 2000).[2] This 'inauthentic'ness is closely connected with the notion that 'in our culture heterosexuality is posited on an ideological attraction of opposites' (Faulkner, 2000: 782). Hence, the aim of this chapter is to explore to what extent sexuality, or the more encompassing term heteronormativity, the invisible and underlying force behind gender relations (Butler, 1999; Rich, 1993; Warner, 1991), can offer an explanation for the persisting association between masculinity and technological/computer competence. What does heteronormativity, as an analytical lens, add as explanation for the continuing disassociation between women and technology/IT? I will particularly focus on two aspects of heteronormative gender relations, namely sexual attractiveness and the heteronormative division of labour.

As heteronormativity is as much an ideal which forms part of our symbolic environment (e.g. in

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