



Geek and nerd masculinity in *The Big Bang Theory*

Marie Louise Skou Larsen

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Mia Rendix

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	3
Keywords.....	3
Topic.....	4
Introduction	4
Method	6
A brief history of masculinity	7
Judith Butler on gender performativity	13
Raewyn Connell on masculinities	15
Male intimacy and homosocial groups	21
Geek and nerd culture and masculinity in cinema	25
Analysis	28
Geekdom and nerdiness in <i>The Big Bang Theory</i>	29
Competitiveness	36
Emotional detachment	45
The sexualization of women: the woman as an object and less than	51
The sexualization of women: the rejection of femininity in other men	61
Racism in <i>The Big Bang Theory</i>	69
Discussion: ideology and impact.....	75
Conclusion.....	79
Works cited	82

Abstract

Having once been equated with subordinated masculinity, the nerd trope has moved into a less underprivileged position of marginalization since the 1980s, while the geek trope has become a fully valid aspect of hegemonic masculinity in certain situations. As a consequence, both nerd and geek characters are now seen in leading roles in popular media to a greater extent than ever before. The American sitcom *The Big Bang Theory* is one such popular media text that portrays four marginalized, geeky nerds and their friendships and everyday life as scientists, niche culture, and more. Through the theoretical lenses of Butler, Connell, and others, I have tried to map out how the geek and masculinity is portrayed in the series. While shows main male characters are both socially awkward and not stereotypically attractive, the men are portrayed as welcome and better alternatives to the hypermasculine man commonly known from Hollywood and in this way rejects some stereotypical notions of being ‘manly’. However, despite the characters being portrayed as genuinely nice guys, they still perform certain aspects of their masculinity in ways that seeks to emulate hegemonic practices, some of which are oppressive to others including each other and, in extension, themselves. The one who is most often targeted by the others’ discriminatory behavior is Raj, who is both non-white and consistently effeminate and therefore is the only one of the men who are subordinated. As such, the men regularly behave in ways that are racist, emotionally detached, objectifying, anti-feminine, homophobic, and competitive at the expense of other. However, because of their status as nice guys with generally good intentions, their oppressive behavior is excused as good-natured fun at best and misunderstood at worst. The men’s oppressive behavior is not in the show by accident, as it creates the foundation for most of its punchlines based on the premise that seeing marginalized and subordinated men trying, and largely failing, to emulate hegemonic masculinity is unexpected and thus funny. However, the show never actually questions the behavior it portrays and this this way, while it may not be framed as worthy of glorification, it is not framed as being truly harmful to men or women either. Instead, it is framed as a harmless, as quirks, as not worthy of changing and even as an inevitable and natural part of manhood.

Keywords: Masculinity, Masculinities, *The Big Bang Theory*, Raewyn Connell, Judith Butler.

Topic

How is nerd and geek masculinity portrayed in the American sitcom *The Big Bang Theory* and with what effect?

Introduction

The way the media portrays sex and gender is an ever-topical subject of debate in society and the academic fields alike and has been for the last decades. One of the reasons for this is that the mass media is a powerful aspect of circulating gendered images (Connell 185-188) and plays a significant role in producing and normalizing hegemonic forms of masculinity and femininity (Blosser 140). Connell argues that fictional men may just as well be visible bearers of hegemonic masculinity as real men (Connell 77) and thus fictional characters may play powerful roles when it comes to producing and reproducing norms of hegemony and thus they may contribute to the enforcing and normalization of hegemonic norms.

A great many over-generalized stereotypes of masculine behavior in everyday life and the media seem to be based around these persistent gender expectations. As such, stereotypes and expectations of masculinity generally involve personality traits such as detachment, independence, and agency, while emotional behavior, is typically associated with femininity. Stereotypes are part of human existence, and the concept can be said to be both based on individual experiences as well as a highly social concept based on societal discourses which enable us to make sense of the world (Stangor and Schaller 4).

By utilizing stereotypes, we are better able to organize the impressions we get and avoid sensory overload from the constant stream of information which we are faced with on a daily basis (Osland et al. 65). However, while fundamental to human functioning, stereotypes are not always positive, or even accurate, and may be limiting or harmful to the individual (Benshoff and Griffin 7). Because of this, the power of the media to shape our view of the world calls attention to the importance of analyzing and remaining critical of the discursive constructs of the many texts many of us interact with on a daily basis – particularly in today's times, where the media is increasingly omnipresent. With its huge popularity, the American sitcom *The Big Bang Theory* is one such text which may potentially have had a large impact on its viewers.

The Big Bang Theory ran from 2007 until 2019 and consists of twelve seasons with a total of 279 episodes. The show primarily revolves around the lives of four fictional male friends living in Pasadena, California: Leonard Hofstadter, an awkward but generally amiable experimental physicist; Sheldon Cooper, a brilliant but eccentric theoretical physicist who pays little attention to social conventions; Rajesh Koothrappali, a sensitive astrophysicist with selective mutism who is originally from India; and Howard Wolowitz, a Jewish, wannabe pickup artist and aerospace engineer.

Another central character of the show is Penny, a beautiful woman who moves in across the hall from Sheldon and Leonard on the first episode. Penny is a waitress and aspiring actress who is quickly absorbed into their group of friends and whom Leonard soon begins dating and ends up marrying towards the end of the series. While the men all work in scientific fields Penny is of average intelligence, which becomes a recurring focal point of jokes in the series. Later on, two additional female characters join the main cast: Bernadette Rostenkowski, a sweet and headstrong microbiologist who becomes Howard's love interest and later his wife; as well as Amy Farrah Fowler, a good-natured but socially awkward neuroscientist who later enters a relationship with Sheldon and ends up marrying him.

In its lifetime, *The Big Bang Theory* became one of the most popular shows on American television, attracting millions of viewers each episode and gaining a vast and loyal fanbase. Additionally, it is perhaps the first comedy sitcom with nerdy, Ph.D. level scientists as central characters marking the entrance of a new type of male protagonist into popular culture which is very far from more traditionally masculine men in Hollywood. As such, the series has received praise for portraying the scientist type in a way that is not stereotypically anti-social and even dangerous, but rather funny and interested in maintaining both their career and hobbies as well as long-standing and deep friendships (Blosser 140).

While the geeky and nerdy male has historically been subordinated and often confined to supporting roles at best, Leonard, Sheldon, Raj, and Howard, are now the focal point of a highly popular Hollywood narrative driven by their very social incompetence. This is indicative that the nerd and geek masculinity have undergone gradual transformations over time and are now being allowed to be seen as more valid forms of masculinity than previously. This is exemplified in the series by how the men of *The Big Bang Theory* are generally portrayed as genuinely nice guys,

particularly when juxtaposed with more hypermasculine characters in the show who are generally portrayed as rude, aggressive, and unintelligent. As such, the show pledges allegiance to the nerdy and geeky man, while critiquing certain accepted norms of 'being a man'.

However, having watched and analyzed *The Big Bang Theory*, I have found that while the main male characters of the show are generally portrayed as nice and perform masculinity in ways that are in some aspects very different from what we are used to seeing in Western cinema, that does not mean that they are any less ideologically involved with toxic practices of masculinity. There are countless examples of the men engaging in sexist, homophobic, racist, or otherwise discriminatory or hypermasculine behavior – however, because of their status of nice geeks and nerds, their actions are not condemned but rather excused while serving as the primary foundation of the sitcom's punchlines.

The purpose of this project will be to dive deeper into the subject of how the men of *The Big Bang Theory* perform masculinity in ways that, at times simultaneously, abide by and deviate from current hegemonic standards of masculinity and with what effect. Furthermore, I will consider how they are portrayed in manners which both promote that performing geek and nerd masculinity is more valid than ever but also in ways that are not nearly as unproblematic, wholesome and harmless as they might seem on the surface.

Method

To analyze the types of masculinity portrayed in *The Big Bang Theory*, with an emphasis on geek masculinity as performed by the series' four leading men, I will mainly utilize two theorists, namely Judith Butler and Raewyn Connell who are both noteworthy names in the field of gender studies. Both I will draw on to create a frame of reference for the concepts of sex, gender, and sexuality, while I will mainly be drawing on the theories of Connell when addressing masculinity specifically. I find that Butler's and Connell's theories complement each other well to elucidate the very complex topic of gender and, in the case of this project, masculinities specifically through a social constructivist lens.

I will of course also be drawing on a number of different academic sources to illuminate different aspects which I find relevant to further illuminate the particular kind of masculinity which I find is most at play in *The Big Bang Theory*. Noteworthy examples of this include Todd

Migliaccio and his research article “Men’s Friendships: Performances of Masculinity” and Sharon Bird’s article “Welcome to the Men’s Club: Homosociality and the Maintenance of Hegemonic Masculinity. Lastly, Ashley Morgan’s article “The rise of the geek: exploring masculine identities in *The Big Bang Theory*” and the YouTube video “The Adorkable Misogyny of *The Big Bang Theory*” uploaded by the user Pop Culture Detective have been big sources of inspiration on how to approach the topic of masculinity in *The Big Bang Theory*.

In my chapter “A brief history of masculinity” I will draw on a number of sources to shed light on the many different approaches to the subject of masculinity. While gender and masculinity are by no means new terms both in academics as well as in everyday life where men and women have always been subjected to contemporaneous discourses and stereotypes of gender, the history of men’s studies as an interdisciplinary academic field seems to only date back to somewhere between the 1950s and the 1970s depending on the source. Because of this, the period from the 1970’s until today will be my primary focus as to restrict myself due to the limited nature of this project as well as to provide a clearer and more narrow focus.

My subject of analysis will be *The Big Bang Theory* in general, however for the sake of limitation, I will primarily be looking at examples from the first six seasons. However, I will be including examples from later seasons if I find that they best exemplify my arguments. I will however be excluding the spin-off prequel to the series named *Young Sheldon* from my analysis, as this is different narrative entirely which focuses only on Sheldon’s childhood and youth. My focus of analysis will mostly restrict itself to the series main male cast, Leonard, Sheldon, Raj, and Howard. When discussing the series’ portrayal of women, I will be expanding my main focus to also include the characters Penny, Bernadette, and Amy.

A brief history of masculinity

In this chapter, I wish to give a brief historical overview of how the field of masculinity studies have evolved over time in the Western world since the 1970s until the 2000s. Due to this chapter’s limited size, I will in no way be able to mention everything or everyone worthy of mention, but I set out to cover the basics. This I will do because I wish to make clear that the field of masculinity studies is broad and nuanced, and in no way limits itself to Butler and

Connell nor ideas identical to theirs. As such, there are many ways in which to approach the subject of masculinity, of which I have simply chosen the one I find the most interesting.

As I have previously mentioned, having stereotypes and ideals about how a man should be is nothing new, and people have always been affected by shifting gender expectations and norms in their everyday life. In my research I have come across no shortage of literature touching on masculinity as it functioned throughout history, from ancient Greece until today. However, despite masculinity being very present throughout the ages, the history of masculinity studies as an interdisciplinary academic field is relatively new and I have chosen to focus on the 1970s until the 2000s as the basis of my brief historical overview as I find that this era was the most crucial when it came to moving the focus from manliness to masculinity and forming how we view masculinities today.

It is commonly accepted that men have been at the center of mainstream social science and the humanities for a long time. However, this has mostly been because of men's dominant position in society and the patriarchy's subordination of women into a position of an absent presence and less about actually approaching men as gendered beings. This however began changing in the 1970's where feminist and gay researchers started focusing on the role of male gender identities and the concept of 'being a man' began its journey to being formally theorized (Gottzén et al. 1). Jóhannesson notes that until then, most actual research on masculinity had had its basis in Freudian psychoanalysis and Talcott Parson's sex-role theory, ideas that have their basis in the assumption of gender as a natural process, while furthermore legitimizing a power division between the genders because of this, a notion that masculinity studies aimed to break away from (Jóhannesson 86).

In his 2004 book *Cultures of Masculinity*, Tim Edwards has outlined three waves of the evolution of masculinity studies, which I find adds a great deal of structure when approaching this subject and which I will now account for and support with examples from the works of notable authors. Of course, Edward's outline is essentially flawed in the sense that truly dividing the field of masculinity studies into separate parts is practically impossible and shows no consideration for how many theorists and theories in no way were limited to a single decade. However, for the sake of structure, I will still proceed to use it in this chapter.

The first wave refers to the development of what Edwards calls the ‘sex role paradigm’ in the 1970s (Edwards 2) and amongst the notable authors of this era are Andrew Tolson, Warren Farrell, as well as Deborah David and Robert Brannon. During this time emerged also the small but impactful Men’s Liberation Movement who argued that the male sex role was oppressive (Connell 24), which Edwards and Farrell were both a part of. In this decade of critical studies of masculinity, focus was mainly on questioning gender as a natural notion and demonstrating the social constructedness of gender and its reliance on socialization and social control. Amongst those devoted to this notion, was Tolson which he made clear in his 1979 book *The Limits of Masculinity: Male Identity and the Liberated Woman*. Here, he lays out his idea of gender as learned behavior from an openly feminist inspired and -friendly perspective. One of Tolson’s main points is that he believes there to be a fundamental difference between sex and gender: “There is ‘sex’, the biological difference, and there is ‘gender’, or ‘gender identity’ – the cultural significance attached to sexuality” (Tolson 12).

Besides a wish to challenge notions of gender as a natural process, this first wave focused on the limiting nature of male gender expectations, including that of emotional repression, and how these might be harmful for the mental and physical health of men as well as women (Edwards 2). Farrell explores this on his 1974 book *The Liberated Man* where he discusses the man’s liberation from rigid expectations of gender and he questions, amongst other things, earlier discourses of the role of breadwinner being the key masculine role while drawing parallels between women’s experience of being ‘sex objects’ and men’s experience as ‘success objects’, a notion which encompasses the expectation of the man succeeding in scoring women and be regarded as losers if they cannot (Farrell 49).

Similar ideas are expressed by David and Brannon in their 1976 book *The Forty-nine Percent Majority: The Male Sex Role*. Here, they proposed the commonly cited gender-role model which suggests that there are four main aspects that men must abide by to live up to contemporaneous manly ideals: ‘No sissy stuff’ (49-88) which refers to avoiding any feminine behavior; ‘Be a big wheel’ (89-160) which refers to being assertive and attaining dominance; ‘The sturdy oak’ which refers to independence and controlling one’s emotions (161-197); and ‘Give ’em hell’ which refers to being courageous, aggressive, and taking risks even if it is not necessarily beneficial to oneself (199-230). David and Brannon argue that while the chances of

men being able to fully encompass all four aspects are slim, they function as ideals in relation to which men compare and measure themselves. In this sense, these four ideals are similar to the notion of hegemonic masculinity and complicity as proposed by Connell.

While the first wave arguably allows for a more nuanced idea of being a man than previously, it still relies very much on the idea of masculinity as a singular notion. As such, while Tolson states that he finds that there are “different expressions of masculinity within and between different cultures” – including “homosexual and transsexual identities” – and that “the characteristics we define as ‘masculine’ are culture specific” since there is no universal masculinity (Tolson 12-13), he still adheres to a quite narrow understanding of what constitutes ‘being a man’. As such, while Tolson and similar theorists of the era do include factors of sexuality and class to a limited degree to nuance the notion of masculinity, they generally have little focus on the experience of men adhering to non-hegemonic notions of masculinity. Furthermore, while many do acknowledge the presence of a hierarchy of power in society, the discussion is focused on the presence of an inherently oppressive patriarchy while the hierarchy between men is not yet important (Collier 39).

The second wave of critical masculinity studies emerged in the 1980s, mostly as a critical reaction to the first wave and the sex role paradigm was rejected for “its ethnocentrism, lack of power perspective, and incipient positivism” (Connell et al 1). This wave included several noteworthy authors amongst them Jeff Hearn, Michael, Kimmel, David Morgan, Raewyn Connell, Joseph Pleck, and Victor Seidler, although the influence of several of these authors is not constricted to this decade. In his 1987 book *The Making of Masculinities*, Harry Brod noted about contemporaneous masculinity studies:

“The most general definition of Men’s Studies is that it is the study of masculinities and male experiences as specific and varying social-historical or cultural formations. Such studies situate masculinities as objects of study on par with femininities, instead of elevating them to universal norms” (Brod 40)

The second wave of masculinity studies wave was generally more political than the previous as most authors were very openly pro-feminist and sought an alliance with feminism. The sex role paradigm of the 1970s became seen as politically questionable as it implied the existence of an equal playing field between the sexes, and notions of complex systems of power

and the hegemonic subordination based on several social and political identities such as gender, class, and sexuality became a primary focus. Implementing the plurality of masculinities allows for the integration of contingencies of factors such as race, sexuality, physical ability, class, and age (Collier 39). About this Hearn argues that “in this and most other societies, oppression even when it had other bases or other visible expressions, for example, in class or race or disability, still occurs in gendered ways” (Hearn xiv).

The second wave furthermore exposed that the first wave’s subject of analysis was generally the most hegemonic type of man, leading to an oversimplified and singular notion of masculinity – which was often white, middle-class, and Western – rather than viewing masculinities in the plural sense and as part complex hierarchies (Edwards 2). A fundamental part of propagating the notion of multiple masculinities and gender hierarchies was Connell, who in her book *Gender and Power: Society, the Person and Sexual Politics* introduced the concept of hegemonic masculinity, a notion which I will dive further into in a later chapter. In his 1992 book *Discovering Men*, Morgan also touches on the subject of the plurality of masculinities. Here, he states that there is “not simply a diversity of masculinities, rather like a well-stocked supermarket, but that these masculinities are linked to each other, hierarchically and in terms of power” (Morgan 45). As such, Morgan and many other theorists of this era adhere to the idea that while all men benefit in some way under patriarchy, all men do not benefit equally.

While the field of masculinity studies was initially primarily led by white, pro-feminist, male sociologists and social scientists residing in English speaking countries, it expanded greatly throughout the 1990’s. During this decade, the research area expanded into a range of social sciences and humanities disciplines as well as into different areas of the world (Gottzén et al. 1). Amongst the theorist most associated with this era are David Buchbinder, Judith Butler, Michael Messner, and Michael Kimmel, however there are many more. With the third wave, the field of masculinity studies became less easily definable, generally moving rather freely across interdisciplinary lines. With this wave also came a larger focus on literary and media studies, brought on by a heightened desire on zooming in on the representation of masculinities in cultural texts to gain a broader understanding of both historical and contemporaneous cultural discourses (Edwards 2).

The third and last wave of masculinity studies resembles the third wave of feminism in the sense that it is influenced greatly by the advent of post-structuralist theory and views gender issues in relation to notions of performativity and normativity (Edwards 2). Perhaps the theorist most associated with the notion of performativity is Judith Butler who I will be using in this project as the foundation to approach the topic of gender as a social construct. As such, she views gender as a series of performative acts that create rather than reveal a stable gender identity. Buchbinder further develops Butler's notion of gender to include what he refers to as 'ex-citation' and 'in-citation'. The former refers to the naturalization of gender performance and making it appear indisputably natural despite its constructedness while the latter refers to features that encompass masculinity (Peberdy 30).

In his 2005 book *The Gender of Desire: Essays on Male Sexuality*, Kimmel defines well the notions of normativity which defined the era: "That which is normative – constructed and enforced by society through socialization of the young and through social sanctions against deviants – begins to appear as normal, that which is designed by nature." (Kimmel 67). As such, he, like Butler and Buchbinder, supports the notion of gender is a social construct while also emphasizing how normative standards of gender are both designed to conceal its own genesis and to act as a means of regulative discourse which serve as a foundation to impose social acts of punishment onto those who deviate from established norms.

While many of the notions and theorists from the second and third wave are still very relevant today, particularly those of hegemonic masculinity, since the early 2000s masculinity studies have also integrated theoretical ideas from both the poststructuralist and postcolonial influences associated with contemporary feminism, the fields of queer and sexuality studies as well as the theoretical framework of intersectionality (Gottzén et al 1-2). As such, masculinity studies of today entails an even bigger focus on incorporating social, cultural, and political identities in its theoretical framework than ever, which acts as a testimony to far the interdisciplinary academic field of masculinity studies has come since its focus on the middle-class, heterosexual, and white man.

Judith Butler on gender performativity

Before I get into theories of masculinity specifically, I want to first establish the theoretical framework in which I will be operating when approaching the notion of sex, gender, and sexuality in my analysis. In this assignment, I will be using the theories of American gender theorist and philosopher Judith Butler, who has greatly influenced the field of gender studies as well as queer theory and feminist theory. In her acclaimed book *Gender Trouble* from 1988, she explores the notions of gender and sex and challenges that certain gendered behaviors are inherently natural. Instead she proposes that they are instead culturally constructed and reinforced as we all position ourselves in relation to them and continuously learn and reproduce normalized codes of gendered behavior.

I find that I should start off with pointing to Butler's own metacommunication on the subject of gender, sex, and sexuality and the use of labels such as 'woman', 'transgender', and "bisexual" in cultural and political texts. As such, she emphasizes that she finds such descriptive labels fundamentally limiting of the very objects they are referring to, as they do not encompass more complex constructions of sexuality, sex, and gender and thus are reductionist. However, while Butler finds that such labels restrict the discussion on the topic, she still acknowledges the need for such simplified identity labels, or what she refers to as 'signs', as they also enable tangible communication while also acting as terms that challenge signs of heteronormativity on a linguistic level (Butler 309-310). I find that these reflections become relevant both when reading and understanding Butler's texts, but also in the writing and reading of this project. As such, while I must use labels to communicate both my thoughts and the thoughts of others, I realize that the very utilization of these labels is both limiting and a basic term of communication.

Butler theorizes that gender is what she calls a 'performative act', meaning that gender is not a fixed or stable identity, but rather a continuous performance of behavior that either challenges or reinforces established dominant conventions. As such, when people act in accordance to hegemonic norms, this is not expression of naturally existing gender codes but rather a performative display of the internalization of established societal norms. About this, Butler notes that "gender proves to be performative – that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be [...] no gender identity behind the expression of gender; [...] identity is performatively constituted by the very "expression" that are said to be its results." (Butler¹ 34).

As such, she expresses that gendered behavior constitutes, rather than expresses, a delusion of a stable gender identity.

Since there are no natural gender identities, Butler argues that there cannot be said to be any correct or incorrect acts of gender, only acts which either conform to or challenge contemporaneous hegemonic discourses. As such, she notes that she finds that there really is no problem with “women having a penis, and men having a vagina. People can have whatever primary characteristics they have whether given or acquired – that that does not necessarily imply what gender they will be or want to be” (Butler via Williams). Yet, Butler also notes that some acts of performativity are generally more readily perceived as socially acceptable acts of gender, particularly those who abide by a polarized view of gender as well as established conventions on what constitutes ‘correct’ feminine and masculine behavior (Butler² 528).

Another category which Butler addresses is sexuality, which she argues is often wrongfully viewed as having a natural coherence with sex and gender, a perception which is based in heteronormative hegemony. As such, she argues that society is generally characterized by a sense of compulsory heterosexuality which is “reproduced and concealed [...] through the cultivation of bodies into discrete sexes with ‘natural’ appearances and ‘natural’ heterosexual disposition” (Butler² 524). As such, having a male body is traditionally expected to equate both a male gender as well as inhabit heterosexual desires towards the female body and gender. As is the case with gender, heterosexuality as a natural fact has thus been normalized through the perceived naturalness of binary sex (Butler¹ 147-148).

Butler argues that while modern society has traditionally been dominated by norms of heteronormativity, it has become more accepting of non-heterosexual and non-binary individuals over the last several decades, about which she notes that the media plays a vital role. As such, she argues that “the more cultural acceptance, the more cultural discourse, the more media representation, the more proximity that people have to gay, lesbian, bi, trans people, the more that life becomes thinkable” (Butler³ 0:10). Butler accentuates that sexuality is fundamentally not a choice, as is the case with gender and sex, and that some aspects of human desire remain unrealizable and subconscious (Butler³ 0:43). However, she does stress that increased media representation of non-heterosexuality and generally changing discourses on sexuality does not produce homosexuality but instead makes it feasible to imagine and thus reproduce culture in

ways that challenge current norms of heteronormativity. This greatly emphasizes the important role which the media, including shows such as *The Big Bang Theory*, plays in shaping cultural and political discourses.

While Butler argues that there is no correct or incorrect expressions of gender, she acknowledges that we historically and currently exist in a reality where “genders constitute univocal signifiers, in which gender is stabilized, polarized, rendered discrete and intractable” (Butler² p. 528). This cultural circumstance as such functions as a regulative discourse that imposes onto the individual the expectations of compliance and conformity. As such, the notion of sex and gender as binary becomes a cultural construction that succeeds in regularly concealing its own genesis and whose illusion of universal accuracy and credibility is only maintained by a shared agreement to reproduce them (Ibid. 522).

Those who cannot or will not live up to established illusions of gender essentialism may be subject to social or even political punishment directly or indirectly, while those who do are rewarded. As such, this dynamic further contributes to sustain a faulty reassurance that a true essence of sex and gender does indeed exist (Ibid. 528-522). I will elaborate further on political punishment in my section on Connell, who theorizes that institutions, including the political system and the justice system, are very much gendered and condone certain behaviors and identities while condemning others. As such, conventions of gender become means of regulative discourse used to compel the individual to conform (Ibid.).

Raewyn Connell on masculinities

In this section, I aim to establish the main theoretical framework on masculinities which I will be applying to my analysis of how masculinity is portrayed in *The Big Bang Theory*. For this purpose, I have chosen to utilize Australian sociologist Raewyn Connell, who has had a major impact on the field of masculinity studies, particularly with her book titled *Masculinities* which was published in 1995. This work proved to be groundbreaking in the field, and it is still highly acclaimed and one of the most cited works on the subject today – so much so that it was republished in a second edition in 2005. Initially stating that she finds that earlier works on the subject “have failed to produce a coherent science” on the subject, she sets out to redefine the

notion of modern masculinity from a cultural standpoint rather than focusing solely on what characteristics defines a person who is masculine (Connell 67-68).

I will have a special focus on four terms which Connell outlines in the book – namely ‘hegemonic masculinity’, ‘subordination’, ‘complicity’, and ‘marginalization’. Connell herself states that these four terms provide a useful “framework in which we can analyze specific masculinities” as they address different but related key aspects of masculinities and cultural gender systems, a point with which I agree. It should be noted that these four aspects of masculinity should not be seen as referring to fixed character types that are not subject to change, but rather configurations of practice which are continuously dynamic and dependent on cultural context (Connell 81).

According to Connell, the concept of masculinity is highly relational, and so discussing gender becomes to discuss the relationship between gender. Connell argues that, in principle, only societies which view men and women as bearers of polarized characteristics will have a concept of masculinity, as it only exists in the capacity of a culturally and socially perceived polarization to femininity (Connell 68). Because of this, Connell notes that an assessment of masculinity should be conducted with a focus on both men and women’s gendered lives and how they relate to each other through practices that reinforce hierarchical systems, and on how these practices might affect bodily experience, personality, and culture (Connell 71).

Connell rejects notions commonly accepted in mass culture of the ‘real man’, the ‘natural man’, or the ‘deep masculine’ and of masculinity as a natural consequence of the male body with a fixed set of traits associated with it (Connell 45). Instead, Connell refers to what she calls the ‘reproductive arena’ when talking about how social practices may be reliant on notions of the biological body. As such, this concept refers to factors such as “sexual arousal and intercourse, childbirth and infant care, bodily differences and similarities” (Connell 71).

At the core of Connell’s theories is the claim that there does not exist just one form of masculinity, but rather many different forms that all interact with each other within an ever-dynamic hierarchy. Connell defines gender as “a way in which social practice is ordered” (Connell 71) and notes that any one masculinity is positioned in a number of structures of relationships and will always be liable to internal contradiction (Connell and Messerschmidt 848). Masculinities must also always be considered in the context of culture and history, as “any

one masculinity, as a configuration of practice, is simultaneously positioned in a number of different structures of relationships, which may be following different historical trajectories” (Connell 73).

The claim that all institutions are gendered is another key element to Connell’s theories. As such, she notes that institutions such as schools and the state are not just gendered in a metaphorical sense, in a way that is substantive and socially structured in relation to the reproductive arena. Connell uses the state as an example of an institution that is heavily structured about the male biological arena. As such, she argues that the state is characterized by a majority of male officials because practices such as recruitment, hiring, and internal divisions of labor are configured to the male biological arena, which put non-marginalized and, particularly, non-subordinated men at an advantage (Connell 73).

One part of Connell’s gender theory is the notion of *hegemonic masculinity*. According to Connell, the concept of hegemony is derived from Antonio Gramsci’s analysis of class relations and refers to social and cultural systems in which a group claims and maintains power which gives them a leading position over others. Looking at Connell’s works, it seems that hegemonic masculinity has two primary components to it, the domination of women and intermale dominance. As such, the concept refers to social practices that legitimize and normalize the hierarchical dominance of maleness in society as well as the subsequent marginalization of non-maleness, most notably femaleness, as well as marginalized forms of performing maleness. This means that not only is masculinity dominant, but there also exists particular dominant forms of masculinity which will achieve a socially favorable position over others (Connell 71-81).

Since the notion of hegemonic masculinity is fundamentally a dynamic construction, non-hegemonic groups, including women, may challenge current accepted answers and establish a new hegemony. As such, hegemonic masculinity refers to the type of masculinity which if performed generates the most social power and benefits in society at a given time. Connell argues that whichever type of masculinity is hegemonic is the one which best represents “currently accepted answers to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy”, a dynamic which continuously ensures that men may hold a dominant position over women (Connell 77-78).

Connell notes that the most visible bearers of hegemonic masculinity will not necessarily be those who hold most power in a society. As such, men who has a high degree of capital such

as institutional power or economic prosperity may still hold great power in a society even if they do not live up to hegemonic ideals in other notable areas such as sexuality or race. While this is possible, hegemony is still more probable to be attained “only if there is correspondence between cultural ideal and institutional power”. Because of this, the institutions who best live up to masculine ideals will also be those who hold most power, of which the military, the government and the top levels of the financial sector are prominent current examples (Connell 77).

While hegemonic masculinity relates to masculinities’ privileged positions of power in society in general, *subordination* rather relates to power relations between groups of men. As such, some groups of men dominate the societal hierarchy while other groups of men are subordinated and suppressed through a series of cultural practices due to them performing masculinity in a way that is far removed from hegemonic ideals. Connell underlines, that subordination goes beyond cultural stigmatization in this sense, as these practices are highly institutionalized and material, and such are completely integrated as a part of everyday cultural and political experience (Connell 78).

Perhaps the best example of a subordinated masculinity is gay men as a group, who Connell label as “the bottom of a gender hierarchy among men” (Connell 78). As such, Connell theorizes that no relationship among men in contemporary Western society is more surrounded by symbolic fear than the one between heterosexuality and homosexuality. Historically, this relationship masculinity has been characterized by both the institutional criminalization of homosexuality as well as violence or threats of violence outside the law (Connell 155). As such, different aspects of gayness are symbolically expelled from hegemonic masculinity with examples of this being a perceived interest in activities traditionally associated with femininity – such as an interest in interior design or beauty products – as well as being on the receiving end of penetrative intercourse.

Connell notes, that this symbolic amalgamation with femininity plays a significant part of the subordination and rejection of gay masculinity, it being the closest thing to actual femininity which is subordinated under masculinity as whole (Connell 78-79). As such, the homosexual man is seen as simply lacking in masculinity, an idea which has historically been expressed throughout our society in a vast multitude of ways, ranging from stereotypical ideas of the loose-wristed, lisping gay man to the scholarly theories of the aetiology of male homosexuality,

building on the idea that it is fundamentally deviant in a natural sense and needs its cause explored.

These ideas of homosexuality are based on the binary interpretation of femininity and masculinity and that these opposites fundamentally attract. As such, when someone is attracted to that which is masculine, they must be feminine in either gender or psychology, a notion which creates the foundation for the assumed correlation between male homosexuality and feminine, gendered behavior (Connell 143). The ideas of a correlation between males performing gender in a way that is perceived as feminine and homosexuality is persistent to a degree that they might be utilized to impose homosexuality on individuals whether they identify as gay or not. In this position, the man identified as homosexual will receive the same disadvantages of the subordination which is associated with actual gayness (Connell 151).

While these ideas are incoherent in certain aspects, failing for example in clarifying how homosexual men are attracted to each other, they are persistent and integrated into contemporary discourses. This is the case despite homosexuality continuing to gain more cultural acceptance, particularly through social movements by certain political groupings, and largely having moved away from being described as neither a deviance, a disease, nor a simple matter of identity. As such, Connell states that while gay communities provide resistance to hegemonic notions of masculinity, they do not currently challenge them in a way that threatens societal male dominance altogether – however they do possess the potential for change (Connell 143-144). However, while homosexuality has moved from being deviant opposite the norm to being viewed rather as a form of sexual subculture in modern Western society, homosexual masculinity is still very much subordinated and lacking in many of the benefits associated with hegemonic masculinity (Connell 160).

While gay masculinity is perhaps the most notable example of subordinated masculinity, Connell argues that some heterosexual groups of men are also culturally excluded although to a lesser extent. While she does not get too specific about which masculinities are subjected to this, she notes that what they have in common is a greater extent of association to femininity and thus disassociation from the more hypermasculine hegemonic ideal. She does however mention both “nerd” and “geek” as labels commonly associated with subordination (Connell 79), which becomes highly relevant in regard to my project.

As is the case with subordination, the notion of *marginalization* concerns power relations between men. However, while non-heterosexual and feminine men are subordinated to hegemonic masculinity not only in terms of social status but also in regard to cultural, political, economic, and legal discrimination, marginalization rather refers to “the interplay of gender with other structures such as class and race” and how such factors may put some men at a disadvantage in relation to reaping the benefits of hegemonic masculinity if they fail to embody core hegemonic ideals such as being white and middle- or upper-class – or able-bodied, cisgender, Western, or something else entirely (Connell 80). That is not to say that one can talk of *a* lower-class masculinity, *an* Asian masculinity, or *a* disabled masculinity, but rather that social, political and cultural identities impact gender relations and the dynamic between masculinities in a meaningful way and must be considered for a nuanced analysis of masculinity to be possible (Connell 76).

Being black, working class, et cetera does not always equate exclusion from hegemonic masculinity. Connell notes that marginalization will always be relative to “the authorization of the hegemonic masculinity of the dominant group.” As such, while marginalized groups are generally incompatible with hegemonic masculinity, the hegemonic model can choose to authorize some expressions of marginalized and subordinated masculinity as legitimately hegemonic. To exemplify this, Connell refers to how while some black athletes may be granted both fame and fortune, they remain individual exemplars of hegemonic masculinity as their success has no “trickle-down effect”. This means that while some black men may appear to be accepted as living up to hegemonic ideals, black men will still generally be marginalized and benefit less from the patriarchal dividend than white men. As such, Connell stresses that hegemonic masculinity among whites in the United States is still characterized by the institutional oppression of black men “have framed the making of masculinities in black communities” (Connell 80-81).

Connell notes that while in all likelihood, the number of men who actually meet the ideals associated with hegemonic masculinity is small – especially in modern times where a century long push for gender equality has marked the cultural and political climate – the majority of men will still benefit male hegemony and the general subordination of women. In this constellation where a large amount of men may not meet standards of hegemony – and thus are

free from the risk of being “frontline troops of patriarchy” – but still receive some benefits from being male from society is referred to by Connell as a relationship of *complicity*. (Connell 79).

Connell stresses, that the complicit man cannot just be viewed as simply a lazy version of the rare truly hegemonic man, but that this way of performing masculinity instead is an expression of how everyday life often is characterized with the need to compromise extensively with women, such as fatherhood, heterosexual marriage, and work, which makes the fully authoritarian and dominant male an ill fit for today’s society. As such, many men who encompass hegemonic traits to a notable degree will still be respectful and non-violent husbands, sons, and fathers who can easily accept the idea of gender equality. However, because they do not challenge hegemonic masculinity, this majority of men still contribute to the reinforcement of hegemonic standards (Connell 79-80).

Male intimacy and homosocial groups

In this section I would like to firstly address the subject of the role which homogenous male friendships play in maintaining hegemonic masculinity as an extension to my section about Connell. My reasoning for doing this is the large role which the close and longstanding intermale friendships between the series’ four male protagonists – who are arguably very similar to one another – play in advancing the narrative of *The Big Bang Theory*. Looking at the series, the relationship dynamics between the main male characters of the show provide a sort of microcosm of how the hierarchy of masculinities can work. As such, when one character performs acts of gender, the other three are the main audience and reactors, and so they act as a significant regulating factor to one another’s behavior. This makes it relevant to look at how this kind of relationship may interact with, and either challenge or reinforce, hegemonic masculinity.

Studies suggest that in the late 20th century, close ties between groups of friends are often stronger than familial ones, setting the stage for homosocial groups to be featured as the most essential social relationships rather than those with a romantic partner or familial ties (Morgan¹ 41). One would perhaps think, that when men with similar senses of identity and proximity to the hegemonic standard bond in groups, the need to constantly refer in ideology and behavior to hegemonic ideals of masculinity would lessen. However, as I am going to get into in this section, that is not the case.

“What is this world worth without the enjoyment of friendship, and the cultivation of the social feelings of the heart? [...] My heart is now so full of matters and things impatient to be whispered into the ear of a trusty friend, that I think I could pour them into yours till it ran over” (Webster via Rotundo 75). Like such did former United States Secretary of State Daniel Webster (1782-1852) write to his male friend in 1804 at 22 years of age. Rotundo argues, that this quote is a prime example of friendship amongst young adult males as bonds that may hold very much the same level of emotional intimacy and feelings of partnership as of that with a romantic partner. As such, the male friendship is forged during the teenage years or young adulthood and is often based on loyalty and the sharing of innermost, secret feelings, while being characterized by a dominant sense of gentleness and self-expression often associated with femininity and in this way inverting some stereotypical gendered patterns of male behavior (Rotundo 75).

This sort of intermale friendship pattern is seen in many places in fiction, one example being in the movie *Dead Poets Society* directed by Peter Weir, where Ethan Hawke plays the shy teenage boy Todd Anderson who enters an all-male, elite prep-school and is quickly absorbed into a group of friends, with whom he forms close bonds through intense experiences. Together, the young men go through experiences connected with youth and the transition to adulthood – such as rebellion against authority, artistic experimentation, and fumbling with a new world of romantic, heterosexual love (Weir). Another, perhaps even better example, is the long-lasting friendship between roommates Joey and Chandler on the tv-series *Friends*, which would easily switch between watching sports and discussing their innermost feelings and dreams with each other (Crane and Kauffman).

However, that is not all there is to male friendships. While male friendships may often invert some patterns of masculinity, this is often only considered acceptable behavior as long as masculine behavior overshadows the feminine. As such, intermale friendships are very much affected by expectations of masculine behavior (Migliaccio 229). Migliaccio argues – in line with the theories of Butler – that behavior in intermale friendships to a great extent constitute performances of gender instead of being merely a result of being male (Migliaccio 226). Like Rotundo, Migliaccio addresses how a close sense of intimacy is most commonly associated with femininity, and that men may have the same level of closeness as interfemale relationships, albeit

often in a different way which is often overlooked as a meaningful form of intimacy, the ideal form of intimacy being based on a feminine definition.

Migliaccio argues that in contrast to the intimacy based on self-disclosure, the intimacy of male friendships generally exists in a “closeness in the doing” (Migliaccio 226-227) – a term which is borrowed from Scott Swain and which refers to considering engaging in activities other than talking as the most meaningful way to spend time with friends. As such, a study conducted by Swain concluded that two thirds of men preferred closeness in doing over other forms of intimacy such as self-disclosure (White 81). However, research shows that many men would like to express affection, tender feelings, and worries more than they do but abstain from doing so due to such behavior’s negative connotations to femininity (Migliaccio 228), in line with Connell’s thought on femininity as subordinated to masculinity.

Men’s adherence to hegemonic standards of masculinity influences the type of intermale friendships they will pursue. As such, a greater adherence to hegemonic ideals provide men with greater degrees of social capital as well as an inclination to seek out friendships with other males with comparable degrees of social capital. Similarly, men with lower degrees of social capital are likely to enter friendships with other men like them, forming homosocial groups that further encourage different forms of masculinity to be practiced within (Migliaccio 227-228). Homosociality can, simply put, be defined as “the nonsexual attractions held by men (or women) for members of their own sex” (Bird 121).

Homosociality not only promotes a clear divergence between men and women, but also between hegemonic masculinities and non-hegemonic masculinities by the segregation of social groups. Furthermore, Bird argues that homosociality among heterosexual men contributes to maintaining hegemonic norms by “supporting meanings associated with identities that fit hegemonic ideals, while suppressing meanings associated with nonhegemonic masculinity ideals” (Ibid). According to Bird, this is primarily done through the perpetuation of three different meanings, namely though ‘emotional detachment’, ‘competitiveness’, and ‘sexual objectification of women’. It should however be noted, that while these meanings characterize hegemonic masculinity, they are not always internalized as central to the individual man’s identity (Bird 122). As these are terms I will be referring back to in my analysis of *The Big Bang Theory*, I will elaborate on them below, and even further in my analysis.

‘Emotional detachment’ refers to certain behavioral expectations of hegemonic masculinity, especially through withholding expressions of intimacy. These include not being or appearing expressive and emotional, as doing so reveals weaknesses and vulnerabilities, in order to appear unhurt and in control at all times. ‘Competitiveness’ refers to having hierarchies, distinction, and separation as defining characteristic of group dynamics and individual male identities which stand in opposition to corporation and interpersonal symmetry. Lastly, ‘sexual objectification of women’ refers to the marginalization and objectification of women which contributes to maintaining a sense of distinct maleness to the male self-image by creating a symbolic distance through the rejection of anything feminine. This distance enables men to depersonalize women as well as subordinate them, a process which facilitates a foundation on which feelings of male superiority may be maintained (Bird 122-123).

Similarly to Bird, having studied the friendships of 98 males, Migliaccio concludes that their relationships are generally affected by two major expectations of masculinity which influence forms of intimacy between them (Migliaccio 226), the first one being behavioral and relating to how men are generally expected to be ‘stoic’ which in this context means behaving in ways that suppress a range of human feelings and expressions (Migliaccio 228) – an expectation which is comparable to ‘emotional detachment’ as described by Bird. The other expectation is attitudinal and relates specifically with anti-femininity, mainly the subordination of women and femininity (Migliaccio 226), a circumstance which is comparable to Bird’s notion of the ‘sexual objectification of women’.

Bird argues that while men may differ from norms of hegemonic masculinity, these types of masculinities are rather seen as “private dissatisfactions” in an individual level than grounds for challenging the notion and expectations of hegemonic masculinity, let alone social gender constructions as a whole. Because of this, while the group of men that actually live up the masculine ideals in reality can be assumed to be very small according to Connell, hegemonic masculinity perseveres while deviations are regarded as personal failures instead of a foundation for questioning the status quo (Bird 123). This notion is also present within the theoretical framework of Connell, who similarly notes that: “The concept of sex role identity prevents individuals who violate the traditional role for their sex from challenging it: instead they feel

personally inadequate and insecure” (Connell 25). This circumstance rather sets the stage for the complicity of geek masculinity.

Geek and nerd culture and masculinity in cinema

In the following chapter, I wish to dive into the concepts of ‘geek’ and ‘nerd’ as well as geek and nerd masculinity. This I will do in order to establish a frame of reference to use in my analysis, as geekdom and nerdiness play major roles in *The Big Bang Theory* and the masculinities which it portrays. As such, I will provide a short summary of what defines the terms “geek” and “nerd” and what differentiates them from each other, as well as assess how they have been utilized over the last decades. Furthermore, I wish to examine how geek and nerd masculinities and general representations of the trope in cinema have evolved until today.

First and foremost, I would like to make an attempt at differentiating between the two terms ‘geek’ and ‘nerd’ which, although often used interchangeably, do not refer to the same exact thing. A lot of definitions of the words are available, but one of these describe, in simplified terms, that a nerd can be described as someone who is socially awkward and overly intelligent albeit somewhat single-minded, as well as engaged in one or more non-social hobbies or pursuits to an obsessive degree (“What Are the Differences Between “Nerds,” “Geeks,” and “Dorks”?” n.d.). Meanwhile, a geek is not necessarily socially awkward, but is very engaged in and knowledgeable on one or more specialized topic, often digital or technological in nature (Ibid.) or to do with marginalized, obscure hobbies (McCain et al 1). As such, while different, it is clear that there is some overlap between the terms, particularly having a strong interest in specialized activities.

According to McCain et al, the term ‘geek’ has been used since the 1950’s and have historically been used derogatorily until the 80’s to describe social outcasts with strong hobbies. However, as society has become increasingly more reliant on technology and computers, the former outcast group of geeks and nerds have been increasingly useful to society and as a result have become less stigmatized. As such, new media and computer-based geek sub-cultures arose with more defined ideas of what was considered geeky were formed. Furthermore, the term ‘geek’ has been reclaimed to some degree, now used with pride by many, with the level of

knowledge and devotion to certain interests becoming the measurement of authenticity and status amongst self-proclaimed geeks (McCain et al. 38).

The nerd and geek type are increasingly prevalent types in popular media, giving rise to a broader representation of geekiness and nerdiness as defining aspects of masculine identity. This proliferation of the type seems indicative of more acceptance of the trope as a legitimate type of masculinity, and the portrayal of the type has gone from generally negative to being generally positive. Furthermore, while having historically been cast in the role of minor characters whose primary role often was to assist the main character, men embodying a new evolution of the geek and nerd tropes are increasingly seen in leading, positively framed roles (Morgan 34) as is seen in works of fiction such as the 2015 television series *Mr. Robot*, the 2014 Disney movie *Big Hero 6*, and, of course, *The Big Bang Theory*.

Traditionally being portrayed with glasses and an outdated or eccentric style of appearance that shows a lack of interest in fashion trends, the geek and nerd types is generally easily recognizable and the trope is generally depicted as intelligent, but lacking in social skills and luck in romantic and sexual endeavors. However, that is not always the case today as the geek and nerd have undergone a gradual change in appearance, behavior, and social status. The geek trope has enjoyed the most positive change. While the notion of geek has traditionally been associated with marginalization, certain aspects of geekdom, particularly those to do with technology and science, has been integrated into non-marginalized masculinity in a way, it has not previously been (Morgan 33).

Today, it is not uncommon to find different refigured versions of the geek in the media that may be in alignment with hegemonic ideals by being both conventionally physically attractive as well as heroic. Furthermore, this version of the geek generally has great sexual prowess but varying degrees of success when it comes to love and romance (Morgan 33). Furthermore, the modern, geeky male character is often single and more engaged in homosocial relationships than familial ones as is the case with fictional, male characters in general (Morgan 41). According to Morgan, this shift indicates a discursive distancing from earlier hegemonic ideals of manhood based in economic success and heteronormative sexual aptitude which she argues can be ascribed to cultural anxieties about the decline in the global economic market during the 2000s.

Science has become the epitome of rationality needed in a society that is suffering long-lasting, negative consequences of economic unpredictability (Morgan 41). As such, this lack of social control and stability has resulted in the emergence of a different kind of masculinity with a focus on technological and scientific skills but a disinterest in economic wealth often coupled with a failing home life. The rise of this arguably more flawed masculinity in popular media makes male failures and breakdowns common themes, not as a contrast to hegemonic masculinity but as an integrated part of it (Morgan 33). Additionally, a growing fascination of technology, scientific ability, and rationality has set the stage for these aspects of geek masculinity to become integrated in hegemonic forms of masculinities.

One example of a man whose masculinity is not devalued by their use of technology, but rather enhanced by it, is the character Tony Stark from the Marvel-owned Iron Man franchise – particularly as he is portrayed by Robert Downey Jr. in several movies, including the Iron Man and The Avengers trilogies. Starting out as a multi-billionaire weapons manufacturer and playboy in the first Iron Man movie, Stark undergoes a personal transformation, leaving the weapons industry and instead choosing to direct his money and attention towards doing good by building a mechanized suit of armor in which he becomes the super hero Iron Man (Favreau). Furthermore, Stark chooses to abandon his playboy lifestyle and pursue his assistant Pepper Potts, whom he ends up marrying and having a daughter with (Russo and Russo) although their relationship is often strained due to his turbulent lifestyle, at one time leading to a brief break-up (Russo and Russo¹).

Stark is a great example of the change which the concept of hegemonic masculinity has undergone since the 2000s, as he has evolved from a money-hungry womanizer to a man whose identity is deep-set in technology. Furthermore, he enjoys varying success in his home life with his and Potts's relationship often faltering, although he is eventually granted a happy marriage and family life. This transformation does not devalue Stark's masculinity but only enhances and adds complexity to his character. In many aspects he deviates from traditionally geeky characters, being handsome, popular, stylish, as well as having a high degree of social intelligence and self-confidence,

While it is the geek that has enjoyed the most acceptance in the media, the nerd has also gained a rise in acceptance, however to a much lesser degree. While the geek is now more

associated with intelligence and expertise, albeit sometimes coupled with an inability or unwillingness to conform to normalized conventions of behavior, the nerd is still associated with being very easily coded as stereotypical nerdy in both behavior and appearance (Morgan 38). As such, while the nerd trope has detached itself from being automatically associated with subordination, it is still stereotypically seen as socially inept and failing to demonstrate hegemonic traits, particularly being portrayed as sexually incompetent and unable to ‘get the girl’ (Morgan 34). As such, while the fictional nerd character has enjoyed some of the same progress as the geek when it comes to an increase in acceptance, being portrayed in a positive manner, as well as in leading roles, the trope is still most often portrayed as marginalized

Lastly, while the geek and nerd types have undergone changes in the last decades, they are still very much restricted when it comes to representation in terms of gender, class, sexuality, and race in popular media. As such, both generally still equals performing a male, middle-class, heterosexual, and white masculinity, partly caused by the associations between science and maleness. As such, there are few examples of geek and nerd masculinities which deviate from this construct just as there is still a striking lack of female scientists in popular cinema (Moreau et al. 27-28). This leaves much to be desired for the nerd and geek tropes, a subject I will dive deeper into in my analysis.

Analysis

In this chapter I wish to briefly explain what may be expected of my analysis section of this project, particularly which chapters may be found and why I have chosen to organize it the way that I have. For the sake of structure, I have chosen to utilize Bird’s three meanings of masculinity in homosocial groups – namely competitiveness, the sexualization of women, and emotional detachment - as headlines for four chapters in my analysis. This sectioning does not mean that I will be operating mainly with the terms of Bird in these segments, as I will be attempting to draw on all of my theory whenever relevant, and Connell most of all.

However, I have found that these three notions cover some of the most important points I wish to make, when discussing which expectations of hegemonic gendered behavior most characterize the male main characters of *The Big Bang Theory*. Furthermore, I have chosen to split the category ‘the sexualization of women’ into two separate chapters, as I find that both the

subordination of women and the rejection in femininity in men are well-represented enough in the series to be deserving of each their own chapters. In addition to Bird's three meanings of masculinity, my analysis will cover three main topics which I find relevant for a comprehensive assessment of how geek and nerd masculinity is portrayed in the series: Raj and racism in *The Big Bang Theory*; The complicity of geek masculinity; and Why the show gets away with it.

While I have already covered my main theory in previous chapters, I will be referring to some additional theories and theorists in my analyses when I deem doing so relevant and helpful for a comprehensive assessment. I will however be doing so to a minimal degree in attempt to keep my analysis and theory sections relatively separate for the sake of structure, and because of this the theory used in my analysis chapters will not be as in-depth as my main theory.

Geekdom and nerdiness in *The Big Bang Theory*

In this chapter, I wish to begin my analysis of how the concepts of 'geek' and 'nerd' as well as geek and nerd masculinity are utilized in *The Big Bang Theory* by considering how the terms apply to the behavior and appearance of the four main male characters, Leonard, Sheldon, Raj, and Howard. Traditionally understood to devalue masculinity (Connell 19), nerd and geek masculinity is now often presented as accessible, or even cool, as described in earlier chapters. As such, I wish to determine whether the men may be predominantly geeks or nerds, or somewhere in between and with what effect, while also discussing if the men adhere more to traditional or newer conceptions of the trope.

Nerdiness and geekdom play a predominant role in *The Big Bang Theory* and is a defining part of the four main characters' self-identity and sense of masculinity and thus also of how others see them. Generally, the show portrays the four main characters as individuals whose geekdom and nerdiness affect almost every aspect of their lifestyles and who are very knowledgeable on their areas of expertise. However, at closer inspection at least two questions arise: how is the male geek and nerd male portrayed in the series, and if the show is actually seeking to portray a somewhat authentic image of geek culture, or if it merely produces a clichéd and flawed stereotype of what constitutes geekdom.

The show enjoys poking fun at its characters for their obsessions with niche franchises, science, and technology. Most often, the punchlines of the show are not jokes per se, but rather

situations and imagery derived from exaggerated stereotypes of nerds and geeks or simply verbal references to something which the audience will recognize as sounding nerdy or simply intellectual whether they actually fully understand what is being said or not. As such, comical effect is often achieved by the characters saying something which the average viewer has little requisite of knowing and thus verifying, often utilizing a rhetoric relying strongly on highly specialized terms related to niche culture, science, and technology. This is sometimes done in a way that seems to overcomplicate simple, everyday communication, as is the case with the dialogue which begins the very first episode of the series:

Sheldon: “So if a photon is directed through a plane with two slits in it and either slit is observed, it will not go through both slits. If it’s unobserved, it will. However, if it’s observed after it’s left the plane but before it hits its target, it will not have gone through both slits.”

Leonard: “Agreed. What’s your point?”

Sheldon: “It’s no point. I just think it’s a good idea for a t-shirt.” (“Pilot” 00:00:01)

This dialogue is a good example of how it is seemingly not the general objective that the viewer should be able to fully understand the specialized language used by the main male characters but rather the opposite. As such, I assume that the average viewer is unlikely to fully understand Sheldon’s reference to the so-called ‘double-slit experiment’, a term associated with modern physics – however they will be able to understand what is most important to the narrative of the series: that the characters are geeky to an extreme degree and that they are very different from the average person in this regard. The dialogue furthermore informs the viewer that science is likely deeply integrated into the men’s identity, given that they are comfortably using such specialized language in personal, non-work related conversations about something which does not inherently call for physics terms, namely what might look good on a t-shirt.

Looking at the *mise-en-scène* of Sheldon and Leonard’s shared apartment where most of the series’ narrative takes place, the nerdiness and geekiness of its inhabitants becomes apparent on a visual level as well. Being adorned with objects such as whiteboards with mathematical formulas drawn on them, numerous books, a Captain Future poster, an astronomical telescope, various merchandise from sci-fi and fantasy franchises, as well as a large sculpture of a DNA

string, the location is easily decodable as nerdy science enthusiasts. The presence of an abundance of objects associated to science further emphasizes that the inhabitants' identities as scientists reach far beyond their working hours and into their leisure time as a thing to do for enjoyment. This is stressed by how the content of one particular whiteboard famously changes from episode to episode, giving the impression of continuous work being done.



Image 1: Sheldon and Leonard's living room, with the aforementioned whiteboard barely visible to the right of the door behind the sculpture ("The Electric Can Opener Fluctuation" 00:01:31).

The visual cues regarding nerdiness and geekiness extends into the appearance of the four main male characters as well. As such, the men are generally coded heavily as nerds on a visual level, each having their own trademark style of fashion which they wear in most episodes throughout the series almost as individualized, stylized 'nerd uniforms'. Wearing outdated, eccentric, or thematic items of clothes such as sweater vests, various t-shirts with superhero franchise logos, or huge belt buckles shaped as Nintendo controllers or lightsabers, the audience is instantly informed of the characters' status as different from the mainstream norm. Furthermore, Leonard has been supplied with thick framed glasses, which are characteristic for the nerd and geek archetypes in film and television. In terms of physique, the men are either

scrawny or simply not muscular and are furthermore portrayed as not stereotypically attractive, fitting well with traditions of nerd depictions.



Image 2: The ‘nerd uniforms’ of the four main male cast members. From the right: Leonard, Raj, Howard, and Sheldon (“The Hofstadter Isotope” 00:10:39).

Looking at whether the main male cast of *The Big Bang Theory* most embody the nerd or geek tropes, I find that they encompass not just one or the other but exhibit central traits from both. Looking first at geekiness, society’s growing fascination of technology, scientific ability, and rationality is very present in the series by means of these very aspects being vital to the identities of the main male characters. Apart from being scientists and thus engaging with science and technology as part of their jobs as scientists – especially Howard, who as an aerospace engineer develops astronautic equipment for a living – the male characters are very frequently seen engaging with it recreationally. As such, they are regularly seen playing videogames, operating drones, hacking their way into security cameras, and working on scientific formulas simply for the fun of it.

That a societal attraction to technology has set the stage for technological aspects of geek masculinity to become fully integrated into many forms of masculinities as a positive thing is also touched upon in the series. As such, an assumed correlation between general maleness and

technology has become a common societal stereotype (du Preez 50), a circumstance which is commented on in the series when Penny asks the main male cast how they might be able to target sales of flower hairpins towards men, and Howard replies: “We add Bluetooth!” to which Sheldon adds: “Brilliant! Men love Bluetooth (“The Work Song Nanocluster” 00:11:47).

Looking at the main male characters in *The Big Bang Theory*, the men in some aspects live up to modern standards of the flawed man as well as the contemporary inclination to portray masculine identities as less obviously successful, particularly in terms of economic and familial success. As such, a returning punchline for the majority of show is the men’s lack of ability to attain and maintain romantic relationship, and their economic situations are generally not mentioned in a meaningful way to the overall narrative. However, as opposed to characters such as Tony Stark, the inability to obtain familial success of the men of *The Big Bang Theory* is not integrated as a welcome part of their masculinity but rather as being in opposition to it.

To the viewer, it would seem that Tony Stark is unable to settle down because he is almost ‘too much of a man’ to be tied down, a form of masculinity which only adds to make him more popular with women. In contrast, the men of *The Big Bang Theory* struggle to settle down as they for a large part of the series grapple to find women that are interested specifically because of their form of masculinity, which frames them as ‘lesser men’. The reason for this is that while the geek has gained the potential to not be portrayed as the underdog or social outcast, the main male characters of *The Big Bang Theory* draws not only on the geek archetype, but also relies heavily on traditional depictions of the nerd trope, a notion which is still generally associated with a remarkable lack of coolness.

It does not take much inspection to decode, that the men are certainly not depicted as cool, a circumstance which can be said to create the foundation for most of the punchlines of the show. Aside from not being stereotypically attractive, the characters lack character traits traditionally associated with leading Hollywood men. They are not athletic, assertive, completely abled, nor confident, but are instead insecure and anxious, and have health conditions such as asthma and selective mutism. Furthermore, the men have awkward personalities, often exhibiting behavior which does not live up to both ideals of hegemonic masculinity and established societal norms for social conduct, the latter often being ill received by individuals outside the group and sometimes within it.

Their awkwardness leads to many embarrassing moments where the men either approach social interactions from an overanalytical standpoint or act inappropriately due to a lack of social intuition which makes them miss or misinterpret social cues from others, both leading to a failure to connect with most ‘normal’ people. While the men are not exactly asocial, they seem only truly socially comfortable among a few people they are very close to, such as each other, their romantic partners, and their neighbor Penny, who later becomes a romantic partner as well. This is especially the case for Sheldon, whose pronounced lack of social skills are a focal point of numerous sub-plots in the series as he often fails to consider and understand the feelings of others when interacting with others.

The main male cast also engage in activities which are stereotypically nerdy. As such, they consume niche media on countless occasions, for example when playing the fantasy tabletop role-playing game *Dungeons & Dragons* and religiously buying and reading certain comic series, the latter hobby taking place so often that a specific comic book store is an often-recurring location in the series. Their love for niche culture is indeed so big, that they will make an active effort to incorporate it into otherwise non-niche activities, as when Leonard informs Penny that the men like to play Klingon Boggle, which is “just like regular Boggle, but in Klingon” (“Pilot” 00:08:40). Furthermore, the guys own a great deal merchandise related to their preferred franchises such as movie props and figurines and take great pride in their collection.

While the main male characters are definitely characterized by both geekiness and nerdiness, I find the latter to be the most defining of their unique form of masculinity. As such, while their affinity for technology and science are obviously a big part of the characters’ identities as well as the show’s narrative, their overt nerdiness, both on a visual and behavioral level, is what most influences how they are perceived and treated socially by other people. Consequently, it is their status as nerds and the social stigma that comes with it, that truly prevents them from being able to achieve the sense of coolness found in some other contemporaneous, geeky men in fiction such as Tony Stark, and thus their nerdiness becomes defining of their marginalized position in relation to hegemonic standards.

I find that this mix of nerdiness and geekiness contributes to setting the main male cast of *The Big Bang Theory*, and other comparable characters, apart from earlier, similar characters from other works of fiction. As such, the men’s continuous interactions with both science,

technology, and obscure media distinguish them from older nerd characters such as paleontology enthusiast Ross Geller from *Friends* which ran from 1994 to 2004 (Crane and Kauffman), and the stereotypically nerdy Steve Urkel from the sitcom *Family Matters* which ran from 1989 to 1998, the former having a character-defining affinity for science and academia but not for niche culture, and the latter engaging passionately in niche hobbies that are arguably uncommon for a teenage boy such as accordion playing and polka dancing but not in activities related to science and tech (Bickley and Warren).

While the men of *The Big Bang Theory* in some respects are different from many older examples of nerd and geeks, they are very similar to several newer fictional characters, among them the teenage boys Will, Mike, Dustin, Lucas, from the still-ongoing tv-series *Stranger Things* from 2016, who all enjoys niche culture such as Dungeons and Dragons and are well-versed enough in science and technology to build their own radio receiver (Duffer and Duffer). Another example of a modern combination of the geek and nerd is the highly eccentric and slightly socially awkward but well-liked Abigail “Abby” Sciuto from the still-ongoing tv-series *NCIS* from 2003, who is a forensic scientist who also enjoys playing computer games, collecting stuffed animals, and participating in goth and punk subculture which is often apparent from her visual appearance (Bellisario and McGill).

Looking into whether *The Big Bang Theory* seeks to portray a somewhat authentic image of geek culture, or merely a clichéd and flawed stereotype of what constitutes geekdom, one thing which becomes apparent is that the cast has a notable lack of diversity in terms of race, social mobility, and gender. As such, the nerds and geeks of the show are mainly white men with few exceptions – the most notable ones being Raj, who is of Indian descent, and the female scientists Bernadette and Amy. In this chapter, I will not be going further into representations of gender and race in the series, however, I will be doing so in later chapters of this project.

I find that the show features numerous inaccurate depictions of geek and nerd activities which attest to an aim to simply produce a believable and easily coded fantasy of geek and nerd identity rather than an actual homage to geek culture or an accurate portrayal of geek and nerd culture and masculinity. One example of this can be found in the episode “The Fuzzy Boots Corollary” where Leonard, Sheldon, Raj, and Howard are seen playing the massive online role-playing game World of Warcraft using laptops but no mice, instead relying on frantic, seemingly

random keyboard tapping (00:00:01), which is a highly improbable strategy for playing this particular game. Furthermore, the scene includes references to ‘The Gates of Elzevub’ and ‘The Sword of Azeroth’, neither of which exist in the real World of Warcraft.

As is the case with the specialized language used in the series, the show’s stylized and at times incorrect depictions of geeks and nerds are examples of how the main objective does not appear to be to provide the viewer with an understanding of how geek and nerd culture is practiced in real life, but simply to enable them to very easily identify that the characters are geeky and nerdy to the highest degree, in this way setting the stage for the narrative to proceed smoothly. As a result of the show’s highly stereotypical depictions of nerd and geek culture, I find that the show very much appears to be not primarily *for* geeks and nerds, but rather about them and at their expense. With that being established, I will now get into how the male nerd and geek is then portrayed in relation to Bird’s three meanings of masculinity.

Competitiveness

In this chapter, I wish to continue my analysis of how nerd masculinity is portrayed in *The Big Bang Theory* by considering how the second of Bird’s three meanings of masculinity applies to the behavior and appearance of the series’ main male cast. I wish to assess if and how the men as marginalized nerds conform to hegemonic ideals of competitiveness internally and by other characters. To do this, I will be assessing how despite of the show’s relentless mockery of its main male cast, it still frames geek and nerd masculinity as preferable in contrast to other types of masculinities portrayed in the series. Secondly, I will look into two aspects related to the notion of competitiveness are reinforced in the show, namely competing based on ability and competing based on sexual prowess.

To reiterate the theories of Connell, the masculine hierarchy is largely dominated by a white, heterosexual, and hypermasculine ideal, making all other forms of masculinity subordinated or marginalized in relation to it. In contrast, forms of masculinities that are associated with non-heterosexuality or femininity exist at the bottom of this hierarchy. This dynamic hierarchy of masculinity and the negative social consequences that come with being marginalized and subordinated creates a social system wherein men are encouraged to engage in

competitive behavior with other men, a principle which is not restricted to occur between different forms of masculinity but also applies within homosocial groups.

Competing with other men offers the possibility of establishing oneself as an appropriately masculine male – and just as importantly, as not female. Because of this, men often tend to seek out other men with whom they can act out their non-femaleness which furthermore adds to the perpetuation of male dominance. These competitions might center around sports, personal achievements, work, or something else entirely, while displaying hypermasculine acts of gender in itself can be seen as acts of competitiveness as well, as it positions the individual in relation to hegemonic masculinity and thus other men (Bird 127-128).

The friendships between the main male cast of *The Big Bang Theory* is a good example of how this hierarchy and struggle for dominance amongst men function, as practically every aspect of their relationship is characterized by competitive behavior and a constant strive to one-up each other both personally and professionally. The men perhaps most often compete in areas that are very specific to nerd masculinity. As such, knowledge and skills related to science, technology, as well as niche culture, which otherwise contribute to marginalize nerd masculinity in relation to hegemonic masculinity, is often the tool with which the men attempt to gain status.

One would perhaps assume that a group of marginalized nerds who share the experience of being marginalized because of their detachment from hypermasculinity would be supportive of each other and be accepting and empathetic of the insecurities and deviations from classical manhood in others. However, this is not the case, and while occasional fleeting moments of solicitude and tolerance do occur between the men, more often they engage in policing and degrading each other's expressions of masculinity. In this way, the men themselves are complicit in reinforcing the very power structures that marginalize them.

That the men's competitive behavior is at least partly about status and masculine dominance is further emphasized by considering who most often mocks or rejects expressions of nerd masculinity on the show. As such, while female characters do occasionally participate in the ridicule, the majority of condemnations does not come from women, but from other men. It is noteworthy that the woman most participating is Penny, who is the most masculine coded of the show's female characters. As such, her love of sports as well as her competitive and assertive nature is often contrasted with her on-again, off-again boyfriend Leonard's masculinity, or

perceived lack thereof, to emphasize that his sensitivity surpasses that of a woman. In this way, despite being performed by a woman, Penny's devaluation of Leonard's masculinity still comes from a standpoint of masculinity.

An assumed correlation between general maleness and competitiveness is explicitly established in the series. One example of this can be found in the episode "The Wheaton Recurrence". Here, Sheldon drafts Penny for his otherwise all-male bowling crew as he is eager to win a tournament and Penny is a capable bowling player. Penny agrees and notes that his team would never be able to win without her, to which Sheldon replies: "In this particular case, your lack of femininity works to our advantage" (00:05:47). When Penny is insulted by the comment and protests, Sheldon requests of her to "please reserve that butch spirit for the lanes" (00:06:20). As such, the show draws explicit connections between competitiveness and masculinity.

Perhaps the clearest examples of the men explicitly challenging the hierarchical position of other men occur when they go up against forms of masculinity that are notably hypermasculine. This is usually done by establishing an overt juxtaposition between the nerdy and geeky main male characters and caricatured, negatively framed variants of the hypermasculine man. As such, it is within this obvious contrast with hypermasculine men who are framed as aggressive, rude, and thoroughly unintelligent that the show gets to frame Leonard, Sheldon, Raj, Howard as the sweeter, more intelligent, and, essentially, better type of man.

One example of this can be found in the episode "The Middle-Earth Paradigm" where Leonard decides to challenge the masculine dominance of Penny's ex-boyfriend Kurt. Here, Kurt shows up to a Halloween party and physically intimidates Leonard when he attempts to talk to Penny by physically hovering over him, maintaining intense eye contact, and asking him to leave. Kurt's acts of intimidation are only amplified by his visual appearance. As such, Kurt is muscular, tall, and bald while also being dressed in a revealing Tarzan costume, and in this way draws associations to the primal and animalistic fictional character. Leonard on the other hand is dressed up as Frodo from *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (00:13:58) – another fictional character who encompasses many opposite traits. As such, while Tarzan represents a rather caricatured hypermasculine ideal, Frodo is rather associated with traits such as shortness, a slight body, timidity, as well as with the nerdiness that surrounds the fantasy genre which the *Lord of the Rings*-franchise belongs to.

While initially backing down and walking away, Leonard eventually decides to challenge Kurt's position in the masculine hierarchy. When Sheldon expresses reservations towards this course of action, Leonard replies: "Our society is on a paradigm shift. In the information age, Sheldon, you and I are the alpha males. We shouldn't have to back down [...] I'm going to assert my dominance face to face" (00:11:42). As such, the series explicitly touches on the evolution of geek masculinity and the heightened value that has become associated with it since the 1980s while framing it as a legitimate contender to hypermasculinity. As such, instead of trying to emulate Kurt's acts of hypermasculinity by physical intimidation, Leonard utilizes his intellect and scientific knowledge specific to his geek and nerd masculinity when he walks back up to Kurt and says:

Leonard: "A homo habilis discovering his opposable thumbs says what?"

Kurt: "What?"

Leonard: "I think I made my point."

Kurt: "Yeah? How about I make a point out of your pointy little head?"

While Kurt responds with physical force and lifts Leonard from the ground as an act of aggression and this proves himself physically superior, causing Leonard to leave the scene in humiliation, his inability to compete with Leonard on an intellectual level and lack of self-control eventually frames him as the ultimate loser of the altercation. As such, the show frames Leonard as victorious and in extensions expresses that intellect, knowledge, and wit is more desirable in a man than physical strength. This is further underscored by how in the end, Leonard is the one who 'gets the girl' when he is kissed by Penny at the end of episode and eventually marries her in the show's ninth season.

In this way, the show commits to its point that the geeky and nerdy man is the better alternative to traditional manliness – a stance which emphasizes society's growing fascination of technology, scientific ability, and rationality as well as how geek masculinity can take a form that is not only not marginalized, but hegemonic. In essence, while Kurt embodies practically every aspect of hegemonic masculinity by being almost absurdly manly, he is portrayed as a thoroughly unlikable bully. In contrast, Leonard is generally portrayed as a genuinely nice guy despite him not living up to the hegemonic ideal.

This juxtaposition places the notion of hegemonic masculinity in a position that invites the viewer to take a critical view of some of the ideals that are celebrated in modern day society while advocating for geek and nerd masculinity to be seen in a more positive light. However, while the show frames the main male cast of *The Big Bang Theory* in a positive way, the men's unique form of geek and nerd masculinity is not nearly as unproblematic nor wholesome as it seems on the surface. As such, while it would seem that an effort has been made to portray the men in a way that challenges and deviates from hegemonic standards, they often exhibit not only behavior but ideologies which are remarkably close to hegemonic masculinity in ways which I will get into now and the following chapters.

While competitiveness is a stereotypically masculine trait, framing the men's competitive behavior as laughable is a popular punchline of the show due to their failure to fully live up to hegemonic ideals despite attempting to. As such, the series plays on the absurdity found in the discrepancy between socially shared expectations of hegemonic masculine behavior and the behavior of the characters which is instead associated with marginalized nerd masculinity. One example this is continuous rivalry between Sheldon and Barry Kripke, one of Sheldon's colleagues. In the episode "The Killer Robot Instability", Kripke approaches the main male cast in the canteen and asks them if the rumors that they have built a fighting robot are true (note: Kripke suffers from rhotacism resulting in a struggle to pronounce the letters 'r', 'w', and, occasionally, 'l'. This will be reflected in the transcript):

Sheldon: "His name is Monte."

Kripke: "Well, if you have any dewusions about entewing him against my wobot, The Kwipke Kwippler, [...] his name is gonna be Swrap Metal."

Leonard: "Come on, is that really necessary?"

Sheldon: "Leonard, I believe it is. This is trash-talk, and trash-talk is a traditional component in all sporting events. Kripke, your robot is inferior, and it will be defeated by ours because ours exceeds yours in both design and execution. Also, I'm given to understand that your mother is overweight." (00:06:54)

While the rivalry between Kripke and Sheldon is meant to be understood as serious and intense within the narrative, both the conflict in itself as well as each of the men's verbal

contribution to it is framed as ridiculous and laughable in each their own way. Looking first at Sheldon's utterances, his expansive knowledge of social conventions but lack of social skills is put on full display when he attempts to engage in 'trash-talk'. The Cambridge Dictionary defines trash-talk as "to talk in an insulting way about someone, especially an opponent in a sport" ("Trash-talk"), and while Sheldon seemingly has a decent formal understanding of the concept, he displays a notable lack of ability in executing it.

Whilst Sheldon does express hostility towards Kripke on a purely linguistic level, his monotone vocal pitch and high level of formality is mismatched with the level of aggressivity or sassiness normally associated with trash-talk. Furthermore, Sheldon attempts to utilize a so-called maternal insult – sometimes referred to as a 'yo mama' joke. While the insulting motive behind the words is apparent from the context of trash-talk, the delivery's unintentional lack of a punch line results in the format's humorous aspect being lost – at least within the narrative. As such, the show relies on the audience's knowledge and expectations of the maternal insult format, and the irony of the anticlimactic execution of the joke becomes the comedic value in itself as it emphasizes Sheldon's lack of ability to emulate social behavior and frames him as incompetent in the masculine discipline of competitiveness.

Like Sheldon, Kripke is portrayed as inept. While Kripke's rhotacism could have been an opportunity for positive inclusivity of someone with a speech impediment, the medical condition is instead used to achieve a comical effect, with Kripke's verbal communication often being a punchline in itself and his dialogue seemingly containing as many opportunities for mispronunciation as possible – as is the case with his own name and when he names a robot 'The Kripke Krippler' (Ibid. 00:06:52). Kripke's speech impediment creates associations with another comical character from fiction, namely Elmer Fudd from *Looney Tunes*, and like with him, Kripke's rhotacism is used to emphasize his ridiculousness and otherness from the norm. As such, while the behavior of Kripke is much closer to masculine ideals of competitiveness than Sheldon's, as his confrontational and jaunty behavior is characterized by higher levels of aggression anything he says is framed as unworthy of being taken seriously.

As a result, the imbedded ridiculousness of Kripke and the social ineptness of Sheldon – as well as the subject of their feud being highly related to technology and science and thus the marginalized arena of geek masculinity – the men's competitive behavior is portrayed as a

source of laughter rather than a source of status and masculine dominance. As such, while they do adapt to some characteristics of hegemonic ideals, Kripke, Sheldon, and rest are situated in an untenable position, as they are fundamentally unable to sit comfortably withing the paradigm of hegemonic masculinity because of their marginalized form of gender expression.

The men furthermore engage in competition which involves the objectification of women with the goal of achieving romantic and sexual attention from women as well as the status gained from the admiration from other men. In this way, the show consistently frames masculinity as something that is either reaffirmed or devalued by men's capability to score with women. When any one of the four main male characters fails in the attempt to score with a woman or does not have a girlfriend when one of more of the others do, they are likely to be ridiculed for it. Furthermore, they often quite literally compete for the attention of women, often going for the same woman with the winner gaining the right to gloat.

When the men do have girlfriends or love interests, they sometimes parade these women as trophies to gain the envy and recognition of others. One example of this is when they bring Penny to their regular comic book store for the first time. Here, the stereotypical nerds in the shop stare at her in awe, prompting Raj to exclaim: "That's right, she's with us," and then proceeds to whisper to Howard: "Guys like that are so pathetic." However, when Howard only seconds later becomes excited when he notices that the store has some new superhero themed belt buckles, we are quickly reminded that the guys are indeed "guys like that" themselves ("The Hofstadter Isotope" 00:05:38).

One example of the important role which scoring with women plays for the masculinity of the series main male cast can be found in the episode "The Skank Reflex Analysis". Here, Penny falsely believes that she has slept with Raj while they were drunk, and despite Raj knowing that this is not the case, he abstains from telling her the truth for most of the episode due to a desire to maintain the illusion as he wants his three friends to see him as someone who would be able to attain a beautiful woman like Penny. When Penny proves to be distressed by the thought of them having slept together, he finally feels guilty and admits the truth, but proceeds to ask her, if he may continue to lie to his three friends about the situation:

Raj: "Can I tell people that our love burned too bright and too quickly, kind of like a candle in the wind deal?"

Penny: “Sure.”

Raj: “And can I say it fell apart because you were all ‘I want to have your babies’ and I’m too rock and roll to be tied down?”

Penny: [Looks unimpressed] “No.” (00:13:32)

When Raj reveals the urgency of keeping the lie going, it becomes obvious that his attraction to the notion of being able to attain sex and romance with Penny reflects a wish for self-worth build on dominance in his homosocial group. This is made even more clear when he asks Penny if he may elaborate on the lie to include further aspects associated with hypermasculine behavior that might prompt even more admiration and dominance such as being a tough womanizer to a degree that he rejects the notion of a family life. As such it becomes apparent, that sex with Penny likely was never actually about having a sexual experience with a beautiful woman, but about being able to benefit from the status and masculine dominance that would come from it amongst his peers.

While not being able to acquire a woman is framed as pathetic, what is being portrayed as even worse in *The Big Bang Theory* is being controlled by one, a notion which tends to extend into matters of every day relationship compromising. As such, when any of the men are in a position where they do something for their partner they would not otherwise do, the rest of the male group humiliate them for being under female control. One example of this can be found in the episode “The Weekend Vortex.” Here, Sheldon has promised to accompany his girlfriend Amy to her aunt’s 93rd birthday, but later regrets this promise when the rest of the main male cast invite him to a Star Wars-themed sleep over weekend. When he complains to his friends about his predicament, they insist that he cancel going to the party:

Howard: “If you don’t want to go to the party, just don’t go. You’re a grown man – act like one. Tell Amy you want to spend the weekend having a sleepover and playing video games with your friends. And maybe she’ll dig it – women like a firm hand on the tiller.

Sheldon: “Yeah, I always thought if I were ever enslaved, it would be by some advanced species from another planet – not by some hotsy-totsy from Glendale.”

Howard: “I downloaded an app that might be helpful in this situation” (00:04:05)

Having concluded his last line, Howard proceeds to pull out his mobile phone and uses it to play a whipping sound, implying less than subtly that Sheldon is ‘whipped’, a term that refers to being controlled by one’s romantic partner to an unreasonable degree. Once again, the notion of being a ‘grown man’ is used as incentive to police behavior that is deemed not in accordance with hegemonic ideals of control and assertiveness.

Many might agree that being expected to go to a birthday party with your romantic partner once in a while is neither outrageous nor necessarily signifies an unacceptable level of control and manipulation in a relationship. Nevertheless, the men are swift to equate doing something solely for the benefit of one’s partner and prioritizing spending time with them over spending time with your homosocial group with being controlled and thus emasculated. Moreover, Sheldon even compares the setup to slavery, framing asking one’s male partner to attend a birthday party as being oppressive of a sort of ‘authentic’ hypermasculinity while conjuring up more sinister connotations to the notion of being whipped.

Despite being the one most adamant that men should resist being controlled by their female significant others, Howard suggests that a scenario in which a man dominates a woman is acceptable by proposing that Sheldon exert control in his relationship and even frames this as fundamentally desirable for women. This emphasizes how the term ‘whipped’ in itself is an inherently gendered term based in gender stereotypes dictating that assertiveness and control in men is natural and attractive while being undesirable in women. This assumption that women enjoy being dominated furthermore acts as a means to legitimize and normalize the hierarchical dominance of maleness over women in society by labeling it as an inevitable expression of naturally existing gender codes rather than a performative display of the internalization of established societal norms.

While the men of *The Big Bang Theory* are far removed from the masculine ideal, they appear very aware that they are navigating in a dynamic masculine hierarchy. One example of a such awareness can be found in the episode “The White Asparagus Triangulation” where Sheldon pre-loosens the lid on a jar and pretends not to be able to open it with the goal of enabling Leonard to open it in front of a date and thus impressing her with his physical prowess:

Leonard: “What the hell is wrong with you? [...]”

Sheldon: “I’m helping you with Stephanie. [...] When I fail to open this jar and you succeed, it will establish you as the alpha male (00:14:34).”

Of course, this situation ends in humiliation as Leonard fails to open the jar and instead ends up breaking it and cutting his hand, causing the date to end abruptly as he needs to go to the hospital. However, the very use of the term “alpha male” points towards an acceptance of the idea that it is both relevant and desirable to attain dominance in male, homosocial groups. While the show relentlessly pokes fun at its characters for being far removed from ideals of hypermasculinity, it does however make a point of presenting geek and nerd masculinity as a valid form of masculinity, and even worthy of challenging some forms of masculinity that has traditionally been associated with high amounts of status.

Emotional detachment

In this chapter, I wish to continue my analysis of how nerd masculinity is portrayed in *The Big Bang Theory* by considering how the first of Bird’s three meanings of masculinity applies to the behavior and appearance of the characters of the series, with an emphasis on four main male characters, Leonard, Sheldon, Raj, and Howard. As such, I wish to assess if and how the men as marginalized nerds are compelled to conform to hegemonic ideals of emotional detachment by other characters and by each other. This I will do by looking at if and how two expectations related to the notion of emotional detachment are reinforced in the show, namely not appearing expressive or emotional and not talking about feelings.

According to Bird, acting out masculinity in homosocial male groups offer feedback and reinforcement for “masculinity self-conceptualizations”. Because of this, individuals who do not live up to masculine ideals may be at a risk of being in a social disadvantage with possible consequences like exclusion and loss of status and self-esteem, even amongst marginalized groups (Bird 127-128). While not all men have internalized expectations of emotionally detached behavior, Bird argues that most men should at least have interiorized them, enabling them to be aware of socially shared concepts of masculinity and hence also the standards to which they are held socially accountable (Bird 122).

There is a great deal of social expectations involved with ‘behaving like a man’, especially when it comes to living up to certain stoic behaviors. As such, men are generally

expected to display traits such as assertiveness, competitiveness, and dominating, particularly in relation to other men and may be met with social punishment if they fail to do so (Koenig 2). This is especially prevalent in male homosocial groups where behavior is often policed and hegemonic ideals reinforced, as described by Bird, while abstaining from stoic behavior as a man is generally less unacceptable in heterosocial groups with both men and women (Bird 125).

The Big Bang Theory is filled with stereotypical portrayals related to hegemonic notions of emotional detachment. As such, the characters on the show are constantly shown trying to live up to this masculine ideal, but generally fail in doing so, a circumstance which forms the foundation for one of the show's recurring punchlines. The show is relentless in mocking its characters for not living up to traditional manhood, which is often made obvious by how the series' laugh tracks set the stage for the audience's reaction, revealing a motive to openly point to these particular behaviors as laughable in quite a literal sense. Here, the series rather plays on a sense of absurdity found in the discrepancy between socially shared expectations of masculine behavior and the often unmasculine behavior of the characters which provides an ironic hook.

Sensitivity and emotionality are traits which are often being poked fun at. As such, getting emotional is continuously being used as a focal point of humor as shown by the laugh track as well as the other characters' reaction. One example of this is when Leonard is afraid that Penny is planning on breaking up with him, which turns out not to be true. Relieved he asks Penny: "Is it cool if I cry a little" to which she answers: "Yeah, I probably wouldn't" ("The Occupation Recalibration" 00:01:56), implying that she would find Leonard's crying off-putting.

Penny's reaction is interesting in the context of gender expectations, as she is often portrayed as being quite emotional and sensitive herself throughout the series. Because of this, her rejection of acts of sensitivity in Leonard indicates that she is not opposed to the notion of sensitivity and showing emotion in itself or as part of being female, but specifically rejects the trait as a valid aspect of masculine expression and thus it is implied that being sensitive devalues a man due to the trait's association with femininity. This assumed correlation between femininity and being sensitive and emotional is not held only by Penny. As such, traits associated to femininity are often the target of jokes. One example of this can be found in the episode "The Spoiler Alert Segmentation," where Leonard is upset because Sheldon spoils the ending of the sixth *Harry Potter* book even though he knows that Leonard was in the middle of reading it:

Leonard: “What is wrong with you? [...]”

Sheldon: “Really, Leonard, are you going to have another one of your hissy fits?”

Leonard: “Hissy fits? *I* have hissy fits?”

Sheldon: “Yes, and I have a theory why. [...] You switched over to soy milk. Soy contains estrogen-mimicking compounds. I think your morning Cocoa Puffs are turning you into a hysterical woman.”

Leonard: “You are unbelievable! I don't know why I put up with you. You know, you're controlling, you're irritating...”

Sheldon: “There you go again! Nag, nag, nag! You're only proving my point, little lady.”
(00:00:27)

Many would perhaps agree that knowingly spoiling fiction for other people might warrant some sort of emotional response. However, despite Leonard's protests against Sheldon's behavior being arguably justified, he is instantly silenced under the guise that being openly upset is womanly behavior and thus unbecoming for a man. Furthermore, the laugh track following Sheldon's utterances frames them not as abhorrent and fundamentally sexist towards both the male and female gender but as funny punchlines. As such, it is insinuated that between a man behaving in a way that may be associated with femininity and being rude and inconsiderate towards others, the former is the bigger transgression.

When Sheldon equates being emotional with the biological body's level of estrogen – the primary female sex hormone – being sensitive and emotional becomes traits which are inherently and inescapably connected to females and the female body, a notion which functions as a regulative discourse that imposes onto the individual the expectations of compliance and conformity as it frames a man engaging in such a manner as ‘unnatural’ and thus inappropriate. As such, Sheldon's behavior becomes an example of how those who cannot or will not live up to conventional illusions of gender essentialism may be subject to punishment.

Sheldon not only devalues feminine behavior in men but devalues the mere notions of femininity and being a female as well. Sheldon not only addresses Leonard as a ‘woman’ and a ‘lady’ to imply that his behavior is womanly – a circumstance which is problematic in itself – but

also utilizes terms such as ‘hissy fit’, ‘hysterical’, ‘nag’ and ‘little lady’, which are all terms that have been historically used in a derogative way to infantilize, devalue, and dismiss women as well as female expression and influence. As such, Sheldon’s behavior exemplifies well the fundamental presence of anti-femininity found in hegemonic masculinity as argued by Connell.

That Sheldon is the center of this example is in no way strange. The show has divided its main male cast into two rather stylized factions in regard to emotionally detached and anti-feminine behavior. On one side there is Sheldon and Howard who are generally framed as striving to abide to and enforcing expectations of emotionally detached behavior, with Sheldon stating at one point “Sheldon Cooper doesn’t cry” (“The Proton Displacement” 00:03:55). In contrast, Leonard and Raj are portrayed as being emotional and sensitive, particularly Raj, is generally framed as the most feminine of the men. As such, while the two groups do have fleeting moments of deviance from their general ways of acting in relation to expectations of emotional detachment, their behavior is relatively predictable throughout the series.

To reiterate Migliaccio, he addresses how a close sense of intimacy is most commonly associated with femininity and that in contrast to the intimacy based on self-disclosure, the intimacy of male homosocial groups generally relies on a “closeness in the doing” (Migliaccio 226-227). This is also very much the case among main male cast of *The Big Bang Theory*, as the time they spend together is generally focused on their common interests for science, technology, and niche culture. As such, the group mostly engages in activities related to these topics such as going to the comic book store, building robots, or working on scientific formulas in their apartment for recreational purposes.

While the characters seem to enjoy engaging in this form of activity-based intimacy, there are many examples that indicate that intimacy based on self-disclosure are not only rare but discouraged among the men. An example of this can be found in the episode “The Cornhusker Vortex” where Leonard is concerned because Penny did not invite him to a football game she is going to with a group of friends. After Raj theorizes that she might be reluctant to introduce Leonard to her friends as she is embarrassed by his awkward personality, Leonard worries about this for a long time until he finally attempts to confide in Sheldon in the middle of flying kites, but is rejected:

Leonard: “I think Koothrappali’s right, maybe I embarrass her.”

Sheldon: “You’re embarrassing me right now. A grown man worrying about such nonsense when in the middle of flying kites” (00:02:33)

Based on Sheldon’s use of the phrase ‘grown man’, his rejection is seemingly based on the implied premise that being emotionally affected and wanting to talk about it is inherently childlike and feminine and thus unfitting for adult males. Sheldon’s opinion that talking about emotions is unbefitting for a ‘grown’ man seems rather inconsistent with how he otherwise readily accepts many other activities traditionally associated with children and teenagers as completely valid aspects of masculinity. One example of this is the very activity that Leonard interrupted, namely flying kites, which many might associate with non-adults. The same can be said about a myriad of other activities which Sheldon engages in with both vigor and pride, such as collecting toys, reading comic books, and accumulating a large assortment of t-shirts with superhero prints.



Image 3: Sheldon wearing a t-shirt with the superhero Flash printed on it (“The Spoiler Alert Segmentation” 00:01:25)

Sheldon has many other traits and habits traditionally associated with childlike behavior such as often being incredibly stubborn and egocentric. Additionally, he sleeps with a nightlight on (“The Euclid Alternative” 00:08:22) and requires his mother or Penny to take care of him when he is sick by making him soup, rubbing him with Vicks VapoRub cream, and singing

lullabies (“The Pancake Batter Anomaly”). From this it can be concluded that Sheldon generally has little trouble accepting a wide variety of childlike behavior in adults, at least in himself, but still mocks Leonard for wanting to engage in intimacy based on self-disclosure.

Having excluded childlike behavior as a probable cause for Sheldon’s strong aversion to sensitivity and talking about emotion as a valid expression of masculinity, a likely reason might instead be the connotations between intimacy based on self-disclosure and femininity and subordinated masculinity. As such, when Sheldon argues that “a grown man” should not be talking about his feelings, emphasis is arguably placed more on ‘man’ than it is on ‘grown’.

Sheldon is not the only one among the four main male characters that rejects the notion of men speaking about feelings on the basis of such behavior’s associations with femininity. In the episode “The Classified Materials Turbulence”, Howard is even more explicit in framing acts of self-disclosure as womanly. Here, Howard is so tired of Leonard’s need to discuss his relationship troubles that he provides him with a task away from the apartment just to get him out of the house. When Raj asks him why, Howard exclaims: “Leonard is upset about Penny and if I have to hear about it again, I’m going to kick him in the ovaries” (00:13:06), thus explicitly associating femininity and the female body with talking about feelings in a negative way.

Research indicates that many men would like to express affection and tender feelings to a higher degree but refrain from doing so due to such behavior’s negative connotations to femininity and the fear of social punishment (Migliaccio 228). That the main male cast of *The Big Bang Theory* sometimes refrain from talking about their emotions and seeking out emotional support despite wanting to is made evident by how the male characters are much more likely to discuss feelings with women than with other men. A preference for talking to women about feelings is explicitly expressed by Raj in the episode “The Proton Displacement” when Raj tells Howard that he likes to hang out women because he feels that he is more able to talk about feelings with women in ways he is not able to with his male group of friends (00:14:30).

Even the male characters who most rejects the notion of men openly discussing their feelings at times have a desire for self-disclosure. One example of this can be found in the episode “The Killer Robot Instability” where Howard has his feelings hurt by Penny when she scolds him for his sexist behavior. While Howard is obviously upset and shocked, he proceeds to isolate himself in his home, refusing to talk to anyone in an attempt to maintain an image of

stoicism in the eyes of other. Despite being the one in direct conflict with Howard, the task of comforting Howard befalls Penny when even Howard's closest friends fail in motivating him to end his self-isolation.

When Penny urges Howard to talk to her, he initially resists on the grounds that he is “a big boy” (00:12:02) but eventually becomes so distressed that he breaks down and tells Penny not just about his resentment over how she had hurt him, but also about repressed childhood traumas of being rejected by a girl in middle school, indicating that Howard due to his ideal for stoicism has never talked about these incidents before. While Howard opens up to Penny about what is bothering him, she patiently listens and provides him with emotional support, resulting in Howard feeling better. That Penny is successful in this task that even Howard's best friends were unable to succeed in, reinforces the stereotype of women as natural caretakers that are able to provide support for men in a way that other men are unable or unwilling to. This unequal relationship where “emotion work” is considered women's labor that men can freely receive but not provide themselves is addressed by Connell, who notes that men collectively are in a position to receive twice the benefits of emotional support (Connell¹ 1808).

That Howard's emotional state is greatly improved after self-disclosing accentuates that talking openly about feelings is beneficial for men's mental health, thus framing the practice of compulsive emotional detachment as the masculine ideal as potentially damaging. This is in line with research on the subject, which finds a connection between the practice of certain masculine norms, such as self-reliance and emotional control, to mental health issues and higher suicide rates among men. Studies indicate that this is in part due to a lower use of health services, shame and stigma associated with mental health issues, and feelings of not being able to openly discuss personal issues with health care providers (Milner et al. 2-3). However, despite acknowledging the potential harmful effects which emotional suppression can have on the individual, the show again and again enforces this way of performing masculinity.

The sexualization of women: the woman as an object and less than

In this section, I wish to assess the third of Bird's three meanings of masculinity. While the concept concerns both the subordination of women and the general rejecting of all things associated with femininity, I have chosen to split this topic into two separate sections as I find

that both are represented in *The Big Bang Theory* to a degree that makes them deserving of their own assessment. In this first chapter, I will take a look at the show's treatment of the female characters as an expression of masculinity. To assess this, I will first look into the geek as a supposedly more sensitive and sensible choice in partner than the hypermasculine man. Secondly, I will look into how the show portrays the sexualization and objectification of women through 'womanizing', and lastly I will consider how the series devaluates women in science, building on the idea that being a genius is associated with masculinity to a degree that it is incompatible with femininity.

In many ways, the woman can be referred to as an "other", a concept most notably associated with French philosopher and feminist Simone de Beauvoir. She theorized that while the man is allowed to be an autonomous agent, or the 'subject', the woman is always defined by, and in relation to, the man. This position as subject thus allows the hegemonic man to define what is acceptable or not on a discursive level, creating the foundation on which the subordination and depersonalization of women is possible. As such, while feminine traits in a man devalue him, the woman's lack of maleness likewise devalues her, creating a clear hierarchy where masculinity is desirable, while femininity is undesirable. This notion of the other may be applied to almost any individual or group, as there will always be groups in hegemonic positions over others (Beauvoir 25-27).

Because of this dynamic, women in the series who emulate masculine traits are praised and their value is increased as is the case when Amy shows exceptional capacities with hard logic, and when Penny gets competitive when playing sports. The devaluation of femininity also extends into the world of nerdiness. As such, while owning an expansive and valuable collection of mint condition comic books, collector's action figures, and franchised clothing – they still look down on merchandise that is generally associated with a female target audience. An example of this is when Howard gives Raj a kite with a Hello Kitty motif which prompts Raj to react with abhorrence. When Howard then responds with "Yeah, but it comes with a little coin purse" ("The Cornhusker Vortex" 00:12:15), the line is followed by a laugh track, which further emphasizes that while it is perhaps slightly odd and comical that adult men play with toys targeted at male children, interacting with items associated with women is entirely preposterous.

While the main male cast of *The Big Bang Theory* are written to be genuinely likable men who, on the surface, the characters show overt contempt towards behavior and objects related to femininity, and sometimes towards women themselves, while hegemonic masculinity is elevated as the ideal. Nevertheless, the main male characters are let off the hook because of their status as nice, underdog nerds, and their persistent behavior is framed as admirable and an acceptable means to ‘get the girl’. Their status of underdogs is largely established through the men’s juxtaposition with certain other male characters in the series who represent ideals of hypermasculinity although framed in a negative way. Perhaps the most notable examples of such is Penny’s ex-boyfriend Kurt who I introduced in the previous chapter and who Leonard must fight with for Penny’s affection.

Kurt is stereotypically handsome and muscular as well as generally rude and arrogant but most importantly in the context of this chapter, he is portrayed as treating Penny poorly. As part of treating Penny with disrespect, he keeps her tv after their breakup. Because of Leonard’s attraction to Penny, he and Sheldon agree to attempt to retrieve it from Kurt which of course ends in spectacular failure. As such, the scene culminates in Leonard and Sheldon returning both empty handed and somehow forcibly depantsed (“Pilot” 00:18:23) – an absurd circumstance that creates striking associations between Kurt and the cliché of the schoolyard bully who needlessly terrorizes lesser, innocent victims.

This juxtaposition of the bully and the innocent victims who are unfairly mistreated by their peers allows the main male characters to appear as a sensitive and more intelligent alternative and worthy of our sympathy. When Penny asks Leonard: “Why can’t all guys be like you?” (“The Middle-Earth Paradigm” 00:18:00) it is made clear, that the female characters in the show share this conviction. However, despite being framed as a sweet boyfriend, Leonard often utilizes his nice behavior as currency for sexual and romantic affection from Penny. As such, he frequently manipulates her and pushes for a romantic relationship under the guise of friendship. When he purposely sabotages her dates with another man to keep her from entering a relationship, this circumstance is explicitly commented on when Raj says: “Leonard pretends to be her friend but acts like a two-faced bitch!” (“The Classified Materials Turbulence” 00:10:28).

One example Leonard’s willingness to engage in manipulation can be found in episode “The Tangerine Factor” when Penny has just broken up with her boyfriend. When Leonard

learns about this, he announces to his friends that he is going over to her apartment to comfort her, which prompts Howard to suggest that Leonard should take advantage of Penny's vulnerability and make a move on her to which Leonard responds:

Leonard: "I'm her friend, I'm not going to take advantage of her vulnerability"

Howard: "Wait, so you're saying that if in the depths of despair, she throws herself at you and demands you take her right there, right now, you'll just walk away?"

Leonard: "I said I'm her friend, not her gay friend." (00:02:57)

While Leonard initially rejects the thought of benefiting sexually from Penny's grief and expressing that he finds such behavior unacceptable between friends, he soon backtracks when pushed only slightly on the subject. As such, his apparent moral reservations seem to only reflect of how others might think of him and the wish to avoid social punishment. However, as soon as it becomes clear that his innermost desires are met with not only acceptance but approval from his homosocial group, he joins the objectification of Penny without much reservation.

Although Leonard does seem to only accept the idea only if Penny should make advances towards him first, he still shows a willingness to exploit her. As such, Howard's scenario does not eliminate the premise of Penny being in a state of vulnerability which the men seem to acknowledge as a circumstance that could make her susceptible to idea of having a romantic or sexual relationship when she otherwise might not be. As justification for his position, Leonard refers to his heterosexuality. By stating that a non-gay man would never refrain from pursuing sex when it is available and thus labeling such behavior as an expression of naturally existing gender codes, he normalizes the idea that being a heterosexual man is inevitably related to compulsive womanizing which allows him to deny any personal responsibility.

The idea that womanizing is an integral aspect of masculinity is a notion which is very present in the series. As such, the men often go to the extent of lying, stalking, and harassing in the attempt to score with women to gain status and admiration amongst their peers. All four main male characters have difficulty with attaining sex and romance. Raj is unable to speak to women unless he is drunk; Sheldon is portrayed as more or less asexual, although he does engage in intercourse with Amy in later seasons; and Leonard, although being the one who seems to have the least difficulty with women, is awkward and has a hard time striking up conversation or

being explicit about a romantic interest towards women. However, while all the characters are seen trying and failing in ‘getting the girl’, the one who has accumulated the most failures is undoubtedly Howard, who overtly objectifies and dehumanizes women and tries to trick them into sleeping with him on countless occasion.

That Howard objectifies and dehumanizes women becomes apparent in the way he tends to frame the objective of attaining sexual and romantic attention from women as a literal hunt characterized by a myriad of strategies to capture the game, most of which are based in manipulation or the exploitation of weakness. In this context he casts himself and other men in the role of the predator, like in the episode “The Hofstadter Isotope” where Leonard, Raj, and Howard is in a bar. When Leonard asks if they should find some women to talk to, Howard replies: “No, it’s way too early in the night for that. See, first we let the lawyers and the jocks thin the herd, and then we go after the weak and the old and the lame” (00:12:30) in this way conjuring up images of lions observing a flock of antelopes while waiting to strike.

In many aspects, Howard is similar to a character from a different show, namely Barney Stinson from *How I Met Your Mother*. As such, both engage in elaborate ploys in the hopes of making women sleep with them, often having seemingly no qualms with lying and manipulating to achieve their goals and furthermore reject the notion of having a stable, romantic relationship for a large part of their narrative. However, while sharing the same objective, the characters are framed in significantly different ways. While Barney is generally portrayed as being skillful and successful in his pick-up artistry, Howard on the other hand is generally unsuccessful, and while he engages in almost identical behavior to Barney, he is framed as pathetic.

Unlike with Barney, the behavior of Howard is seemingly meant to be recognized for what it is: creepy and violating. As such, the punchline once again becomes ridiculing men pertaining to marginalized masculinity trying and failing to believably pull off behavior associated with hegemonic masculinity. However, while Howard is framed as creepy and never passes up the chance to drop sexist comments or suggestive innuendos, he is rarely called out on his behavior in a meaningful way. The only time he truly gets challenged on his behavior is by Penny in the episode “The Killer Robot Instability”, when she gets fed up by Howard’s sexist comments when he insinuates that they should sleep together:

Penny: “Look, normally I can just ignore you – I mean I get it, you’re a little peculiar [...]. I know you think you’re some sort of smooth-talking ladies’ man, but the truth is you’re just pathetic and creepy. [...] No woman is ever going to flirt with you, you’re just going to grow old and die alone.” (00:04:01)

The scene ends with Howard storming off in a shocked and distressed state whilst the rest of the main male cast sit silently looking at Penny. When Leonard, Sheldon, and Raj discuss the situation the next day, their emphasis is on showing sympathy towards Howard’s hurt feelings, stating that “despite his hard and crusty shell, Howard is a very sensitive man” (00:06:42). However, while the latter part of Penny’s beratement is arguably harsh, no attention is given to her hurt feelings nor to whether such a reaction might be understandable after countless unwanted advances and rejections.

Howard proceeds to isolate himself, but when the group needs Howard’s help to build a fighting robot for an oncoming tournament, Leonard pressures Penny to apologize to Howard and convince him to be social again. During this conversation, Leonard once again puts emphasis on how Penny hurt Howard’s feelings, comparing her to the hyperaggressive superhero The Hulk (00:09:11). When she refuses, Leonard instead calls in a favor that she owes him and in this way coerces her into apologizing despite her wishes. As such, the show frames sexual harassment as not exactly appealing but ultimately harmless while conveying the message that the bruised male ego and male competitiveness is more important than the comfort and boundaries of women.

Another area in which women of *The Big Bang Theory* are treated as the other is in the field of science. While the show does have several female characters who are scientists, what generally defines these women’s identities is their role as romantic or sexual partners to the main male cast, while their academic abilities are secondary if that. As such, while Penny has an arguably far less prestigious job as a waitress at The Cheesecake Factory, the show is much more comfortable showing her in a professional setting than it does Amy and Bernadette. This can perhaps be partly explained by Penny being a more central character in the show and having more screen time but may also be an expression of an unwillingness to show women in the role of genius or scientist.

A few examples of how the show portrays the notion of women in science can be found in the episode “The Contractual Obligation Implementation”. Here, Leonard, Sheldon, and

Howard are required to serve on a committee which focuses on getting more girls and women interested in a career in science. However, while Leonard is invested in the topic and attempts to engage the two others in discussion, Sheldon and Howard are utterly disinterested, the latter dismissing Leonard with the words: “Come on, if I was any good at convincing women to do stuff, I wouldn’t have spent so much of my twenties in the shower” (00:00:18).

By comparing his failing attempts to hook up with women and encouraging women to enter the STEM fields, Howard reduces a complicated societal gender issue to a matter of simply ‘convincing’ women to do something while also labeling science as something women fundamentally do not want just as do not want him. As such, instead of acknowledging women as complex individuals driven by internal hopes and motivations, as well as being likely to have a sincere interest and unique contribution to science like himself and the men in the room with him, he reduces them to an ‘other’ who would require the external motivation in the form of convincing from men to consider a career in science. This idea builds on the idea that women inherently do not have an affinity for science and thus women are expected to be in need of being influenced by men to enter the STEM fields. Moreau et al argue that women in science are generally framed as what they refer to as ‘mathematical heiresses’ who have received the ‘gift’ of scientific ability through patrilineal transmission, a narrative which furthermore suggests that male scientists owe their abilities solely to themselves (Moreau et al 28).

Having rejected working on the project Sheldon and Howard choose to play video games to Leonard’s dismay, who complains:

Leonard: “You don’t think it’s worthwhile to get more women working in science?”

Sheldon: “I think that’s incredibly sexist of you. I believe in a gender-blind society like in Star Trek where women and men of all races and creeds work side by side as equals.” (00:00:48)

When Sheldon expresses that he finds the idea of women needing specialized initiatives to be encouraged to pursue a career in science sexist, this viewpoint on the surface may frame him as egalitarian at best and egocentric at worst, however, it is also indicative of a blindness of privilege. As such, while Sheldon may be marginalized in the hierarchy amongst men, as a male he still enjoys the luxury of a hegemonic position over women through male complicity.

Furthermore, while being a geek and socially inept, and so not unfamiliar with a degree of social stigma, he is also well-educated, heterosexual, and white, which further removes him from being subjected a great deal of potential social disadvantages.

Because scientific institutions as well as the geek and nerd sub-cultures have a long-standing tradition of male domination (Campbell 12), Sheldon is able to conform and be accepted within this paradigm through his association to masculinity while female scientists do not have access to this privilege. As such, Sheldon demonstrates a failure to acknowledge circumstances that are not consistent with his own privileged experiences by failing to consider that dominant discourses related to science favor men and put women at a disadvantage. His disregard for the subject is further emphasized when he says the following:

Sheldon: “If you ask me, this whole thing is a waste of time.”

Leonard: “Helping women?”

Sheldon: “Helping *anyone*. People should take care of themselves” (00:00:27)

While Sheldon’s utterance may be an attempt to attribute equal status and opportunity to men and women, his inability to recognize his own privilege results in a dismissiveness of women’s issues and a subsequent lack of awareness that some groups and individuals may require support and inclusion from those with hegemonic power to gain equal status. As such, Sheldon’s seemingly egalitarian efforts instead result in furthering othering women by both enforcing the masculine subordination of women and failing to recognize nor challenge this circumstance but instead minimizing it when it is brought up. Because of this, Sheldon is enforcing the very social structure which he denies the existence of.

However, while Sheldon seemingly has strong opinions of women and men being equal in terms of career possibilities, he is often the one being the most overtly sexist towards women in general, and particularly those in science. While he is often seen insulting and questioning the competences of both men and women, he seems to belittle women in manner that is very specifically gendered. In the episode “The Egg Salad Equivalency” Sheldon is reprimanded by the female head of the human resource department at the university for telling his female assistant that “[her] ovaries are squirting so much goofy juice into [her] brain that [she] doesn’t even know which way is up” (00:07:20). However, when the same head of resources is in charge

of choosing employees for a promotion in the episode “The Tenure Turbulence” she chooses to promote Sheldon and two others. When Sheldon is surprised because of their earlier dispute, she replies: “Well, despite your quirks, the three of you are very accomplished in your respective fields” (00:17:21). As such, While Sheldon behavior is overtly sexist, the show ultimately frames it as simply a quirky personality trait not worthy of meaningful consequences.

Returning to the discussion between Sheldon, Leonard, and Howard, it is interesting that this conversation is addressing the topic of women in sciences, and to some extent acknowledges the lack of female scientists as a social issue, the focal point of this scene is three men. As such, while the cast includes two female scientists, the women are not present in the discussion nor are they mentioned and hence the scene portrays that privileged males may decide what is best for women. It is not just these particular characters who fail to factor in the experience of women. As such, the very prominent staging of the experience and opinions of male scientists and notable exclusion of the experience of the female scientist is consistent throughout the show.

While the show acknowledges Amy and Bernadette as brilliant scientists, they are rarely shown in a professional setting let alone having dialogues which showcase their vast scientific knowledge. This places them in stark contrast to the main male cast, whose entire male identity is defined by their status as nerds and geeks. As such, the men will refer to scientific terms and topics several times per episode and often utilize language that is academic or specialized to a degree that it habitually alienates them from non-geeks and non-nerds. Because of this, Amy’s and Bernadette’s scientific titles appear to exist mainly to make the women believable love interests to Howard and Sheldon rather than to be meaningful aspects of the women’s identities.

Later in the episode “The Contractual Obligation Implementation”, we see Amy and Bernadette standing in Disneyland dressed up as the traditionally feminine Disney characters Snow White and Cinderella, recording themselves on a mobile phone delivering a motivational speech designed to motivate women to pursue a career in science after having been asked to do so by Sheldon. In this scene, the dialogue seems to further enforce the notion that science is fundamentally coded as masculine:

Amy: “I’m Doctor Fowler and I’m a neuroscientist”

Bernadette: “And I’m Doctor Rostenkowski Wolowitz and I’m a microbiologist”

Amy: “The world of science needs more women, but from a young age, we girls are encouraged to care more about the way we look than about the power of our minds”

Bernadette: “That’s true. Every one of you has the capacity to be anything you want to be [...]” (00:16:17)

While the women are seemingly communicating an inspirational message of female empowerment that women can choose to reject cultural discourses of femininity and become successful scientists, this message is juxtaposed by the fact that the women are portrayed as more focused on twirling their dresses and putting on lipstick than reflecting on gender expectations. While there is a potential message to be found in how women can embody both beauty and brains, the scene rather suggests that women, no matter their scientific accomplishments or interests, will still be inherently and inescapably feminine. As such, while Amy’s dialogue explicitly refers to acts of gender as being the result of internalized societal gender expectations, in this case that females should be interested in external beauty rather than intellectual prowess, this point is partly negated.



Image 4: Bernadette and Amy dressed up as Cinderella and Snow White (00:16:33)

While the two women are indisputably highly accomplished scientists, the show portrays their critical and intellectual minds as being opposite to femininity. As the women can barely concentrate on speaking about science while putting on makeup, the presence of femininity seems to almost overwrite their intellectuality and revert them to an assumed more natural feminine state. In this way the scene reinforces both male and female gender roles by drawing connections between genius and masculinity and maleness, while femaleness is instead associated with an interest in outer beauty as well as the incapacity for both the intellect and scientific ability that men can achieve without being limited, but rather aided, by natural dispositions of gender.

The sexualization of women: the rejection of femininity in other men

In this chapter, I wish to continue my assessment of the third of Bird's three meanings of masculinity. This second part will concern the show's treatment of feminine behavior in men as a measurement of masculinity or lack thereof. Because anti-femininity is an essential part of hegemonic masculinity, I have already touched on this topic on numerous occasions in earlier chapters. However, in this chapter this aspect of masculinity will be the main point of attention and assessed in more depth. To analyze how the rejection of femininity in other men is portrayed in *The Big Bang Theory*, I will primarily look into how the character Raj is subjected to both general ridicule and imposed homosexuality because of his stereotypically feminine behavior.

The main male cast's need to police the gendered behavior of others, particularly other men, for not living up to hegemonic ideal of masculinity becomes especially visible when observing how Raj is continuously mocked for his traditionally feminine character traits and preferences by Sheldon, Leonard, and Howard in practically every single episode. While all four men at some point engage in disparaging each other for engaging in stereotypically feminine behavior or activities, Raj is the character who most overtly does not live up to masculine ideals of compulsive non-femaleness.

While traits such as stoicism, assertiveness, and independence are stereotypically associated with masculinity, traits such as sensitivity, cooperation, avoiding dominance, and being communal are more commonly associated with femininity. Studies have shown that when a person of one sex exhibits the expected behavior of the other, this is generally perceived as

unexpected and often as unattractive as well (Koenig 6). Raj exhibits plenty of traits traditionally associated with femininity and femaleness. As such, he is often shown to be sensitive, emotional, and to enjoy talking openly about his feelings.

While Raj is interested in all of the same things as his three best male friends, he also engages in a broad variety of activities traditionally associated with femininity that his friends generally do not such as watching chick flicks, crafting jewelry, and talking about his emotions. This is generally met with disapproval from the rest of the male cast, who view it as unacceptable based on the stereotype that men do not watch romantic dramas, talk about feelings recreationally, or engage in decoration and domestic handicrafts. A few examples of the social punishments Raj receives from his friends can be seen in the episode “The Proton Displacement” where Raj and Howard are talking in the canteen at the university, when Howard asks Raj if he wants to hang out the following Friday:

Howard: “Bernie’s having a girl’s night on Friday at our place, you want to do something?”

Raj: “Actually I’m busy [...] There’s a new sport’s bar over on Colorado Avenue...”

Howard: “You’re going to girl’s night!”

Raj: “Yeah [...]” (00:02:41)

Here, Raj chooses an excuse that specifically involves a stereotypically masculine activity, which indicates that Raj is fully aware of Howard’s attitude towards men engaging in stereotypically feminine activities and is trying to evade potential punishment by attempting to emulate hypermasculine behavior. This demonstrates a realization that he must adhere to expectations of hegemonic masculinity on a surface level to gain status amongst other men. That Raj is attempting to avoid punishment by lying about his plans furthermore indicates that although Raj continuously insists on engaging in feminine behavior despite unceasing disapproval from his surroundings, and hence actively rejects conforming to hegemonic notions of stoic masculinity, Raj ultimately finds the jabs from his friends uncomfortable.

Due to Howard’s extensive knowledge of Raj’s personality and habits, he is able to instantly reveal his dishonesty, however instead of recognizing Raj’s lie as indicative that he is

uncomfortable with Howard's devaluing behavior, he chooses to engage in predictable ridicule when Leonard and Sheldon seconds late enter the scene and join the men at the table

Leonard: "What's up?"

Howard: "Not his testosterone levels"

Raj: "Excuse me, I happen to be very comfortable with my masculinity."

Howard: "How is that possible" (00:02:40)

Although Howard's mockery is framed as good-humored fun as indicated by a subsequent roaring laugh track, he is devaluing an integral part of Raj's masculine identity based on the notion that wanting to be in the company of a group of women at an event with the headline of 'girl's night' in some way makes one less of a man. Furthermore, he involves other people in his mockery and thus escalates the situation to an act of social ridicule. While neither Sheldon nor Leonard laugh or participate in the ridicule initiated by Howard but simply move on to discuss something unrelated, they do not challenge it either and hence they become complicit in reinforcing antifemininity in their homosocial group.

Like Sheldon did it in when he referred to Leonard as a hysterical woman, Howard similarly associates the desire to be in the company of women with the biological body's level of hormones, in this case the primary male sex hormone testosterone or the lack thereof. As such, while intentionally seeking out all-male company is never framed as a negative, purposely spending time with women as a man becomes a trait which is framed as inherently connected to females on a biological level. This notion of spending time with a group of women as being unnatural and therefore unfitting thus functions as a regulative discourse that imposes expectations of compliance and conformity onto Raj.

That the men's anti-feminine behavior is based specifically in masculine dominance is further emphasized how the ones who most often rejects stereotypically female behavior in men are other men. As such, while female characters – once again, particularly Penny – do participate in the derision on rare occasions, the vast majority of devaluing comments do not come from women, but from other men. In fact, the female characters are most often seen to be sympathetic and accepting of Raj's feminine traits, which is exemplified later in the episode "The Proton

Displacement”, where Raj is making jewelry in the company of Amy, Penny, and Bernadette, when Howard enters the room and eyes Raj, causing Raj to exclaim:

Raj: “Okay, let me have it. Let’s hear all the ‘Raj is a girl’ jokes.”

Howard: “No, Bernadette told me it isn’t nice and that I’m not allowed.”

Raj: “Thank you.”

Howard: “So I won’t be making fun of you or the things you like or the fact that you just want have fu-un.”

Bernadette: “Howie, stop.” (00:06:24)

Howard’s jab is a reference to Cindy Lauper’s 1983 song “Girls just want to have fun”, a less than subtle way of calling Raj a girl. As such, Howard takes his earlier arguments even further and finally equals doing things associated with womanhood with actually being female rather than acting like one. However, while doing so, he also discloses that Bernadette has specifically asked him to stop mocking Raj’s feminine traits. While his continuing to do so despite both Raj’s and his romantic partners wishes only emphasizes his disregard and disdain for all things feminine, it does reveal that the female characters stand in solidarity with Raj and rejects the devaluing of feminine aspects of behavior, which in extension includes their own. This is furthermore supported by how they have invited him to girl’s night to begin with seem genuinely happy to have Raj in their company during the episode.

Looking at the anti-femininity of the main male cast, they are not only policing gender, but also sexuality. While there are no homosexual characters in *The Big Bang Theory*, the show constantly queers the masculinity of its male characters by making them act in ways that are inconsistent with hegemonic standards and sometimes and sometimes even questioning their sexualities. As such, even though Sheldon is the closest to demonstrating hegemonic masculinity through his connection to standards of competitiveness, anti-femininity, and emotional detachment, even he deviates on essential respects, particularly in terms of finding the thought of having sex with a woman repulsive for most of the series, being physically weak, and having fleeting moments of genuine warmth and compassion.

Howard too is queered in a number of notable ways despite being one of the two characters seen most often participating in policing behavior. Perhaps the most notable aspect is his visual aesthetics, and he is the one amongst the male cast that is portrayed to have the most striking visual style. Robert Heasley touches on the ‘metrosexual’ man in his work, arguing that men who “allow themselves to develop and display an aesthetic, such as stylish hair cuts and clothes” are queering the hetero-masculine and thus disrupting the meaning of heterosexuality (Heasley 121-122). As such, while Howard’s bowl cut Beatles-esque hairstyle and colorful and tightfitting clothes are hardly fashionable by contemporaneous standards, they appear very intentional and remain consistent throughout the show.



Image 5: An example of Howard’s distinctive visual style (“The Cornhusker Vortex” 00:17:31).

The most notable example of the show queering its characters Raj, whose effeminate behavior is often framed as gay which is an example of imposed homosexuality as described by Connell. As such, the show’s correlation between Raj performing feminine acts of gender and homosexuality remains persistent to a degree that Raj is continuously the character who has the most issues with attaining romantic relationships with women, and while he does enter a few relationships, by the end of the show he is the only one of the main male cast that is not a steady relationship. Connell describes how men in Raj’s position will receive the same disadvantages

associated with actual gayness (Connell 151). This is the case with Raj as well, who is on the receiving ends of great amounts of mockery from his friends. While these acts of punishment are often framed as good-natured fun, at second glance they are quite severe. As such, Raj is more than once subjected to social exclusion, of which one example can be found in the episode “The Hofstadter Isotope”, where Raj, Howard, and Leonard have gone to a bar to hit on women.

When Raj proceeds to order two drinks with feminine connotations, a chocolate martini and a ‘Grasshopper with a little umbrella’, Howard becomes visibly annoyed and demands that Raj buy something else, stating that “there are plenty of bars in Los Angeles where you can order Grasshoppers and chocolate martinis, but you wouldn’t have to because there are no women in them” (00:12:10). As such, Howard establishes the premise that men buying drinks that are popular among women are coded as gay and that this is undesirable, likely because of gayness’ association with subordinated masculinity as well as signaling homosexuality would work against their goal to attract women.

When Raj displays an inability to determine which drinks are associated with femininity and proceeds to order a Brandy Alexander, Howard ultimately exclaims that for the rest of the night, the “Three musketeers just become the dynamic duo”, leaving Raj to sit alone at the bar for the rest of the night to instead hit on women with Leonard. As such, Howard demonstrates a willingness to momentarily exclude Raj completely from the group, in this way ranking his desire to comply and associate with hegemonic ideals of compulsive heterosexuality higher than his sense of loyalty to his friends.

While Howard often mocks Raj’s femininity, he plays a vital part in queering Raj – and, in extension, himself. One of the behaviors which the show continuously associates with homosexuality is a close sense of intimacy in homosocial relationships, drawing on stereotypes that only women have friendships largely built on interpersonal intimacy. Having been referred to as an ‘ersatz homosexual partnership’ by Leonard’s mother (“The Maternal Congruence” 00:07:20), the close friendship between Raj and Howard is a recurring source of punchlines that rely on alluding to the idea of a homoromantic relationship. This view of their friendship is also shared by characters in the series. Howard’s mother expresses relief when he brings home Bernadette, at she was worried that he might be in a gay relationship with Raj (“The Pulled

Groin Extrapolation” 00:08:01), while Amy jokingly complains that Raj and Howard will likely have sex before she will get to have sex with Sheldon (“The Proton Displacement” 00:15:08).

While both Howard and Raj are feminized to some degree within the context of their ‘bromance’, Raj is still framed as notably more feminine in this constellation while Howard, at least in contrast, remains quite masculine. An example of this can be seen in the episode “The Cornhusker Vortex”, where Raj is upset with Howard for having neglected their friendship in favor of unsuccessfully trying to score with women. To apologize, Howard brings Raj a new kite that comes with a coin purse, which only makes Raj even more upset, leading to an argument between the two:

Raj: “Wow, you just don’t get it, do you? Buying me something pretty isn’t going to make out problem just go away [...]”

Howard: “How about we go spend the day together? Just the two of us [...]”

Raj: “I don’t know.”

Howard: “Come on, I’ll take you someplace nice.”

Raj: “I do enjoy the La Brea Tar Pits.”

Howard: “Really, now? The traffic and the parking...”

Raj: [Stares at Howard insistently]

Howard: “Okay, fine. The Tar Pits – let’s go!”

Raj: [Sighs] “Oh, why can’t I stay mad at you?” (00:12:26)

This dialogue draws heavily on stereotypes of the neglectful husband trying to appease his angry housewife with an apology gift, which is well-known trope from countless other works of fiction such as the television series *Dexter* (“If I Had a Hammer” 00:28:14) and *The West Wing* (“Five Votes Down” 00:27:22). Here, Howard is clearly cast as the apologizing husband while Raj fills out the role of his dissatisfied wife who craves more intimacy which is in line with stereotypes of male independence and tendencies to avoid ‘emotion work’ as well as stereotypes based on women being focused on familial bonding and home life and primarily basing relationships on close intimacy and self-disclosure.

That Howard is framed as the more masculine of the men is further emphasized by how when the homosexual connotations become too overt, Howard will firmly reject them while Raj usually will either not be able to identify them or happily engage with them. This can be seen in the episode “The Proton Displacement”, where Raj has made matching light saber belt buckles for the both of them. This initially makes Howard delighted, however when Raj reveals his light saber under his shirt and it turns out to resemble an penis, and furthermore demonstrates how they can “have swordfights whenever [they] want” (00:17:12) by thrusting his pelvis from side to side, Howard’s expression turns from thrilled to grave in seconds.

Due to Raj’s imposed homosexuality often being the punchline in itself, insults directed towards Raj are often characterized by indirect homophobia. While homosexuality is gaining more acceptance socially and in terms of the law, society is still characterized by compulsive heteronormativity and the subordination of homosexual and feminine men. This leaves other sexualities to be labeled as deviations from the norm, which placing them in a hierarchy below heterosexuality. Still, I speculate that *The Big Bang Theory* very likely would receive backlash if they actually poked fun of queer behavior performed by a queer character, and so they instead implement punchlines based on the topic in a way that is more indirect and thus does not have the same impact. However, in the end, homosexuality still becomes the punchline itself and thus the target of ridicule.

Despite being the character who is most often ridiculed for his behavior often being coded as feminine and homosexual, Raj is portrayed as generally unwilling to perform hegemonic masculinity on more than a temporary surface level with the goal of avoiding social punishment. However, despite Raj being generally comfortable with his own masculinity – although not with the social implications – and insisting on his right to perform gender in ways that do not comply with current discourses of anti-femininity, I find that the show does not frame Raj’s queer-straightness as a valid alternative to hegemonic masculinity in the same way that it does geek and nerd masculinity.

Geek and nerd masculinity, while marginalized within and outside the show, is still framed in *The Big Bang Theory* as the better alternative to other, more traditionally hypermasculine types of masculinity in the show due to its associations with traits such as knowledge, technology, and science and the tropes’ slow evolution away from subordination.

However, while Raj as a character is generally likable, his femininity and queer heterosexuality prevents him from gaining the same privileges as his peers due to the heavily embedded anti-femininity found in hegemonic masculinity.

Race in *The Big Bang Theory*

One major aspect of the portrayal of masculinity in *The Big Bang Theory* which I have not covered sufficiently as part of masculinity in previous chapters is race and ethnicity. Therefore, I will attempt to do so in the following chapter. While there certainly are plenty of instances of humor based on references to race and ethnicity in the series, I will remain mostly focused on examples that pertain to the character Raj. This I will do because of the limited nature of this chapter and because while many of the characters may engage in jokes that revolve around race and racism, Raj is the only main cast member that is continuously at the receiving end of them as he is the only non-white main character. As such, I find that the character very much exemplifies how the show at times treats non-whiteness.

While Raj is the only non-white main characters, the show has many encounters where the subject of race is the focal point. In the episode “The Tenure Turbulence”, Sheldon tries to increase his chances of getting a promotion by gifting the African American head of human resources a box set of the television 1977 mini-series *Roots*, a historical drama about slavery in America. Of course, the laugh track indicates that the audience is well aware that Sheldon’s behavior is problematic and why well before the head of human resources, while Sheldon remains ignorant. When asked why he would think that to be an appropriate gift, Sheldon looks slightly confused, then leans in and asks: “You are black, right?” (00:09:45). While this situation does not actually make fun of being black but rather Sheldon’s utter lack of social and cultural awareness, it still portrays racial stereotypes.

In the episode “The Contractual Obligation Implementation”, the show comes close to having a relevant discussion about depictions of race in the media. As part of a conversation on getting women into science which I have referenced to once before, Leonard makes the point that while *Star Trek* may have been at least somewhat inclusive when it comes to gender, it was rather racist in its portrayal of non-white characters:

Sheldon: “[...] I believe in a gender-blind society like in Star Trek, where women and men of all races and creeds worked side by side as equals.”

Leonard: “You mean where they were advanced enough to invent an interstellar warp drive, but a black woman still answers the space phone?”

Howard: “Ah, I did spend a lot of my shower time with Lieutenant Uhura.” (00:00:55)

However, while the show briefly touches on the seriousness of the subject by identifying issues regarding the portrayal of non-whiteness in popular media through Leonard’s critical observation, it never actually dives deeper into the issue. Instead, Howard, as per his usual conduct, is unable to resist making sexual remarks by objectifying Uhura and in this way he undermines the conversation and ultimately ends it. The pattern of identifying social issues and drawing attention to their absurdity or unacceptability through humor but seldomly actually challenging them is characteristic for the show. The same can often be said about how Raj is portrayed. As such, while the show usually does not attempt to portray racially insensitive behavior as anything but racially insensitive – which often is the punchline in itself – it is still framed as good-natured teasing between friends or as insensitive but well-meant. Ultimately, racially insensitive behavior is framed as harmless and is never actually subjected to discussion.

To reiterate the theories of Connell, she emphasizes that gender interplays with other structures such as class and race and that non-whiteness may put some men at a disadvantage in relation to reaping the benefits of hegemonic masculinity. As mentioned, the geek and nerd tropes both generally still equals performing a male, middle-class, heterosexual, and white masculinity. This is generally the case with the main cast of *The Big Bang Theory* as well, with the exception of Raj, who takes on the role as the show’s token geek of color seemingly there to exoticize the series, and who is a melting pot of stereotypes about individuals from India. Being originally from New Delhi in India, Raj moved to England to attend Cambridge University in his teenage years. Afterwards moved to Pasadena in California where he connected with the other main characters before the beginning of the narrative of the show.

Being not only the primary target when it comes to jokes around sexuality and anti-femininity, the character Raj is also a regular center of attention when it comes to punchlines about race and culture, whether directly in the form of jokes about Indian heritage, and indirectly

through his stereotypical behavior. Not only is Raj the only non-white man in a strikingly white cast, but the show seems to want to put a great deal of emphasis on his racial otherness. One thing which is very notable about the character is his pronounced Indian accent. When accents are used in Hollywood, they convey something about the characters speaking them. Had the Raj's purpose been only to provide a degree of racial diversity, he could just as easily have spoken standard American English while being of Indian descent. However, instead the accent is seemingly utilized to signal not only Indian heritage but also a strong affiliation with Indian culture which allows for a series of references and jokes about Indian culture to be easily recognized and understood.

One thing that generally defines the men of *The Big Bang Theory* is their ineptness, a trait which in Raj's case extends into racial and cultural aspects of his character. Throughout the series, Raj's status as a non-American American has been used to set the stage for a wide array of jokes focusing on his lack of understanding of American culture, customs, and idioms, which is also explicitly expressed in the show, as here by Sheldon:

Sheldon: "In our ragtag band of scientists with nothing to lose, I'm the smart one, Wolowitz is the funny one, and Koothrappali is the lovable foreigner who struggles to understand our ways and fails." ("The Precious Fragmentation" 00:00:05)

This quote highlights how being foreign is an integral part of how Raj is seen by his friends and how he is generally portrayed. While the rest of the friend group gets to be described with actual character traits, Raj is defined by being non-American. As such, the adjective 'lovable' seems to be added more to regulate and add positive connotations to the noun 'foreigner' than to act as a meaningful descriptor in itself. Raj's status of an other is furthermore stressed by how Sheldon establishes a clear 'us' which excludes Raj although he is both an integrated part of the homosocial friends' group and a part of the conversation.

However, while being labeled as the foreigner of the group, Raj is portrayed as being almost as alienated from Indian culture as he is from American culture, being ignorant of or hostile towards many aspects of it. As such, while he was born in India and lived there until his teenage years, Sheldon is shown to be able to dispute Raj's knowledge of a variety of aspects of Indian culture which Raj is shown to engage in, including traditional customs, Hinduism, as well as his proficiency in Hindi. Raj is likewise shown to have a strong dislike for many things

traditionally associated with Indian culture including Indian music and food (“The Vegas Renormalization” 00:05:01).

While not liking, understanding, or identifying fully with everything associated to one’s country of origin is not necessarily unrealistic nor scandalous in itself, I find that the show seems to make a point out of alienating Raj from both American and Indian culture by portraying him as generally culturally incompetent on both fronts. By doing this, the show creates a circumstance where the character of Raj can act as a means to perpetuate negative stereotypes about Indian culture not only indirectly via his laughable, racially coded behavior, but also through his own negative opinions of India. As such, the character often acts as an active, self-deprecating agent in the show’s punchlines centered around India and Indian culture. In this way, the show perhaps tries to eliminate problematic racist undertones that comes from having a non-Indian person make fun of Indians and Indian culture.

Raj is not only portrayed as inept in relation to culture but is arguably the main male character who most fails to live up to hegemonic ideals. Raj is the least successful when it comes to women. While he does enter romantic relationships with a few different women throughout the series, they do not last long, and he is the only one who is not in a steady relationship at the series’ conclusion. In general, Raj’s relationship with women is very problematic. In addition to being as socially awkward as the rest of the male cast, he also exhibits selective mutism for the first five seasons which causes him to be unable to speak in the company of women while he is sober, until he finally gets over it in the sixth season. Furthermore, while he can suppress his mutism by drinking alcohol, by doing this his behavior often changes from timid to sexually aggressive, which often results in him relentlessly hitting on women despite their obvious discomfort or even acting in ways that are illegal. An example of the latter can be found in the episode “The Wildebeest Implementation” where Raj undresses to reveal his penis to a woman in a coffee shop, because he finds her attractive (00:17:16). As such, Raj is portrayed as sexually inept in two very different ways, but never as thoroughly successful.

In the episode called “The Skank Reflex Analysis”, Raj’s Indian heritage in itself is used to frame him as an unattractive sexual partner. In the episode, Penny falsely believes that she has slept with Raj the night before while they were drunk. Afraid that the incident will negatively

affect her friendships with the four lead characters, particularly her ex-boyfriend Leonard, she invites Amy over to talk about her fears, to which Amy replies:

Amy: “Do you know the story of Catherine the Great?”

Penny: “No”

Amy: “She ruled Russia in the 1700’s and one night when she was feeling particularly randy, she used an intricate system of pulleys to have intimate relations with a horse.”

Penny: “I’m sorry, what does this have to do with me?”

Amy: “She engaged in inter-species hanky-panky and people still call her great. I’m sure your reputation can survive you shagging a little Indian boy.” (00:05:56)

While Raj’s heritage was never part of the original issue, it is still unnecessarily drawn into the conversation for comical effect, apparently based in the idea that interracial sex can be paralleled with bestiality. In this way, Raj is compared to an animal and thus dehumanized. Furthermore, Amy strongly implies, that sleeping with someone of Indian heritage as a white woman in itself is seen as something which would be seen as a source of shame by others given that it might hurt someone’s reputation to do so. Lastly, the statement infantilizes Raj by referring to him as a “little Indian boy” instead of as the adult man that he is and thus emasculates him.

Amy’s dialogue paints a picture of Indian men being not only seen as notable other to the white speaker, but also being seen as lesser men and, in extension, lesser lovers than white men, which is further emphasized by the homosexuality imposed on him, as covered in earlier chapters. In this way, Raj becomes part of a long-standing tradition of portraying Asian and Asian American men as less masculine than Western men by feminizing and emasculating them in popular discourse (Iwamoto and Liu 211). This has its roots in historical processes, particular the Western colonization of a number of Asian countries, among them India. According to Boone, the feminization of the Asian man and the Asian male body was used to disguise and justify homoerotic desires towards the ‘oriental’ body by Western men (Boone 50).

Another Indian stereotype relation to Raj’s love life present in *The Big Bang Theory* is the notion of arranged marriage. While Raj longs for finding real love throughout the series, a

recurring punchline is how his parents are repeatedly trying to force him into various arranged marriages which he generally refuses. While the practice of arranged marriage is present in many cultures, it is typically associated with South India and India in particular. As such, on average people from South Asian countries view marriage as an essential institution to a degree that it may outweigh individual desires in favor of familial duties compared to popular American ideals of romance in marriage and an inviolable right for an individual choice of partner (Davé 265).

Some jokes aimed at Indian culture seem to be too controversial for the show to be willing to associate them directly with Raj. While this is pure speculation, the show would hardly get away with portraying Raj as a firm advocate for arranged marriage, as having such ideologies might make him seem unlikeable to an American audience as well as too othered to seem culturally compatible with the remainder of the cast due to the discrepancy between general ideas about American and Indian marriage ideals. As such, by utilizing Raj's parents as catalyzers of the recurring punchlines on the subject, the show is able to both draw on stereotypes associated with Indian culture without alienating the character of Raj too much.

However, the show is able to appear mostly sympathetic through the use of ironic humor and particular through what is known as 'lampshade hanging'. Lampshade hanging is the name of a writer's trick that deals with elements of a narrative that challenges the viewers 'willing suspension of belief' – a term which refers to the audience willingly accepting a fictional world as it is presented without questioning the autonomous reality of it or its characters, provided they are in turn granted a good story and an acceptable level of internal consistency and believability. As such, if the suspense of disbelief is threatened by something which is uncharacteristic or too unacceptable in another sense, lampshade hanging may be utilized in an attempt to make the audience accept this. This is done by self-deprecatingly pointing out the show's own fault, thus disarming the viewer while creating a sense of community around the humor ("Lampshade Hanging").

In *The Big Bang Theory*, this is usually done through the blatant use of a recurring and clichéd punchlines which the show then calls attention to and quickly moves on from. One example of this can be found in the episode "The Boyfriend Complexity". Here, Sheldon, Raj, and Howard are talking about which editions of Monopoly they prefer, when Howard decides to make a joke based on an array of Indian stereotypes:

Howard: “Actually, Indian Monopoly is just like regular, except the money’s in rupees and instead of hotels, you build call centers – and when you pick a chance card you might die of dysentery. Just FYI: that was racist.” (00:03:02)

As such, to adjust for how for the joke is so overtly racist that it might be deemed unacceptable by many while also threatening the show’s internal consistency and tradition of being less explicit in its racial insensitivity, the dialogue quickly draws attention to this fact. When the show articulates self-critique on behavior that might be found unacceptable, it attempts to signal that a sense of self-awareness of the insensitiveness installed in many of the its punchlines and thus creates a situation where the viewer and the show are in on the jokes together both of which may disarm the viewer. In this way, the show is able to get away with humor which might otherwise trigger a significantly negative response by disguising controversial, discriminatory statements behind a thick coat of irony.

In essence, while Raj’s Indian heritage or nerdiness as separate social and cultural identities might not have subordinated him in relation to hegemonic masculinity, the interplay between his gender, his non-whiteness, his nerdiness, and, most notably, his femininity places him in solidly in a position of subordination. This becomes especially prevalent when juxtaposing Raj with his homosocial group who all share many of the same characteristics as Raj, but are privileged due to their non-whiteness and compliance with normative rules of anti-femininity which positions them closer to hegemonic ideals and thus the benefits that come with male hegemony.

Discussion: ideology and impact

Connell notes that while not all men fit into the mold of hegemonic masculinity, a large majority do not challenge it either and thus they are still complicit in reinforcing hegemonic masculinity. Complicity, I find, is a core element to the masculinity of the main male cast of *The Big Bang Theory*. While all of them perform complicit behavior at different points, the most prominent example of this behavior is Leonard. Being framed as the most ‘normal’ and sensible man of the group, Leonard is the one to be the voice of reason when other characters in the show are behaving in ways that are socially unacceptable – and while he occasionally makes sexist, racist, or homophobic remarks himself, he is arguably the character who does so least often.

However, while Leonard is the one who most often draws attention to his friends' marginalizing behavior, at closer inspection he almost always excuses their behavior.

While Leonard may shake his head and sigh at his friends, he never actually challenges their behavior in a meaningful way. In fact, his mild protests, often invite further jokes which are often at his expense. One example of this can be found in the ninth season's second episode named "The Separation Oscillation", where Raj and Howard are exchanging sexist jokes:

Raj: "I'd like to get lost in her Bermuda Triangle"

Leonard: [Looking visibly annoyed] "That's not helpful"

Howard: "Then I won't say I'd like to cover three quarters of her surface area"

Leonard: "Are we done?"

Raj: "Not yet, this is fun! Ooh, I know – I'd let her free my Willy!" (00:11:41)

As such, Leonard's weak protests do not challenge Raj and Howard's behavior in a way that makes a difference but instead only act as a springboard for more sexist jokes. The situation is made worse by the fact that the woman they are making remarks about is a one who is causing serious issues in Leonard's relationship with Penny, a situation which he was trying to talk with Raj and Howard about in a serious manner. In the end, Leonard leaves the table in protest – however, despite Raj and Howard's sexist remarks as well as their disregard for Leonard's feelings and acts of disapproval, all appears instantly forgiven mere seconds later when Leonard once again engage his friends in conversation as if nothing has happened.

The same dynamic takes place between the show and its characters. As such, while the show frequently draws attention to its characters marginalizing behavior – most notably through its frequent laugh track – the male main characters' status as nice, geeky nerds continuously acquits them for a wide range of demeaning, sexist, and racist behaviors of which I have addressed some in my analysis. Most of the time, the four main male characters are portrayed as genuinely likable men, often exhibiting traits such as sensitivity, loyalty, thoughtfulness, and kindness, which is amplified when the men are juxtaposed with stereotypically hypermasculine men such as Penny's ex-boyfriends.

It is largely because of their positive traits and their status as ‘better men’ that their negative behavior is framed as excusable and as a result of either awkwardness, ignorance, or a desperate wish but inability to conform to hegemonic standards rather than any ill will. As such, while the men are at times sexist, racist, and homophobic, the audience is encouraged to instead find this behavior pathetic – or even charming – and even more importantly considering the genre of the series: funny. Moreover, because of how the male characters fail time and time again to live up to hegemonic ideals and thus are framed as pathetic and somewhat helpless, the audience is encouraged to feel pity for them when they are finally confronted with their behavior. One example of this is when Penny loses her patience with Howard’s sexist comments and scolds him which I discussed in my chapter “The sexualization of women: the woman as an object and less than”. While the laugh track without fail sounds after every sexist and obtrusive comment made by Howard despite Penny’s visible annoyance. However, when Penny has finished scolding Howard and he leaves the apartment in distress, the laugh track is replaced by a united “aw” from the audience (“The Killer Robot Instability” 00:05:08).

As mentioned previously, most of the shows punchlines rely on the sense of absurdity that emerges from the discrepancy between socially shared expectations of hegemonic masculine behavior and the personalities and behaviors of the characters who are associated with marginalization that comes with nerd masculinity. All of Bird’s three meanings are very much present in *The Big Bang Theory*, albeit inverted and portrayed in ways that are laughable instead of cool. As such, the target of the punchlines is almost never the sexist, homophobic, or racist behavior in itself but rather the men’s inability to successfully emulate hypermasculine behavior. Because of this, I find it safe to assume that the overall message of the show is not that being racist or otherwise discriminatory is actually funny, good, or worth emulating in real life, but rather that it is not really a big deal, particularly if the intentions are good – or at least not bad.

Because of their good intentions, the men’s disrespectful behavior is tolerated both by the writers, the audience, and by other character – even the ones that are in in the receiving end of it. This is even explicitly commented on in the series’ very last episode. Here, the entire main cast is travelling to attend the Nobel Prize Award Ceremony as Sheldon and Amy have won a joint Nobel Prize in physics. Being caught up in his upcoming glory, Sheldon fails to congratulate Penny and Howard on Penny’s newfound pregnancy and shows a lack of compassion towards

Bernadette and Howard when they express that they miss their children back home. Because of this, Bernadette, Howard, Leonard, and Penny threaten to not attend the ceremony, which Sheldon angrily vents to Amy about:

Sheldon: “How can you call them friends when they're abandoning us?”

Amy: “They're abandoning us because you broke their hearts.”

Sheldon: “I didn't mean to.”

Amy: “I know! You never mean to. That's the only reason people tolerate you!”

Sheldon: “Does that include you?”

Amy: “Sometimes, yeah.” (“The Stockholm Syndrome” 00:14:51)

While Bernadette, Howard, Leonard, and Penny consider rebelling against Sheldon’s behavior, in the end they all cannot bring themselves to hurt him or damage their friendships and they end up going. What I take from this situation and the show’s many situations like it, is that while the message of the series does not appear to be the condoning of disregarding the feelings of others or engage in discriminatory behavior, but rather this behavior is harmless, innocent and ultimately excusable due to intentions that are fundamentally good.

The issue with this is that while the show may appear as somewhat critical of the flaws of its own characters – which is made apparent though lamp shading – it never actually critiques or challenges discriminatory behavior in a meaningful way but only acknowledges it and then moves on. One example of this is how Leonard briefly comments on the racist portrayal of Lieutenant Uhura in *Star Trek* which never results in a substantial discussion. In doing so, *The Big Bang Theory* abstains from framing this behavior as potentially damaging in any meaningful way, and their behavior is instead framed as peculiar quirks and as harmless in addition to being normal, and even natural and inevitable, for men.

Looking towards other works of fiction, *The Big Bang Theory* is definitely not alone in its depiction of awkward nerds whose sexist and insensitive behavior is excused by their awkwardness, sweetness, or lack of understanding of social conventions. One notable example of this is the 1984 film *Revenge of the Nerds* directed by Jeff Kanew. Here, the nerdy social outcast, Lewis, tricks his popular crush, Betty, into having intercourse with him by impersonating her

boyfriend. When she finds out, she is not mad or traumatized, but instead applauds his sexual performance and expresses joy in having had him open her eyes to a different kind of man than her jock boyfriend (Kanew). In this way, while Lewis commits sexual assault, there are no negative consequences, and his actions are excused because of his status as the bullied underdog.

Another, albeit less severe, example is the geeky paleontologist Ross from the American sitcom *Friends*. Despite his on-again, off-again relationship with Rachel being a core part of the series and a fan favorite, Ross exhibits much of the same behavior towards Rachel as Leonard does towards Penny. As such, while the audience is made to root for Ross to achieve a relationship with Rachel – him having had a crush on her since high school but always being the underdog compared to other men in the beautiful Rachel’s life due to his geekiness – he frequently engages in manipulative or deceitful behavior to get what he wants from her. One example of this is how when the two gets married while drunk in Las Vegas. Here, Rachel regrets it the next morning and asks Ross to get an annulment to which he agrees. However, because Ross is still in love with Rachel and does not want another divorce under his belt, he intentionally does not get the annulment and proceeds to keep this secret from Rachel, justifying it with his wish that they will get back together (“The One Where Joey Loses His Insurance”).

However, while there are plenty of examples of depictions of geeky and nerdy men in fiction who engage in toxic practices of masculinity, there are also examples of male characters who do not. One such example is Ben Wyatt from the American Sitcom *Parks and Recreation* which ran from 2009 to 2020 (Daniels and Schur). Being deeply engaged in fantasy franchises such as *Game of Thrones* and *The Lord of the Rings*, being a nationally ranked player of the board game *Settlers of Catan*, and even inventing his own, award-winning board game, being a nerd is a huge part of Ben’s identity and masculinity. However, rather than engaging in toxic practices of masculinity, Ben is portrayed as unwaveringly sweet, genuine, loyal, and considerate and he succeeds in continuously performing nerd masculinity in a way which is both thoroughly wholesome and entertaining.

Conclusion

With today’s increasingly omnipresent media image playing a vital role in shaping societal discourses pertaining to gender, sex, and sexuality, how these notions are represented in

popular media seems more relevant to look than ever before. This is also the case with *The Big Bang Theory*, a show which gained huge traction throughout its run of twelve seasons and was one of the most popular tv-series of its time.

Having once equated subordinated masculinity, the nerd trope has moved into a position of marginalization. Perhaps the best indication of this is how the nerd character, while once generally occupying lesser roles today gets to be main characters in popular media texts such as *The Big Bang Theory* and *Stranger Things*. However, despite being more valid, nerd and geek masculinity is still marginalized in a variety of ways.

The show attempts to portray its main characters Leonard, Sheldon, Raj, and Howard as welcome and sweet alternatives to the stereotypical, hypermasculine man of Hollywood. This is most clearly established through the juxtaposition to traditionally masculine characters who are generally portrayed negatively as overly aggressive, confrontational, and macho. Additionally, the hypermasculine men of the show are portrayed as rather unintelligent, relying on raw masculinity in combination with a traditional attractiveness to attain women and intimidate men as a form of competitiveness, but in the end lose to the nerdy men.

However, despite the characters being portrayed as overall sweet and likable, the show still reproduces the very hegemonic norms which it on the surface distances itself from, and as such the men participate in competitive, emotionally detached, objectifying, anti-feminine, homophobic, and racist behavior or in ways that in some aspects mirror hegemonic masculinity. However, this is excused due to their otherwise endearing manner.

While the masculinity of the nerds is generally portrayed as a valid albeit not ideal way to portray gender, the character of Raj is a notable exception. He is not only nerdy, but also inhibits several other traits associated with marginalization and subordination. As such, due to also being both effeminate and non-white, and in this regard displaying a wide variety of Indian stereotypes which further emphasizes his otherness, Raj has been set up to fail in the competitive scene of masculinities.

Often times the compliance to discriminatory norms of masculinity is intentional and create the foundation of the show's humor is mainly the sense of absurdity which may be found in the discrepancy between socially shared expectations of hegemonic masculine behavior and

seeing this behavior performed by characters associated with marginalized nerd masculinity. However, in doing this the show still reproduces the very hegemonic norms which it distances itself from and which contributes to marginalizing its main characters and in the process normalizes aspects of intolerant and complicit behavior.

Despite often engaging in ridicule towards other characters in the show, the men are tolerated by both the show and the rest of the cast and are almost never challenged in a meaningful way. Because the show portrays and acknowledges, but rarely actually challenges, this discriminatory behavior, *The Big Bang Theory* ultimately refrains from framing certain aspects of hegemonic masculinity as potentially harmful to the ones who practice them, nor the ones targeted by mockery and social punishment. Instead, they are framed as eccentricities that may not be praiseworthy but are, in essence, harmless.

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Image 3: "The Spoiler Alert Segmentation." *The Big Bang Theory*, written by Chuck Lorre, Eric Kaplan, Steve Holland, Steven Molaro, Maria Ferrari and Adam Faberman, directed by Mark Cendrowski, Chuck Lorre Productions and Warner Bros. Television and Warner Bros. Television, 2013.

Image 4: "The Contractual Obligation Implementation." *The Big Bang Theory*, written by Chuck Lorre, Eric Kaplan, Steve Holland, Steven Molaro, Jim Reynolds and Maria Ferrari, directed by Mark Cendrowski, Chuck Lorre Productions and Warner Bros. Television and Warner Bros. Television, 2013.

Image 5: "The Cornhusker Vortex." *The Big Bang Theory*, written by Bill Prady, Steven Molaro, Dave Goetsch and Richard Rosenstock, directed by Mark Cendrowski, Chuck Lorre Productions and Warner Bros. Television, 2009.