4.8: She's a 10, He's a 2: *Playboy* Cartoons and a Culture of Male Entitlement

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The author analyzes Playboy *cartoons to see whether and how they illustrate and contribute to male entitlement.*

When University of California Santa Barbara student Elliot Rodger was 22 years old, he stabbed his two roommates and a friend to death and then drove to Starbucks for coffee. Sitting in his car in the parking lot, he recorded his motivations uploaded the video to YouTube, then emailed some friends and family. He drove on to a nearby sorority house where he shot and killed two students and injured another. He got back into his car and drove around the area, shooting at pedestrians and striking them with his car. By the time he crashed his car and then shot himself, he had killed six people and injured fourteen others.

He explained his reasons in his video. "I've been forced to endure an existence of loneliness, rejection and unfulfilled desires all because girls have never been attracted to me. Girls gave their affection, and sex and love to other men but never to me;" "I will punish you all for it" (CNN, 2014).

Rodger's is not an isolated case of a man feeling entitled to female attention and using violence when he didn't get it. Also in 2014, in Connecticut, high school student Maren Sanchez turned down Christopher Paskon's prom invitation, so he stabbed her to death. In Detroit, Mary Spears refused to give Mark Dorch her phone number, so he killed her and shot her fiancé and four other people. Media typically frame these tragedies as the work of a confused, troubled loner. However, some media began to address male entitlement—an attitude that men deserve attention from women. On *Patheos*, Adam Lee argued that "*this* shooter didn't spring from nowhere. We know what motivated him, because he said so explicitly: he was bathed in a malevolent ideology which teaches men that they're entitled to women's time and attention,

entitled to a relationship, entitled to love and sex" (Lee, 2014, emphasis in original). In *Slate*, Amanda Hess wrote, "Elliot Rodger targeted women out of entitlement, their male partners out of jealousy, and unrelated male bystanders out of expedience. This is … evidence of the horrific extent of misogyny's cultural reach" (Hess, 2014). Male entitlement is at the root of domestic violence, which is at epidemic levels.

Researchers studying sexual assault in college found that men who feel entitled to women are more likely to commit acts of sexual aggression and that a man's beliefs and attitudes about women are strong predictors of whether he will sexually assault women in college (McDermott, Kilmartin, McKelvey, & Kridel, 2015). Patriarchy—male control of the power and leadership roles in a society—trickles down into individual men, creating in some of them attitudes of male entitlement, jealousy, and possessiveness; these attitudes offer justification for sexual aggression and violence (Dekeseredy & Schwartz, 1993).

Researchers have long studied how the representation of gender in advertisements, films, and television helps reinforce cultural and social attitudes about gender. Media help form cultural attitudes (Rakow, 2001) and help produce an ideology of hegemonic masculinity (Hanke, 1998). In prior research (Nettleton, 2011), I found that magazines' presentation of domestic abuse blamed women for men's violence. Elliott Rodger blamed women for the murders he committed.

Analyzing *Playboy* cartoons as cultural scripts

Years ago, I thumbed through a book of *Playboy* magazine cartoons and noted that the women were gorgeous and the men were not. In cartoons, the subjects can be drawn in any way the artist wishes, so why make men undesirable? Might such images illustrate and contribute to male entitlement, communicating that a man, regardless of his appearance or achievements, has

access to any woman he desires? Cartoons may seem an innocuous and even silly type of media, but cartoons carry influence and portray cultural attitudes.

To Erving Goffman, cartoons were dramatic scripts of everyday life that allowed audiences to vicariously participate in the moments depicted (1974). Readers interpret a cartoon as both an amusing anecdote and as how life really is, identifying key elements in the cartoon and relating to them (Dines, 1988). Cartoons serve as "terse statements of human foibles" that "integrate society's members into a collective understanding of social situations" (Bradley, Bowles, & Jones, 1979, p. 43). Dines-Levy and Smith, who called cartoons "an art form which may have implications for the standing of persons in the real world" (1988, p. 246) studied *Playboy* cartoons from 1970-79 and found that female characters appear as passive and willing sexual playthings, drawn nude or nearly so with exaggerated breasts, hips, and bottom, and often with an older male partner.

Playboy magazine was founded by Hugh Hefner in 1953, at a historical moment when most magazines were for women or for a general interest audience, and when the political ideology and the sexual mores of the nation were about to undergo dramatic shifts. Hefner's vision was to appeal to men aged 18-44 who enjoyed good writing, politics, sports, and women. The magazine was a phenomenal success, and *Playboy* became an internationally recognized brand that included clubs, hotels, casinos, and merchandise. The magazine was profoundly influential in setting taste and public conversation, especially during its early decades (Dines-Levy, 1988). It became known for insightful, controversial interviews with celebrities and leading thinkers, and was recognized for intelligent fiction and articles, media reviews, advice columns, letters from readers, and cartoons, as well as its centerfolds of attractive women.

Playboy was an important ideological influence on American masculinity and gender, yet studies of it have been limited because the magazine was not typically archived in university or public libraries. However, in 2015, *Playboy* released most of its editorial content on a hard drive that could be purchased for a few hundred dollars, and later released an online archive, making it possible for the first time to design an efficient study of *Playboy* content over several decades of its production.

I used these texts to study how *Playboy* cartoons might differ over time, whether the standards of male and female physical beauty were roughly equivalent, and how gender and power inequities might or might not be represented. I searched one year's worth of monthly issues in each of five decades (1974, 1984, 1994, 2004, 2014), plus the three issues produced in its birth year, 1964: 63 issues total. Cartoons that included at least one female and at least one male were included; in all, 423 cartoons portraying 600 men and 602 women were catalogued and analyzed (cartoons depicting large crowds were sometimes difficult to discern with accuracy). Two researchers reviewed each cartoon, recording the month, year, page number, artist's name, text and narrative, a detailed description of the appearance of the men and women represented, and any reference to domestic violence. The detailed descriptions of men and women were then sorted into four groups: Unattractive, Average, Attractive, or Fantasies. Standards of physical beauty and sexual attractiveness are subjective, so personal judgment was avoided and instead, sorting focused on reading the artist's apparent intent—how the artist wanted that character to be read by the viewer. Unattractive included characters of advanced age, exaggerated skinniness or weightiness, stooped posture, and other indicators that a character was meant to be read as unattractive. Average included unremarkable characters that were neither distinctively attractive nor unattractive. Attractive included pretty or handsome faces, toned

bodies, and curvy or muscled figures. Fantasies included exaggerated, impossible bodies, such as women with breasts the size of floor pillows and waists smaller than their necks.

Gender Attitudes Revealed in *Playboy*

Significant cultural shifts have occurred since *Playboy's* origin in 1964, but the magazine's cartoons reflected no significant changes in gender roles or subject matter over the decades. Representations of women and men remained consistent in character. Particular historic moments, such as the Civil Rights Movement or Second Wave feminism, did not appear to alter cartoon content; no visible shift in depictions of gender (or race or class, for that matter) were found.

Consistent differences in attractiveness of characters were found, linked to gender. An overwhelming majority of men were unattractive or average—560 of 600—whereas most women were attractive or fantasies—539 of 602. The genders have opposing levels of attractiveness, with women occupying the attractive and fantasy end of the spectrum and men the average and unattractive end. Most of the men having sex in *Playboy* are some combination of bald, chubby, painfully thin, knobby-kneed, sunken-chested, and over-the-hill. Their female partners have exceptional figures and resemble movie stars. Every typical Joe lands a super-model. When average-looking female characters were drawn, they were not sexual partners, but sidekicks and passersby. Unattractive women were angry wives in curlers with wrinkles and scowling faces, or elderly women with buns, glasses, hairy chins, and sagging breasts. Again, categories were not determined by personal preference of the coders but were attempts to read the intention of the cartoonist. We intend no statement that any of these physical characteristics are particularly attractive or unattractive.

Besides gender-based differences in levels of attractiveness, the cartoons also revealed differences in the apparent ages of male and female characters. Seventy-five percent of men are depicted as old—bald, paunchy, stooped—whereas 97% of women are teens or young adults. This age disparity is usually ignored in the cartoon text, but occasionally becomes the point of the joke—for example, when a caveman wields a club over a lissome woman who warns him that she is not yet 18 years old (Sneyd, 1964). Old men are shown with young women in 75% of the cartoons. Women are older than men in only 3% of the cartoons, and only in two types of situations. One, when she is an attractive young adult and the male is a young boy, such as a cartoon about a child finding a voluptuous nude woman under the Christmas tree (Ffolkes, 1974) or three lads finding a photo of one's mother as a centerfold (Erickson, 1974). Two, when the older woman is a sexually predatory granny who cracks lewd jokes but never gets her man, in a long-running series by Buck Brown (1984, 1994, 2004). Old men are portrayed as active, lusty, and successful in securing youthful, attractive sexual partners. Old women are portrayed as grotesquely ugly and ridiculous in their wish for sex.

Gender-based differences were also found in the amount of clothing worn by men and women in the cartoons. Who gets to wear clothing and who appears nude or nearly so is a reflection of relative power. In these cartoons, nearly 90% of all women appear nude or nearly nude. Female full frontal nudity, including pubic hair, occurs 17.4% of the time, but frontal nudity occurs in a mere four out of 600 male cartoon characters. Being similarly dressed (or undressed) might indicate power equity, and that occurs in just 10% of the cartoons. Male genitalia appear rarely, and are treated as more sacred and protected than women's; women's bodies are freely displayed. Obviously, *Playboy* is a men's magazine known for showcasing women's bodies, so this is not surprising. However, the gendered difference in nudity reveals a double standard and suggests the deep anxiety many men have about their penises.

Clothing itself is a power indicator, signaling a person's occupation, status, class, and relative social and cultural importance. Almost all men were dressed enough to indicate an occupation. In contrast, only 16 women wore enough clothing to indicate who or what they were – but 11 of the 16 were represented as porn actors or sex workers. Thus, only 0.01% of the women in the cartoons existed other than for sex. Most men are dressed as professionals, in business suits, lab coats, and the like, emphasizing their dominance over the women who appear nude and powerless alongside them and encouraging men to imagine and relate to women as objects for their sexual enjoyment, even in the workplace. Cartoons often depict men being sexual with co-workers and clients: A waitress has sex with a line cook and says "So I'm going to be employee of the month twice in a row!" (Williams, 2004), a swim instructor has sex with a student and suggests next week they will try that in the water (Erickson, 2004), a doctor asks a patient to disrobe but to "leave on the shoes and fishnet stockings" (Kiraz, 2004). In this way, attitudes of entitlement are suggested and reinforced, as is the ideology that undergirds domestic abuse as being pervasive and acceptable. A husband punches his fist through a door and his wife says she'd know his knock anywhere (Sokol, 1964); a caveman swings a club at a woman (Sneyd, 1964); a woman is attacked and a passerby says "Just another mugging-rape!" (Kurtzman & Elder, 1974). A link is drawn between masculinity and violence.

One prevalent male uniform in cartoons resembles that of *Playboy*'s founder, Hugh Hefner: pajamas, a robe, and/or a smoking jacket. This may signal an aspiration among readers to be like Hefner. Characters also appear in roles that carry sexual meaning (satyrs, centaurs, sultans with harems) and as mythic and heroic figures, such as superheroes and cowboys. These roles are linked to images of hegemonic masculinity and reinscribe connections between sexual conquest and masculinity. When young boys are present, they act as mature sexual beings, seducing and hitting on grown women. This

representation supports the idea that highly inappropriate sexual aggression is inborn and inescapable among men.

Reinforcing the Ideology of Male Entitlement

In *Playboy* cartoons, each man, regardless of how humble his physical attributes, is entitled to a stunning bombshell of his very own. Little boys in tam-o'-shanters, aging bosses in suits, bedraggled painters, Santa Claus, and middle-aged men marooned on a desert island all have attractive women nearby for their use and pleasure. Men vary in appearance, but women do not: slim and tall with cascading hair, large breasts, small waists, and prominent buttocks. Every cartoon male, regardless of his physical attractiveness, age, and occupation, has access to the woman he wants, as does the reader, by extension.

Men are allowed to be old, unattractive, or merely average and still be successful sexual creatures, but to be desirable, women must be flawless supermodels. Male sexual aggression is presented as inborn and apparent from a young age, buttressing the argument that it is a natural and inescapable component of masculinity that is impossible to tame. Men of all ages have access to beautiful, young women, supporting the ideology that men are active sexual creatures throughout their lives but that women are only useful and sexual when they are young. The sexuality of older women is presented as hideous; gray-haired Granny is depicted as a sexual predator, and middle-aged women are drawn only as angry, non-sexual wives of men who are having sex with someone younger, more curvaceous, and wearing fewer clothes.

Nearly everyone is White in the world depicted in Playboy cartoons (94% of men and 97.2% of women). Women of color appear rarely and are drawn as exotic objects; men of color are just like other men. The racial homogeneity could undergird assumptions about what and

who is sexually desirable to most *Playboy* readers, and appears outdated and tone-deaf to the current decade, at least.

The presence of so many historical, literary, and mythic figures might signal simple escapism, but also may help cement male entitlement as an attitude that has existed forever and has been practiced by leading lights and famous men throughout the ages.

A prevailing message insists that women must be flawless, even fantastical, in order to please and excite a man. There are no unattractive women engaging in sex with attractive men or older women with younger men who aren't boys. The narrative is persistent: what is most valuable about a woman is her physical attractiveness, she loses this by her 30s; without it, she will not attract a man and becomes a laughingstock if she tries.

The premise of unremarkable men having easy access to highly desirable women may allow male readers to feel unthreatened and to imagine similar outcomes for themselves. This sends a message that any man deserves—and indeed, is entitled to—the idealized woman he desires. He is assured that she will not reject him, nor does she deserve an idealized man. She is content with an average or less-than-average man, even if she is a super model fantasy. These images reassure male readers that the world is full of extraordinary women and not much competition for them. Every average and unattractive man on *Playboy's* pages helps himself to an extraordinarily attractive woman, and she never says "In your dreams, buster." On the pages of *Playboy*, every man deserves and has easy access to physically elite women. Men deserve and expect women they'd score as perfect 10s, yet women accept any man, at any level. A scrawny, knock-kneed man never says "Lucky me!" when faced with a naked and willing stunner. He doesn't even seem surprised.

Note

1. The author is grateful for the assistance of Naomi Waxman, Northwestern University, in conducting the content analysis.

It's Your Turn: What Do You Think? What Will You Find?

1. Flip the genders in *Playboy* cartoons. Imagine unattractive, older women partnered with attractive, younger men. Does that make the gendering in cartoons more visible? How would ideologies of masculinity and sexual attractiveness need to change in order for such cartoons to be possible?

2. Extend your observations of gender and attractiveness to A) Magazine ads, B) Movies, C) Television programs. Do your findings match those in this study?

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