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Female and Male Stereotypes in the Big Bang Theory series

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Female and Male Stereotypes in the Big Bang Theory series

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Cílem této bakalářské práce je analyzovat stereotypní postavy a jejich vzorce chování v americkém sitcomu Teorie velkého třesku z pohledu genderových studií. Práce se zaměřuje zejména na hlavní postavy, jejichž vykreslení buď podléhá určitým stereotypům, nebo je naopak boří.

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ANOTACE

Cílem této bakalářské práce je analyzovat ženské a mužské stereotypy v americkém sitcomu *Teorie velkého třesku* z pohledu genderových studií. Teoretická část se zabývá popisem pojmů, jakými jsou stereotyp, předsudek a s tím související genderová role. Praktická část se věnuje demonstraci a případným vývojem stereotypních předsudků na konkrétních postavách a situacích v tomto televizním sitcomu. Práce se zaměřuje především na hlavní postavy, které svým ztvárněním a chováním buď podléhají určitým genderovým stereotypům, nebo je naopak boří.

KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA

Teorie velkého třesku, sitcom, stereotyp, předsudek, genderová role, feminismus, hloupá blondýnka, ženy a věda, hegemonní maskulinita

ANNOTATION

The aim of this bachelor's thesis is to analyse female and male stereotypes in the American sitcom *The Big Bang Theory* from the perspective of gender studies. The theoretical part deals with the description of concepts such as stereotypes, prejudice, and the related gender role. The practical part is devoted to the demonstration and eventual development of stereotypical prejudices about specific characters and situations in this television sitcom. The paper focuses mainly on the main characters, whose portrayal and behaviour either submits to certain gender stereotypes or, on the contrary, destroys them.

KEY WORDS

The Big Bang Theory, sitcom, stereotype, prejudice, gender role, feminism, dumb blonde, women and science, hegemonic masculinity

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1. INTRODUCTION

The American television sitcom *The Big Bang Theory* is considered one of the most successful TV shows of modern times. The show comprises twelve seasons and focuses mainly on the personal and work life of a group of scientists and their friend Penny, who, in the initial seasons, works as a waitress. During its broadcast, the entire show portrays various female and male stereotypes, but also, occasionally, modifies or contradicts them. This paper examines how these stereotypes have evolved during the show's long broadcast.

The theoretical part of the paper deals with the contextual definition of the term sitcom and the role of stereotypes in comedy. Further, it describes terms such as stereotype, prejudice and closely discusses gender stereotypes, followed by a short overview of shifts in society in the United States.

According to Stafford (2004, 6), comedy adapts as stereotypes change, mirroring the shifting dynamics of society. As Stafford observes: "Commentary on the stereotype provides sitcom with plenty of narrative conflicts and if accurately observed can 'capture' a sense of 'now'. The best 'social comment sitcoms' will undermine stereotypes and explore 'real' social situations and the dynamics of social interaction" (2004, 7). Thus, innovative sitcoms, such as *The Big Bang Theory*, are trying to place a greater emphasis on developing complex characters who defy traditional stereotypes. Female characters are no longer confined to the roles of doting homemakers or ditzy sidekicks but are instead portrayed as multifaceted individuals with ambitions, aspirations, and agency. Likewise, male characters are no longer limited to the "macho" stereotype but are presented as vulnerable, emotionally aware, and capable of growth. This thesis investigates which gender stereotypes are contradicted and which are perpetuated throughout the series. It critically examines the portrayal of women in sciences, connected with the character development of Penny from the "dumb blond" to a successful saleswoman, the reversed gender role within a family, the masculine hierarchy, and typical men and women traits and behaviour. Drawing insights from Stafford's observation on the adaptability of comedy, the thesis comes to the conclusion that several traditional gender stereotypes are undermined, especially in the later seasons. These include, for example, the dumb blond stereotype, the conservative gender roles within a family, and the strict division of roles for certain genders. There are, however, several notable exceptions, whereby outdated gender

stereotypes are still displayed uncritically: for example, the depiction of women scientist, the portrayal of hegemonic masculinity, and sexism connected with sexual harassment.

2. SITCOMS AND GENDER STEREOTYPING

A situation comedy, or sitcom for short, is a genre set in a specific environment, usually of a shorter duration, between 18-24 minutes per episode. These episodes are usually presented in “seasons.” Sitcoms are typically broadcast on television and are known for their episodic nature and use of laughter tracks (Savorelli 2010, 22). The humour in this kind of show mainly lies in the characters’ personalities, relationships, and daily situations.

In a sitcom, characters are typically central in the humour and storylines. The sitcom characters can come from various backgrounds and personalities but often share specific characteristics. Roy Stafford (2004, 6) suggests three types of characters:

1. The archetype refers to conventional characters; for example, comedies often feature the archetypical “clown” or a naive person.
2. Stereotype comedies heavily rely on “social categorisation”. Such shows portray characters which are based on characteristics related to social status, age, gender, and ethnicity.
3. The (often singular) “normal” character in the workplace has to endure the silly actions of the main characters.

As Stafford points out, the setting of a sitcom is typically an essential element of the show, serving as a backdrop for the characters and their interactions. Many sitcoms take place at home, in a shared living space, such as an apartment or house, where the characters interact daily. Some sitcoms are set in a specific workplace, such as an office, restaurant, or store, where the characters spend a significant amount of their time. Alternatively, sitcoms can be set in public spaces, such as a park, coffee shop, or bar, where the characters interact with each other and others (2004, 3). Savorelli states that the couch is one of American sitcoms’ most frequently used elements. Typically, it is positioned in the centre of the room and the film frame. In sitcoms which are set in the workplace, it is replaced with a desk. Nevertheless, even in those shows, the couch regains its central placement once the scene moves away from the workplace (2010, 23).

The typical sitcom, which has become a dominant form of comedy in the visual media, also aims to have a connection with its audience. This is achieved in various ways, primarily by creating characters meant to resemble and embody the audience (Berman 1987, 6). A critical factor, however, is that the potential cast of characters and the location must provide a variety of potential story conflicts. This requires that the characters have a diverse range of ages, social backgrounds, and cultural values or individual characteristics. This can include – but is not limited to – differences in gender, nationality, or ethnicity (Stafford 2004, 4).

Nevertheless, most sitcoms offer at least a slightly exaggerated representation of everyday events and characters. Thus, as Marcin (2011, 28) observes, the abundance of stereotypes in sitcoms is not only a reflection of the long-standing tradition of humour but also a constant and almost necessary result of the genre conventions. This stereotyping includes gender-related prejudices, contributing to a blurred perception of women in society. Such portrayals of gender roles often perpetuate traditional stereotypes, presenting women in limited and sometimes demeaning ways. Consequently, the image of women becomes dull and hazy, lacking diversity and complexity. Such depictions reinforce societal expectations and norms, constraining women to specific roles and behaviours.

3. STEREOTYPE AND PREJUDICE

Prejudices and stereotypes are frequently discussed topics, and most people, knowingly or unknowingly, have a certain degree of prejudice towards their surroundings and certain social groups, as well as individuals who are part of this group. The term “stereotype” was first used in a different context by the French printer Firmin Didot. In 1798, he used the word to describe his occupation of producing copies through the method of printing (Plous 2003, 1). Walter Lippmann, a journalist, later compared stereotypes to “mental images” or a person’s representation of reality. From this comparison, the term gradually evolved to refer to generalised and often oversimplified beliefs about a group of people (Plous 2003, 1).

A stereotype can be described as a commonly held opinion or preconception about an individual or group. The Cambridge Dictionary defines stereotype as a “set idea that people have about what someone or something is like especially an idea that is wrong” (‘STEREOTYPE | English Meaning - Cambridge Dictionary’ 2023). The

Britannica dictionary provides a similar definition as “an often unfair and untrue belief that many people have about all people or things with a particular characteristic” (‘Stereotype Definition & Meaning | Britannica Dictionary’ 2023). Psycho-sociological research, however, shows more complex and ambiguous approaches to the term. For example, Marx and Ko (2019, 2) stress that “stereotypes refer to both positive and negative over-generalisations or beliefs about the attributes and behaviours of individuals and/or groups.” In case of a positive impact, stereotypes can help us categorise everyday life and assess the facts and situations. Thus, stereotyping indicates a consistent and unconscious behaviour, which is “habitual and automatic” (Crespi 2004). If categorisation is based solely on negative judgment and the individual is not considered, it is defined as prejudice. (‘Prejudice | Behaviour | Britannica’ 2023)

Some experts do not distinguish between prejudice and stereotypes. Nevertheless, prejudice often refers to the negative aspects of the stereotype. Gordon Allport defined prejudice as an “aversive or hostile attitude toward a person who belongs to a group, simply because he belongs to that group” (quoted in Rouse, Booker, and Stermer 2011), while a stereotype can be neutral or even positive.

Negative stereotypes cause significant tension, particularly when they lead to discrimination. They limit opportunities for people and prevent them from being seen as individuals with unique experiences and perspectives. They also thwart diversity within a group and can lead to misunderstandings and missed opportunities for learning and growth (Ellemers 2018). However, it is important to note that a stereotype must have some level of accuracy to gain popularity (Stafford 2004, 7).

Today, many stereotypes and prejudices exist, such as the belief that men are more competitive compared to women, who are seen as more nurturing. Heterosexuals hold biases against homosexuals, locals discriminate against immigrants, and religious individuals have negative views towards atheists (Sng, Williams, and Neuberg 2016, 21). People can be stereotyped about people based on their race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, nationality, occupation, and other factors.

3.1. GENDER STEREOTYPES

A gender stereotype is a type of stereotype based on a person's gender. While sex refers to an individual's biological characteristics that define their male or female status, gender refers to the cultural and societal norms, values, and attributes attributed to each sex (Blackstone 2003, 335). In other words, gender is a social interpretation of biological sex. Eagly et al. (2020) and Koenig & Eagly (2014) state that according to social role theory, gender stereotypes arise from people's perceptions of men and women in their various social roles (as cited in Priyashantha, De Alwis, and Welmilla 2021, 2). However, a counterargument suggests that gender stereotypes are rooted in biological differences between sexes (Rangel & Keller, 2011, as cited in Priyashantha, De Alwis, and Welmilla, 2021, 2). A definition provided by Burgess and Borgida (1999), Eagly and Karau (2002) and Heilman (2001) suggests that "gender stereotypes are generalisations about the attributes of men and women" (as cited in Heilman 2012). Heilman (2012, 1) further elaborates on her definition and states that "gender stereotypes have both descriptive and prescriptive properties." Descriptive gender stereotypes describe women's and men's perceived characteristics and behaviours, while prescriptive gender stereotypes dictate how women and men should behave and what qualities they should possess (Heilman 2012, 1). In other words, gender stereotypes refer to widely accepted beliefs or generalisations about individuals based on sex. These beliefs and generalisations are often rooted in cultural and societal norms and perpetuated through education, media and advertising.

Gender stereotyping refers to attributing certain traits, characteristics, or roles to a person based solely on their sex as a member of either the female or male social group (United Nations' Gender Stereotyping, OHCHR 2014). Gender stereotypes can profoundly affect individuals, shaping their views of themselves and others and affecting their actions and behaviour. For example, gender stereotypes about women being nurturing can limit women's opportunities in the workplace, leading them to be overlooked for leadership positions or viewed as less competent than their male counterparts. On the other hand, gender stereotypes about men being strong, tough, and unemotional can lead to toxic masculinity and pressure on men to conform to these narrow expectations. Such unequal and unfair treatment often caused by stereotyping is called sexism ('Sexism | Definition, Types, Examples, & Facts | Britannica' 2023).

Gender stereotyping can be harmful when it restricts an individual's ability to grow, pursue career goals, and make personal life choices. For instance, the stereotype that

women are nurturing often results in them shouldering sole responsibility for child-rearing. Stereotyping violates human rights when it leads to the infringement of fundamental freedoms (United Nations' Gender Stereotyping, OHCHR 2014).

Although gender stereotypes are very close to gender roles, the difference lies in the way societies perceive the attributes of masculinity and femininity. While gender roles represent the behaviour of a given individual within their gender, a stereotype is only the opinion of a more significant part of society about such behaviour of men and women ('APA Dictionary of Psychology' 2023). Gender roles refer to the societal expectations and norms that dictate appropriate behaviour and traits for individuals based on sex, shaped by cultural and social factors (Blackstone 2003, 335). Historically, women were expected to fulfil submissive and nurturing roles in the household, while men were seen as dominant figures responsible for providing for their families (Cartwright 2016; Bovey 2015). However, industrialisation and the feminist movement challenged traditional gender roles, leading to greater gender equality and recognition of the limitations of rigid gender roles (Rupp 1981, 277-281; Burkett, 2022). Despite progress, women still face a double burden of pursuing self-realisation while fulfilling traditional domestic responsibilities.

Furthermore, gender biases result in women earning less than men, who are viewed as more skilled and committed employees (Suter and Miller 1973, 962). Women's family and household management responsibilities can challenge their work performance, especially in traditional family structures where gender roles are clearly defined. Sharing family responsibilities can positively impact both women and men, giving women more time to pursue their careers and men more time with their children. New parenthood significantly impacts a couple's life. New mothers often leave work to recover and adjust. In contrast, "far fewer fathers experience even temporary absence from the workforce" after the baby's birth; they usually maintain or increase work ties. (Fox 2009; Glauber 2008; Sanchez and Thomson 1977 as cited in Rehel 2014, 110).

Nevertheless, alternate views and diversity in gender expression are becoming more accepted in contemporary society (Blackstone 2003, 337).

4. SHIFTING DYNAMICS OF SOCIETY IN THE US AND FEMINISTS MOVEMENTS

The Big Bang Theory aired from 2007 to 2019, and American society shifted to a certain degree during this period. There has been a growing emphasis on gender equality, challenging traditional gender roles and expectations. Women have made significant strides in pursuing careers, attaining leadership positions, and advocating for equal rights and opportunities. Education and awareness campaigns, as well as increased representation of diverse gender identities and roles in media and advertising, have played a role in breaking down gender stereotypes and promoting gender equality.

Society has become more open and accepting of diverse sexual orientations and identities. LGBTQ+ rights have gained significant traction, leading to legal recognition of same-sex marriage and increased visibility and representation in various spheres of life (Flores 2019, 4). Even though such social changes are not directly represented in *The Big Bang Theory*, homosexuality is inferred by the relationship of Howard and Raj, who are often portrayed as a homosexual couple:

Bernadette: I don't want to drive that. It's such a mom car.

Howard: The guy at the dealership said they're not just for moms any more.

Raj: Then again, he did think you were my husband. (Lorre and Prady 2016, S10E06, 6:07)

Similarly, romantic relationships have changed, with an increasing emphasis on egalitarian partnerships. Gender roles within relationships have become more fluid, with shared responsibilities and decision-making. There is a greater emphasis on mutual respect, communication, and consent (Juhn and McCue 2017, 201). There is a greater acceptance and recognition of different family arrangements and parenting styles. This can be observed well in the show's depiction of couples like Penny and Leonard or Bernadette and Howard. This issue will be discussed more closely in the analytical part of the thesis.

This change of strict gender roles within a family is connected to several notable feminist movements that have gained significant attention and sparked meaningful discussions on gender equality and women's rights in recent years. The Women's March is an annual event that began in 2017 as a response to the inauguration of former President

Donald Trump. It is a protest movement advocating for various women's rights issues, including reproductive rights, equal pay, gender-based violence, and LGBTQ+ rights. The Women's March has become a platform for women and allies to voice their concerns and demand social and political change (Brewer and Dundes, 2018). Furthermore, there have been international women's strikes organized around the world. These strikes highlight women's significant contributions to society and the economy while drawing attention to the ongoing gender disparities and injustices. The strikes emphasize the importance of gender equality, fair wages, and improved working conditions for women.

The most prominent recent feminist movement is the #MeToo movement, which emerged in 2017 as a global movement against sexual harassment and assault. It started as a social media campaign encouraging individuals, primarily women, to share their experiences of sexual misconduct. The movement shed light on the pervasive nature of sexual harassment and led to increased awareness, accountability, and discussions surrounding consent and power dynamics (Lee 2018, 433).

Occasionally the show touches on topics such as physical harassment when, for example, sex-loving women, such as Doctor Plimton, prioritize their sexual instincts over their knowledge and respected position as a scientist (more about this situation is described in the chapter "Women and science"). Also, Penny is, from the beginning, a victim of sexual jokes and hints, especially by Howard or Amy. As Farghaly and Leone highlight:

Penny was confronted with Amy's not-so-suitable sexual comments, consider when the portrait she [Amy] had commissioned was originally a nude portrayal of two women (Lorre and Prady 2011, S05E07) or when Bernadette's bridal shower ought to include naked bridesmaids washing each other, or when she gets the idea that the bachelors party should be embrace of Native American sweat lodge women dance around and paint fertility symbols on the brides naked body (Lorre and Prady 2011, S05E08) (2015, 8).

Amy's persistent and inappropriate comments about Penny's body remain a recurring theme in seasons five and six of the show. However, in season seven, these remarks are toned down. Amy's behaviour, described as sexual harassment (as Farghaly and Leone call it), finally ceases during the last season, coinciding with Sheldon's emergence as a visible sexual partner (Farghaly and Leone 2015, 8).

5. ANALYSIS OF STEREOTYPES IN *THE BIG BANG THEORY*

5.1. *THE BIG BANG THEORY* AND GENDER STEROTYPES ACCORDING TO THE CRITICAL CONSENSUS

The Big Bang Theory was created by Chuck Lorre and Bill Prady. Since Prady, a good friend of Lorre, works as a computer programmer, his idea was to make a show about computer programming. However, the collaboration with Lorre gave birth to *The Big Bang Theory* as we know it today:

Lorre: (...) [Prady] were telling me stories about computer programing (...) and [he was] talking about the guys that he worked with, and they were fascinating, they were deeply troubled, and we were also working on an idea about a young woman who is going off to the big city to (...) start her life, and there was a moment when we went what if these guys would meet that girl (The Paley Center for Media 2014, 1:07)

The show soon became very popular and was broadcasted in many countries worldwide. According to the critical consensus, it owes much of its success and popularity to the ability to “authentically” portray scientists. As Raewyn Campbell observes, it is a sitcom where “nerdom; the stories; the characters; the background details seem plausible” (Farghaly and Leone 2015, 11). Cooper claims that the show offers a platform for individuals who self-identify as “nerds” or consider themselves to have “nerdy” interests, allowing them to find acceptance and empowerment through narratives and characters that genuinely reflect their experiences (Tanner et al. 2014, 10).

The Big Bang Theory is known for its comic portrayal of the lives of a group of scientists, but the show’s creators and producers have made efforts to ensure that the science presented on the show is accurate. UCLA astrophysicist David Salzbeg played a crucial role in overseeing the science writer for the show, working closely with creators Chuck Lorre and Bill Prady. Salzbeg’s involvement ensured that the show incorporated various scientific concepts, theories, experiments, and mathematical equations from a range of scientific fields, with a particular focus on physics. By integrating these scientific ideas into the show’s regular dialogue, *The Big Bang Theory* aimed to provide accurate scientific information to its audience. Salzbeg revealed that Science magazine gave the

show favourable reviews, indicating that the show's scientific accuracy was recognised by both scientists and non-scientists alike (González and Leal 2010, 9).

The vast majority of the story takes place in Pasadena, California. It features two geeky scientists, Sheldon and Leonard, their neighbour Penny, who works as a waitress in the initial seasons, and their friends, the engineer Howard and astrophysicist Rajesh. Later in the third season, the series introduces Bernadette, Howard's girlfriend, and Amy, Sheldon's romantic interest, who starts to appear in the fifth season.

However, as Farghaly and Leone argue, *The Big Bang Theory* is not merely a show about a few scientists and a waitress or aspiring actress. This sitcom can also be used as a "lens through which to look at and understand society" (2015, 7). It tackles fascinating topics such as sexuality, family, friendship, education, marginalisation and fandom. As an emblematic sitcom, the primary focus in *The Big Bang Theory* is on the topics of sexuality, gender, and race, which are depicted in a humorous way to highlight and ridicule the racial diversity and gender expressions of the central characters. For this reason, *The Big Bang Theory* has been criticised for portraying gender roles and stereotypes (BBC News 2018; Weitekamp 2015, 75; Naresh and Narayanan 2021, 3). The characters in the show are strongly stereotypical; Penny is portrayed as a dumb blond, Rajesh as a stereotypical Indian scientist with a heavy accent, and Howard as an immature Jewish man in his thirties, still living with his mother (Willey and Subramaniam 2017, 15-16).

Critics often emphasize that *The Big Bang Theory* is a contemporary show, but it adheres to traditional gender stereotypes in its portrayal of women characters (Farghaly and Leone 2015, 9). In the beginning female characters are depicted with exaggerated feminine features, regardless of their educational and professional backgrounds. The show perpetuates traditional gender dynamics in relationships, with males being dominant and females being submissive. Additionally, the show suggests there should be a clear separation between the sexes, emotionally and spatially. Carlson mentions that "the show refuses to portray characters as anything other than the thinnest punchlines for the jokes about intelligence and geek culture by refusing complexity and depth in favour of cheap laughs predicated on stereotypes." (Carlson 2015, 97; Turker 2014, 7; Yi and Singh 2019, 519). Carlson also claims that "*The Big Bang Theory* recreates gendered stereotypes, recreating and reinforcing misogynist ideology in every episode's performance of gender" (2015, 98).

This paper intends to moderate such negative critical opinions and demonstrate that, to some extent, gender stereotyping is changing throughout the years in the sitcom. My

argumentation follows Dennin, who states that the female characters in *The Big Bang Theory* break the trend of portraying women in traditional gender roles, with Bernadette and Amy being scientists and Penny exhibiting various masculine traits and occasionally assuming traditionally male gender roles (2021, 261). Thus, throughout the show, the identities of all the characters grow and become more complex.

5.2. WOMAN AND SCIENCE

The Big Bang Theory features several female scientists. This chapter focuses on their portrayal and the typical stereotypes associated with them.

There is a persistent and concerning lack of representation of women in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) fields. The idea that being feminine and pursuing a career in science is incompatible is a well-known problem that adversely affects women (Banchefsky et al. 2016). Therefore, the fact that the show presents women in these fields is already breaking a widespread stereotype. This issue is even discussed in Season 06, Episode 18, “The Contractual Obligation Implementation,” where Sheldon, Leonard, and Howard discuss attracting more women to science careers. Eventually, they decide to have a presentation for young girls in school to encourage them in their scientific studies:

Sheldon: (...) I do not know if women, in general, have been actively discouraged from pursuing the sciences, but it is clear you young women here, today, have been. While I was listening to my colleagues waste your time, it occurred to me that it might be much more meaningful to hear about women in science from actual women in science, and, uh, I happen to know two brilliant examples who have agreed to speak to you on the phone right now. Uh, Dr Rostenkowski and Dr Fowler, are you there? (...)

Amy: It is our pleasure. I am Dr Fowler, and I am a neuroscientist.

Bernadette: And I'm Dr. 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. (Lorre and Prady, 2013, S06E18, 16:15)

Amy highlights that young females are encouraged to care more about how they look than their intelligence, to which Bernadette adds that they can achieve whatever goal they establish for themselves. The show, however, itself belittles the value of this statement, as Amy and Bernadette, together with Penny, are in Disneyland dressed as Disney princesses. The visible excitement from the costumes suggests that, in a way, they sort of desire to be “beautiful princesses” and to look pretty even though they are intelligent and successful scientists (Archer in Farghaly and Leone 2015, 51). So Bernadette and even Amy, in some way, care about their appearance and try to embrace their femininity.

Furthermore, the female characters in the series are primarily involved in the “soft sciences,” like biology or psychology. In contrast, male characters are presented as working in the “hard sciences” like physics or chemistry (Willey and Subramaniam 2017, 15). “Fields with greater representation of women are labelled as ‘soft sciences’ and, consequently, devalued” (Light, Benson-Greenwald, and Diekman 2022, 1). This is also a stereotypical categorization since women in the US are historically underrepresented in the physical sciences, which are considered manly but have a more substantial presence in “more feminine” biosciences (Vetter 1976, 717; Filipova 2017, 2).

Sheldon frequently undermines the importance of microbiology and neuroscience, which are the areas of expertise of Bernadette and Amy, respectively. He considers these fields less significant than physics in their intensity, difficulty, and rigour. Like it is visible in Season 05, Episode 12, “The Shiny Trinket Manoeuvre”, where Amy and Sheldon are on a date after Amy published a paper in a highly distinguished journal:

Sheldon: Oh, I see why you’re confused. No, her news sounded important, but what you’re forgetting is, it was an achievement in the field of biology. That’s all about yucky, squishy things. (Lorre and Prady 2012, S05E12, 3:43)

The show introduces quite a few female scientists. The commonly popular opinion is that scientists are geeks. Regrettably, the geek image is often associated with negative traits such as “poor hygiene, posture, (...), thick black glasses and greasy hair,” and they are often portrayed as highly intelligent but isolated individuals who are detached from society and engrossed in their work (Tintori and Palomba 2017, 11). This stereotype is challenged in the show by Dr Bernadette Maryann Rostenkowski-Wolowitz, a microbiologist who embodies a “hyper-feminized” image of a scientist (Archer in Farghaly

and Leone 2015, 52). Bernadette's appearance is that of a small and adorable girl with lengthy blonde hair and bangs, speaking in a soft, high-pitched voice, with a slender waist and generous chest. She wears flowery dresses with cardigans, tights, low heels, and delicate red glasses instead of black ones (Archer in Farghaly and Leone 2015, 57). However, her career as a scientist is not emphasized much, and she rarely appears in the laboratory, unlike male scientists, such as Leonard, who is frequently shown at work. Bernadette herself often emphasizes her femininity over intelligence in the show (Archer in Farghaly and Leone 2015, 60). In Season 7, Episode 8, Bernadette expresses her excitement about participating in an article about the 50 sexiest female scientists, and her friends have contrasting opinions about it:

Bernadette: (...) Anyway, I was asked to be a part of a magazine article about the 50 sexiest female scientists in California. Isn't that cool?

Amy: I think it is awful.

Penny: Why would you say that?

Amy: Bernadette is a successful microbiologist. She should be celebrated for her achievements, not her looks. I mean, what kind of message does that send?

Penny: I think the message is to check out the rack on that scientist.

Bernadette: Why can't someone be thought of as both smart and pretty?

Amy: I just don't think a professional woman should have to flaunt her sexuality in order to get ahead.

Penny: Okay, what's the big deal? Look, if it helps me make a sale with a physician, I don't think it hurts to flirt a little. I mean, laugh at their joke, touch their arm, and maybe crank up the AC in the car beforehand, you know, to wake up the girls.

Amy: Maybe it's different in the world of sales, but it's already hard enough for women to be taken seriously in science.

Bernadette: I was kind of excited about the article, but now you're making me feel bad. (Lorre and Prady 2014, S08E07, 0:28)

During the discussion about whether Bernadette's right or wrong to participate in an article about the 50 sexiest female scientists, Amy disapproves of the project, stating that Bernadette should be celebrated for her achievements as a successful microbiologist, not for her body. Amy also points out that it is already difficult for women to be taken

seriously in science. They may feel pressured to suppress their femininity to be respected in their field (Banchefsky et al. 2016, 96). However, in this scene, Penny supports the sexist stereotype that women achieve success through sexual attractiveness (Murnen and Byrne 1991, 481) by suggesting that her sexuality helps her with sales. Bernadette challenges the stereotype that intelligence and attractiveness are incompatible (Webster and Driskell 1983, 20). However, she eventually feels uncomfortable with the emphasis on her appearance, as she believes it detracts from her accomplishments as a microbiologist.

A similar approach represents a one-episode character Dr Elizabeth Plimpton, a beautiful cosmological physicist. In Season 03, Episode 21, “The Plimpton Stimulation,” there is not much emphasis on Dr Plimpton’s professional accomplishments, even though Sheldon describes her as one of the “great minds of the 21st century” (Lorre and Prady, 2010, S03E21, 5:23). Nevertheless, much more space is given to her femininity and “nymphomania” as she is romantically interested in Leonard and uses her beauty and sex appeal rather than her intelligence in seduction. However, Leonard is currently reading her book and is interested in it:

Elizabeth: Yeah, I just couldn’t sleep.

Leonard: Me neither. Oh, look what I’m reading. It’s you. (...)

Elizabeth: I wrote the section on the Wilson-Bappu Effect completely naked.

Leonard: Really? Uh, sure doesn’t read that way.

Elizabeth: Here, let me show you. When we consider the brightness of pulsating variable stars, we start to see [removes robe] a possible explanation for some of the discrepancies found in Hubble’s constant. (Lorre and Prady 2010, S03E21, 10:10)

In this scene, there is a demonstration of emphasizing Dr Plimpton’s femininity and instinctual needs over her intelligence (Archer in Farghaly and Leone 2015, 52). Later in the episode, after she has sex with Leonard, she sees Raj and Howard and tries to have sex with them.

On the other hand, the show also represents a female scientist’s “hyper-rational” model. An example of a hyper-rational scientist is the supporting character of Leslie Winkle. Although her field of study is not in “soft science” but experimental physicist, she represents another stereotype. Leslie is the complete opposite of the feminine portrayal of a woman. She wears big black glasses, messy curly hair, and unfashionable boy clothes consisting of a hoodie and pants. She portrays stereotypical traits of a scientist – socially

awkward, highly intelligent, rational and unemotional since women who partake in scientific fields are typically depicted as unattractive and emotionally deficient (Tintori and Palomba 2017). This is well demonstrated in Season 01, Episode 03, where Leonard comes to Lesley to propose starting their intimate relationship with a date. Lesley does not want to waste her time. She asks Leonard if he agrees “that the primary way we would evaluate either the success or failure of the date would be based on the bio-chemical reaction during the goodnight kiss” (Lorre, Prady 2007, S01E03, 6:24). They eventually decide to go straight to the kiss so they would find out if their relationship would work. The whole situation is portrayed as an experiment:

Lesley: Well, why don't we just stipulate that the date goes well and move to the key variable?

Leonard: You mean, kiss you now?

Lesley: Yes.

Leonard: Can you define the parameters of the kiss?

Lesley: Closed mouth but romantic. Mint?

Leonard: Thank you. [Takes mint]. Shall I count down from three?

Lesley: No, I think it needs to be spontaneous. [They kiss.]

Lesley: What do you think?

Leonard: You proposed the experiment; I think you should present your findings first.

Lesley: Fair enough. On the plus side, it was a good kiss, reasonable technique, no extraneous spittle. On the other hand, no arousal.

Leonard: None?

Lesley: None.

Leonard: Ah. Well, thank you for your time.

Lesley: Thank you. [They shake hands. Leonard leaves.] (Lorre and Prady 2007, S01E03, 6:35)

This scene demonstrates Leslie's “cold” approach, since even though a kiss is intimate, she ultimately acts rationally and without any emotions in this situation, and her behaviour is purely rational.

Neurobiologist Dr Amy Farrah Fowler is another example of the stereotypical image of a scientist portrayed in the show. From her first appearance in the show, Amy

goes through significant changes. Initially, she dresses in baggy knee-length skirts, dark tights, t-shirts, and sweaters or cardigans and speaks a reasonably flat, robotic tone. Her appearance includes dark, straight, and long hair, dark glasses, and an unstylish demeanour (Willey and Subramaniam 2017, 20). She often misunderstands social cues and does not realize when she is making inappropriate comments. One scene that highlights her social awkwardness is when she is supposed to engage in “girl talk” with Penny and Bernadette but instead talks about her lady parts, leaving them in shock (Lorre and Prady 2010, S04E08, 07:00). Overall, Amy is portrayed as unattractive. However, she does not seem bothered by this fact throughout the show, and she appreciates her intelligence until the show’s last episode, where she sees her picture on the Internet:

Amy: [crying in the bathroom]

Raj: Hey, what’s wrong?

Amy: My picture’s all over the Internet, and I look terrible.

Raj: No. Let me see. Well, that is an unfortunate angle. But who cares? You just won the Nobel. You should be proud of this moment.

Amy: I know I shouldn’t care about my appearance, and I never thought I did. It- It’s stupid and shallow, but I just can’t help it.

Amy: Am I really this frumpy?

Raj: No. No, you are a beautiful woman. By the way, if you’re not happy with those pictures, then make some changes. Get a haircut, new clothes, new glasses, big glasses... (Lorre and Prady 2019, S12E23, 8:50)

After Raj gives her a makeover, Amy also breaks the stereotype of an unattractive scientist, even though, at the moment, she is more interested in her looks in the photo and the fact that she won the Nobel Prize, which implies that she also wants people to think she is pretty, which she criticized in Bernadette when she was chosen for the 50 Sexiest Women Scientists article. During the show, Amy’s character develops from a brilliant and successful but unattractive, awkward, unemotional scientist to a fashionable and more-or-less socially skilled Nobel Prize winner.

A similar situation occurs with a doctor of neuroscience, Beverly Hofstadter. She is Leonard’s mother, working as a psychotherapist, who also wears big glasses and dresses in serious business suits of dark colour. She is emotionally distanced, talking in a monotonous voice showing almost no emotions and being cold even to her son. She is

staying in touch with Sheldon, and she seems to enjoy his company more as he can intelligently come closer to her than her son Leonard whom she considers unsuccessful and a kind of disappointment (Lorre and Prady 2009, S03E11). She talks in a monotonous robotic voice, mostly giving an open and inappropriate psychological analysis of Leonard and his friends. She does not validate Leonard and is not proud of her kids in general. When Beverly talks about the successes of her children, Howard says she must be very proud:

Howard: Wow, you must be very proud.

Beverley: Why? They're not my accomplishments. I have to urinate. (Lorre and Prady 2009, S02E15, 8:45)

After this conversation, Leonard is excited to show her his work, and a similar conversation follows:

Leonard: (...) I think you'll find my work pretty interesting. I'm attempting to replicate the dark matter signal found in sodium iodide crystals by the Italians.

Beverley: So, no original research?

Leonard: No.

Beverley: Well, what's the point of my seeing it? I could just read the paper the Italians wrote. (Lorre and Prady 2009, S02E15, 11:05)

She cannot appreciate Leonard for his work or show any signs of emotions, as Leonard described for Penny when he was ten; he built a hugging machine:

Penny: A hugging machine?

Leonard: Yeah. I got a dressmaker's mannequin, stuffed it with an electric blanket so it would be warm, and built two radio-controlled arms to hug me and pat my back.

Penny: Oh, that is so sad.

Leonard: You know what the saddest part was?

Penny: What?

Leonard: My father used to borrow it. (Lorre and Prady 2009, S02E15, 13:45)

The show occasionally breaks stereotypes about female scientists insofar as almost all the women the show presents over time are at least partially active in academic fields. Despite their different backgrounds and experiences, these women share a common focus on their professional identities and intellectual achievements. Whether through a Nobel Prize win or intellectual stimulation, their dedication to their fields is a significant aspect of their lives.

On the other hand, the show emphasizes the femininity and sexuality of Bernadette and Dr Plimpton. It indicates that pretty women have difficulties being taken seriously publicly and in scientific circles. Furthermore, the series depicts Bernadette and Dr Plimpton as attractive women with a sense of fashion and a developed social sense. This is contrary to the idea that women in STEM fields may feel unable to express their femininity through traditional means, such as wearing a skirt or showing emotions, because they fear that doing so will make them appear unsuitable for their profession. Studies by Hewlett and colleagues (2008) and Pronin and colleagues (2004) have documented these experiences. One tech company launched a recruitment campaign to attract more engineers using posters featuring photos of their employees. Unfortunately, the campaign was met with scepticism by some who found it hard to believe that an attractive woman could be a “real engineer” (as cited in Banchevsky et al. 2016, 95).

However, a closer analysis of this series in the area of stereotypical portrayal of women in science shows certain negative stereotyping since female scientists are often penalized by their feminine portrayal. Bernadette is portrayed as a woman who cares more about her appearance than her job position. Dr Plimpton is portrayed as a sex-hungry “nymphomaniac.” Her scientific career is not given any screen time in the episode’s subtext, although Sheldon calls her one of the greatest minds of modern times. Other female scientists are depicted as not very attractive and struggling with regular social interaction. These stereotypical portrayals continue to be projected throughout the show. The only development we see is that of Amy, who becomes more adept at social skills throughout the series and is interested in changing her appearance.

5.3. THE DUMB BLOND STEREOTYPE

For many years, the stereotype of the “dumb blonde” has been a prevalent and persistent image in popular culture. The most well-known hair colour stereotype mainly suggests that women with blonde hair are less intelligent or ditzy. Studies have also found that blondes are commonly assumed to be more fun-loving, flirtatious, and happy (Synnott 1987, 387). One woman shared her thoughts on this stereotype in the *New York Times* (18.10.86), saying that for her, being blonde meant being sexy and happy (as cited in Synnott 1987, 387). This stereotype also characterizes blonds as women with an attractive physique, childlike naiveté, and a hint of sex appeal (Bartyzel 2000, 33).

The stereotype of a dumb blond has a lengthy past of appearing as lead actors in popular media such as movies and TV series (Inness 2007, 2). It is widespread in many American sitcoms. For example, in the TV series *2 Broke Girls*, a blond waitress is often portrayed as being somewhat ditzy. However, she has a college degree, is enterprising and has her “bright” moments. In a sitcom from 1970, *Three’s Company*, a blonde character named Chrissy Snow is portrayed as sweet and ditzy. Chrissy is often the subject of jokes and misunderstandings.

Another example can be the role of Kandi, a brunette still portrayed as “ditzy blond” and shallow in the American TV sitcom *Two and a Half Men*. Kandi is often the subject of jokes and sexual innuendos, and the male characters frequently question her intelligence since she is foolish and mostly clueless. In all these series, the stereotype of the ditzy blonde appears; nevertheless, the characters are not developing from these characteristics. In *The Big Bang Theory*, the character of a “dumb blond” stands out since she is situated in a science environment. The characterization of Penny as a waitress at The Cheesecake Factory reinforces the prejudiced idea that her skills and abilities are limited, in contrast to her male peers who work as engineers and astrophysicists. However, her role in the show is changing throughout the seasons.

In this chapter, the character of Penny and Bernadette from *The Big Bang Theory* will be described since they are both blond and “dumb” in their ways. Penny conforms to traditional and modern beauty standards associated with white beauty by having long, styled hair, wearing high heels and tight clothing, and enhancing her appearance through hairstyling. This results in a polished, refined look that exudes beauty and elegance, putting these features equal to being less intelligent (Synnott 1987, 386). Her naivety is immediately apparent in Season 01, Episode 01, “Pilot,” when Sheldon and

Leonard invite a new neighbour who just moved in; when Leonard asks her to tell them about herself, Penny replies, “I’m Sagittarius, which probably tells you way more than you need to know.” (Lorre and Prady 2007, S01E01, 9:13) This creates the first impression of Penny that she is foolish and participates in the mass cultural delusion that “the Sun’s apparent position relative to arbitrarily defined constellations and the time of her birth somehow affects her personality” (Lorre and Prady 2007, S01E01, 9:22), as is in turn mentioned by Sheldon. The fact that Penny reads horoscopes is considered somewhat “stupid” by both men. However, Penny believes the predictions and finds them amusing.

Penny, however, is not outright unintelligent; she is just less educated and more careless and naïve, which stands out in a group of scientists since she does not have the same academic interests and does not understand the terms of that field. Likewise, she is very reckless and naive regarding their problems, especially from the beginning of the series, because her friends and boyfriends are also of this nature, as is seen from the conversation below, where Zack (Penny’s boyfriend) is participating in an experiment of the scientific friends:

Zack: One question. How can you be sure it won’t blow up?

Leonard: The laser?

Zack: The moon.

Sheldon: See, now this is a man for Penny. (Lorre and Prady 2007, S03E23, 4:25)

At the show’s beginning, Penny is often marginalized and undervalued by the male characters, who often dismiss Penny’s opinions because of her perceived lack of intelligence; a good example is where Sheldon notes above that a man who thinks they will blow up the moon is the right for Penny. But Penny herself is developing since she sees herself that Zack is stupid, and she accuses Leonard that he “destroyed her ability to tolerate idiots” (Lorre and Prady 2010, S03E23, 8:34).

Another portrayal of Penny as a dumb blond is visible when other characters are talking about science or some scientific matter is concerned. For example, in Season 06, Episode 05, “The Holographic Excitation,” where Bernadette suggests that Penny should be more interested in Leonard’s work. As Penny wants to know something about Leonard’s work, she asks him about various devices that catch her attention in the laboratory; one is a nitrogen laser that Penny wants to take a closer look at. However, Leonard warns her not to approach it and tells her, “It’ll cook your eyeball like a soft-

boiled egg”. In this situation, Penny is portrayed negatively as a stupid blonde because she does not understand the devices in Leonard’s laboratory nor how they work; in addition, Penny does not even see the danger sign on one of the devices and wants to try and touch it immediately because she feels that it will be entertainment. After asking Leonard about other things, she finally asks about a simple pencil sharpener, further reinforcing her ditzy character’s portrayal. When Leonard decides to show her exactly what he is working on, Penny is unable to have a meaningful conversation about his project:

Leonard: (...) It’s a front-projected holographic display combined with laser-based finger tracking. Here, I’ll show you. We’ll just put this pencil over here.

Penny: Sharp. Thanks to the machine we saw earlier. (Lorre and Prady 2012, S06E05, 7:07)

Also, during the TV show, Penny is alerted by various characters (often Sheldon) about the engine light in their car. However, Penny does not bother with this warning and either reassure their fellow diners that everything is fine and does not worry about this problem any further; this behaviour can also be described as stereotypical because, as Takeda et al. suggest, blondes are often perceived as very careless (2005, 1):

Sheldon: Your check engine light is on. (...) Typically, that’s an indicator to, you know, check your engine.

Penny: It’s fine; it’s been on for, like, a month. (Lorre and Prady 2008, S02E05, 3:07)

Several episodes later, Penny informs Sheldon that she is unable to pay her rent due to her car breaking down and the repair costs being exorbitant:

Sheldon: If you recall, I pointed out the “check engine” light to you several months ago.

Penny: Well, the “check engine” light is fine. It’s still blinking away. It’s the stupid engine that stopped working. (Lorre and Prady 2009, S02E14, 3:10)

Penny is negatively portrayed in this scene since she did not connect the light control to the actual issue with the car; furthermore, she is overlooking this problem for

several months and does not attach any importance to it. Later in Season 03, Episode 11, “The Maternal Congruence,” when Leonard’s mother Beverly points this out, Penny carelessly replies, “I gotta put a sticker over that.” A few episodes later, Penny comes to Sheldon again with car trouble – the car does not start, and she has to get to work, but this time she is out of gas. He humiliates her in front of Dr Plimpton, which puts their two ladies in an unpleasant perspective as Sheldon introduces them:

Sheldon: Did you once again ignore your check engine light?

Penny: No, Mr. Smarty-pants. I ignored the fill gas tank light. (...)

Sheldon: Oh, Penny, this is Dr Plimpton, a leading expert on quantum cosmology. Dr Plimpton, Penny is a waitress who does not understand the role gasoline plays in the internal combustion engine. (Lorre and Prady 2010, S03E21, 12:43)

In this scene, it is also visible that Penny’s vocabulary is very distant from the rest of the group, for example, by using the term “smarty-pants”, which is informal, and she constantly refers to someone (especially Sheldon) as “sweetie”. Thus, another negative portrayal of Penny arises from her use of language and ignorance of scientific terms.

In the later seasons, after spending enough time with her new intelligent friends, Penny also gets the need to educate herself, so in Season 06, she decides to return to college and take some history classes. Penny is given the assignment to write an essay, and when she shows it to Leonard, he not only criticizes it but also secretly makes corrections, which infuriates Penny. As a result, she begins to feel insecure about her writing skills. To overcome this feeling, she turns to her female friends for help. They assist her in rewriting the essay, but Penny receives a B-minus grade. Although she is somewhat disappointed, the grade also serves as a motivation for her to strive for better results in the future:

Penny: Now, ladies, we got a B-minus on this paper. I think if we put our heads together on the next one, we could get an A.

Bernadette: Uh, but we got you a B-minus on purpose to make it believable. (Lorre and Prady, 2012, S06E06, 19:08)

The way Bernadette responds shows how much Penny’s intelligence and academic abilities are being underestimated by everyone, even though she tries to educate herself. Penny is often seen as a person who is limited to discussions around stereotypical feminine

topics like sex, wine, and gossip and cannot have a quality talk about serious academic topics. This highlights the gendered expectations and constraints placed upon her character.

Penny makes several attempts to appear intelligent, as she feels that her intellect is inferior to the other group members. In one instance, in Season 06, Episode 12: “The Egg Salad Equivalency,” Penny excitedly tells Leonard that she explored the science classes in the course catalogue but ultimately found them boring and didn’t enrol. Despite this, she still manages to come up with a “clever” idea:

Penny: (...) I decided I don’t need to be a scientist; I could just look like one. So I bought these.

Leonard: Glasses? I really don’t think that’s gonna change [Penny puts glasses on]... oh, my God, you look so smart and hot.

Penny: I know, right? Watch this. Molecules [puts glasses on her nose]. (Lorre and Prady, 2012, S06E12, 20:12)

However, it is important to note that Penny’s character is evolving throughout the seasons. As Lorre himself says:

One of the most underwritten characters in the show early on was Penny. It was really obvious immediately that we hadn’t developed the character beyond the pretty girl next door, and Kaley was certainly capable of doing a great deal more than what was asked of her. We had to make the character more fully realized. Not just for an episode, but always. [Over time] Penny had an intelligence about people, about relationships, and about sussing out a situation and understanding the dynamics of what’s going on in a room. (Pappa, 2023)

The show, therefore, started to challenge Penny’s negative characteristics by showcasing her emotional intelligence and common sense. The show often depicts the “geeky” characters as socially challenged and lacking in practical knowledge, thus seeking advice from Penny on everyday matters.

The dumb blond stereotype develops significantly during the show. Eventually, Penny becomes slightly more educated. Sheldon often tries to help her, for example, in Series 03, Episode 10, “The Gorilla Experiment,” where Penny asks him to teach her

something from physics. In Series 09, Episode 23, “The Line Substitution Solution,” they play a picture game where Penny guesses terms, people and other things from physics and Sheldon guesses celebrities and other trivia that Penny is interested in. Thanks to Sheldon and other friends from the group, Penny starts to orient herself better in the physics field, even though she is not always entirely sure what the knowledge means. For example, when Penny regrets breaking up with Leonard and confesses to Raj, who replies that “to paraphrase Shakespeare, It’s better to have loved and lost than to stay home every night and download increasingly shameful pornography” (Lorre and Prady 2011, S04E24, 16:20), to which Penny responds:

Penny: (...) If we weren’t friends, and you hadn’t brought up that creepy pornography story, I’d be on you like the speed of light squared on matter to make energy.

Raj: Hey, you totally got that right! E equals MC squared.

Penny: I listen. I have no idea what it means, but I listen. (Lorre and Prady 2011, S04E24, 16:37)

Here Penny names a well-known physics equation but adds that she has no idea what it means. Nevertheless, even here, it can be seen that she tries to educate herself and listens to what her friends are talking about. She is able to reproduce some of the things, unlike in the earlier series, when she did not understand or even pronounce the word neurobiologist. In Season 03, Episode 10, “The Gorilla Experiment,” Penny repeats what Sheldon tells her in the “Pilot” episode:

Penny: Oh no, no, you see, in the winter, that seat is close enough to the radiator so that he’s warm, yet not so close that he sweats. In the summer, it’s directly in the path of a cross-breeze created by opening windows there and there. It faces the television at an angle that isn’t direct, so he can still talk to everybody, yet not so wide that the picture looks distorted.

Sheldon Cooper: Perhaps there’s hope for you after all. (Lorre and Prady 2009, S03E10, 1:40)

This shows that Penny is not only an emotionally intelligent person since she respects Sheldon's obsession with "his spot" but also she has a good memory as she remembers and can reproduce all the detailed benefits Sheldon said to her in the "Pilot" episode.

The show depicts Penny's insecurities in her relationship with Leonard, which arise from her belief that she is not as intellectually competent as him. This lack of confidence is evident in her struggles to understand Leonard's work and participate in his academic discussions. In the episode called "The Gorilla Experiment," Penny expresses her sadness over her inability to understand Leonard's work, leaving her with the feeling that she has nothing to discuss with him. Desperate to bridge the gap in her knowledge, Penny turns to Sheldon for help, and he takes it upon himself to educate Penny about Leonard's work. After a long process of Sheldon telling unnecessary facts from physics, he eventually explains the concepts to her in a simple and easy-to-understand manner, which helps her grasp the fundamentals of the field. So this time Penny has a chance to manifest her freshly gained knowledge:

Leonard: I'm glad you enjoyed it. Most people aren't that interested in what I do.

Penny: Actually, that's not true, Leonard. In fact, recently, I've been thinking that given the parameters of your experiment, the transport of electrons through the aperture of the nano-fabricated metal rings is qualitatively no different than the experiment already conducted in the Netherlands. Their observed phase shift in the diffusing electrons inside the metal ring already conclusively demonstrated the electric analogue of the Aharonov-Bohm quantum-interference effect. That's it. That's all I know. Oh, wait! Fig Newtons were named after a town in Massachusetts, not the scientist. (Lorre and Prady 2009, S03E10, 20:10)

In later episodes, in a surprising turn of events, Penny defeats Leonard in a chess game despite never having played it before. During the game, it becomes evident that Penny is not familiar with the proper names of the chess pieces, as she refers to them as "lighthouse" and "pointy-head guy." Despite her lack of knowledge of the game, Penny demonstrates an innate ability to strategize and think ahead. She surprises Leonard with her moves and ultimately checkmates him, leaving him shocked and impressed:

Penny: So, if I move my horsey here... Isn't that checkmate and I win? (...) Well, is it or isn't it?

Leonard: You know, I think this is a good stopping point. Uh... it's your first real game; I threw a lot of information at you...

Penny: Well, no, I mean, your king is trapped. He can't go here because of my lighthouse, and he can't go here because of my pointy-head guy. (Lorre and Prady 2012, S05E18, 8:52)

In this scenario, Leonard expresses his surprise upon learning that Penny could defeat him in a game of chess. While chess is known to be an intellectual game, Leonard's surprise stems from his perception of Penny as someone who is not as intellectually inclined as he or his friends. However, Penny's victory proves otherwise, as it showcases her intellectual progress and natural ability to learn and excel in new challenges. Despite having no experience in playing chess, Penny defeated Leonard by utilizing her strategic thinking and problem-solving skills.

In the eighth series, she starts working as a pharmaceutical salesperson (Season 08, Episode 01, "The Locomotion Interruption"), understands her duties, and becomes very successful in her job. In the final episodes of Season 9, Penny makes significant strides in breaking free from the "dumb blonde" stereotype assigned to her. She takes control of her life by enrolling in history and psychology courses to pursue her intellectual interests and advance her professional goals. Furthermore, Penny overcomes her self-doubt about her relationship with Leonard and decides to commit to him by agreeing to marry him. This significant milestone in her personal life reflects her growth and development as a character, as she no longer engages in short-lived romantic relationships or casual sex. Penny's decision to prioritize her relationship with Leonard demonstrates her emotional maturity and commitment to building a stable and long-lasting partnership.

In Season 11, Episode 12 of *The Big Bang Theory*, "The Solo Oscillation," Penny demonstrates her highly developed emotional intelligence compared to the rest of the group. In a conversation with Sheldon, she senses his sadness and reaches out to him to offer her help. Sheldon is feeling down because he is unable to come up with a solution to the string theory problem. Penny's empathetic response and desire to support Sheldon showcase her emotional maturity and sensitivity to the feelings of others. Although it may initially seem that Penny does not have the necessary expertise to assist Sheldon in solving a complex physics problem, she is still determined to help him in any way she can. She

tries to understand the problem and explore potential solutions, even though the subject matter is outside of her area of expertise. Her determination to assist Sheldon highlights Penny's growth as a character, as she demonstrates a willingness to step outside of her comfort zone and engage in activities that challenge her intellectually.

Bernadette's character is portrayed as a highly accomplished microbiologist. However, a recurring stereotype surrounds her as a "dumb blonde" scientist (Archer in Farghaly and Leone 2015, 37). Unlike Penny, Bernadette's lack of prudence and perceived "stupidity" remains consistent throughout the series. This behaviour gains prominence in Season 04 when her character becomes more important, further reinforcing the image of the "ditz blonde." Interestingly, like Penny, Bernadette sometimes does not get the jokes that others make.

Episode 10 of Season 03 highlights Bernadette's attitude towards her serious job in microbiology. She casually remarks that if she had not pursued a career in science, she would have chosen to become an ice dancer. This comment suggests that she may not place great value on her scientific profession and would prefer something more thrilling and enjoyable, such as ice dancing; furthermore, she is putting it right next to physics on the same level:

Bernadette: (...) If I hadn't gone into microbiology, I probably would have gone into physics. Or ice dancing (Lorre and Prady 2009, S03E10, 3:24).

There are instances in the series where Bernadette's actions further perpetuate the perception of her as a less competent scientist. In Season 04, Episode 05, she and her colleagues accidentally create a super virus but then lose track of it. Additionally, in Season 04, Episode 11, she consumes Jelly-O shots from contaminated petri dishes infected with yellow fever. In Season 07, Episode 06, "The Romance Resonance," Bernadette finds herself in quarantine, likely due to her exposure to a contagious disease or a laboratory mishap. This incident reinforces the notion that her lack of caution and oversight in her scientific endeavours:

Howard: Oh, my God, Bernie, what happened?

Bernadette: Well, let's just say the next time you move a dozen vials of raccoon virus to the fridge, make two trips. (Lorre and Prady 2013, S07E06, 12:41)

Regrettably, as Archer notes, the media often portrays blonde women as either beautiful or intelligent, rarely both. If they possess both traits, they are often burdened with unrealistic flaws as a form of punishment. Bernadette's character in the show perpetuates this detrimental stereotype, despite her academic accomplishments and professional success (Archer in Farghaly and Leone 2015, 31)

5.4. REVERSED GENDER ROLE WITHIN A FAMILY

The TV show depicts an interesting reversed gender role, particularly noticeable in the dynamics between Penny and Leonard and between Howard and Bernadette. At the beginning of the series, Penny and Leonard's relationship reflects typical gender stereotypes, mainly in financial differences. Leonard is often portrayed as the breadwinner and provider, paying for Penny's meals and drinks, while Penny works as a waitress at the Cheesecake Factory and struggles with financial issues and her unsuccessful acting career:

[Leonard distributes food to everyone and tells them how much they owe him]

Penny: Thank you, Leonard. What's my share?

Leonard: Don't worry about it. It's my treat.

Penny: No, really, how much?

Leonard: It's whatever. Ten, eleven dollars.

Penny: Well, which is it, ten or eleven?

Leonard: Fourteen-fifty, but it's no biggie, you'll get the next one. [Raj whispers something to Howard]

Penny: What?

Howard: He was just wondering if he wore skintight jeans and a tank top if he'd get his shrimp lo mein for free.

Penny: What are you saying? That I'm using my body to get dinner? That I'm some kind of Chinese food prostitute? (Lorre and Prady 2009, S02E14, 7:55)

In Season 04, Episode 02, "The Cruciferous Vegetable Amplification," the friends have lunch again, and Penny does not have enough money to pay Leonard for her meal. Leonard has paid for her in the past since he considered himself the breadwinner in the relationship. However, Penny and Leonard are in their on-and-off relationship currently broken up, and Leonard tells Penny that since they are not together anymore, he will not be

paying for her all the time. Unfortunately, Penny has no cash, so Leonard still pays for her lunch. When he asks her how she can walk around without money, Penny answers, “I’m cute. I get by.” (Lorre and Prady 2010, S04E02, 3:49).

These situations reflect a hyper-feminine stereotypical concept which suggests a woman’s success depends on her ability to establish and sustain a romantic relationship with a man and that her sexual attractiveness is her main asset in such a relationship, as described by Murnen and Byrne in 1991. This is even highlighted by Raj, who comments on this situation “if I had woman parts, I’d eat for free the rest of my life” (Lorre and Prady 2010, S04E02, 3:35). The same concept Penny uses in later seasons when she works as a seller of pharmaceuticals. Penny mentions multiple times in the show that she uses her sexuality to help her with the sales (Lorre and Prady 2014, S08E07, 1:06). In the same episode; she reveals she hides her wedding ring and purposely chooses her wardrobe so that she has a better chance of selling medicines to her male clients.

In the later seasons, the role changes as Penny works as a pharmaceutical seller, earning a decent amount of money through this job, and the role of the breadwinner belongs to her. However, Penny is still seen as hyper-feminine in Season 10, Episode 06, “The Foetal Kick Catalyst,” although the image is not created directly by herself this time. At the Comic Con, a fan comes to Penny and wants a photo of him and her kissing; Leonard reveals that he is Penny’s husband. Suddenly every man at the Comic-Con assumes that Leonard must be rich since he is nerdy and not very attractive – he describes himself at one point as a “short, asthmatic scientist” (Lorre and Prady 2015, S8E20, 15:35). The public assumption is that Penny is a beautiful woman, so she must have married him for the money (Lorre and Prady 2015, S8E20, 16:04). However, Leonard responds by saying proudly that “She makes more money than I do” (Lorre and Prady 2015, S8E20, 16:05). This shows that Penny has become the breadwinner in their family, which is a departure from the earlier episodes where Leonard paid for her meals.

Leonard, however, was not always as reconciled to Penny’s role as breadwinner as he is in this scene. As the gender roles changed with Penny getting a new job as a pharmaceutical salesperson, she started to earn a significant amount of money. Throughout the show, Penny is portrayed as a college dropout and Leonard as a scientist with a PhD in experimental physics, but despite Leonard’s accomplishments, she makes double the salary. Leonard was not okay with this situation at the beginning since he felt like his manhood was threatened, and also because Leonard studied hard to achieve his goals:

Leonard: I'm just trying to protect you. How many times did I see you get your heart broken trying to make it as an actress?

Penny: Okay, instead of protecting me, why don't you try being excited when something good happens?

Leonard: I'm always excited for you. I'm excited that you found this new job where you're making decent money.

Penny: Decent? I make twice what you make. (Lorre and Prady 2015, S8E20 12:13) (...)

Penny: Leonard, why are you making such a big deal out of this? So our roles have changed a bit over the last couple years. This is the way life is. And I'm sure in time they'll change again.

Leonard: Great, you're not only more successful than me, now you're more mature. (Lorre and Prady 2015, S8E20, 15:25)

Another atypical situation is that Penny does not want kids, which is mentioned throughout the series, for example, in Season 12, Episode 03, where Penny speaks with Bernadette:

Penny: I get that. You know, I've been thinking lately that maybe I don't want kids. (...)

Bernadette: Are you crazy? Of course you want them. It's amazing.

Penny: You just said they ruin everything.

Bernadette: I'm allowed to. It's their fault I pee when I laugh.

Penny: Hang on, why is it crazy to say I might not want kids?

Bernadette: It's not crazy. It's just wrong. You only think you don't want kids, but once you have kids, you'll realise that you did want them.

Penny: Or I don't want them, so I won't have them, so back off.

Bernadette: Aw, you sound just like me before I became a mom and learned what the meaning of love was. (Lorre and Prady 2018, S12E03, 6.45)

This situation breaks a certain stereotype about women since “for women, not having children may be viewed as a non-traditional social role because they are stereotypically associated with the childrearing process” (Iverson, Lindsay, and MacInnis 2020, 720) and viewed as naturally nurturing (Sng, Williams, and Neuberg 2016, 21).

Penny argues that she is happy and “not everyone needs to have kids to be fulfilled” (Lorre and Prady 2018, S12E03, 7:34). This is in contrast with Leonard’s belief, who is portrayed in the first episode as wanting children and very much looking forward to the role of a father since the first episode of Season 01 where he mentions that their “babies will be smart and beautiful” (Lorre and Prady 2007, S01E01, 21:27). Men envision having a traditional family consisting of themselves and their biological children, but they usually have doubts and conflicting feelings about becoming parents and whether they are prepared for it (Sylvest et al. 2018, 1). Therefore, Leonard breaks this stereotype. When he finds out that Penny might not be interested in having kids, he is worried that he “might be the last of the Hofstadter line” (Lorre and Prady 2018, S12E03, 12:00). Such a portrayal of Leonard remains the same throughout the show; nevertheless, Penny’s opinion of kids changes since it is revealed at the end of the show that she is expecting a baby.

A similarly reversed situation occurs between Howard and Bernadette. In the show’s early seasons, Bernadette works at the Cheesecake Factory to support herself financially while finishing her degree in microbiology, which makes Howard the one with a bigger salary and the breadwinner of the family. Nevertheless, after earning her doctorate in the last episode of the fourth season, she is offered a lucrative job at the flourishing company ZanGen Pharmaceuticals. Bernadette is proud of and excited, but Howard is not enthusiastic about it since it means she will make more money than him. He feels ashamed since this makes Bernadette the breadwinner in their relationship (Archer in Farghaly and Leone 2015, 57), a role that was traditionally assigned to men (Rupp 1981, 275-277):

Howard: So, do you know what kind of research you’ll be doing at this pharmaceutical company?

Bernadette: Well, there are a couple of opportunities available, but I volunteered for the premature ejaculation project. I mean, it’s not like either one of us has heart disease. Oh, I almost forgot. I got you a little present.

Howard: Oh, Bernie, no. You didn’t have to.

Bernadette: I wanted to. Come on, open it.

Howard: You bought me a Rolex? How much did this cost?

Bernadette: Oh, you let me worry about the money. I just want my baby to have pretty things. (Lorre and Prady 2011, S04E24, 13:47)

After this conversation, Bernadette and Howard argue. According to Parson and Bales (1955) and Goode (1963), as cited in Giele (2008, 1), in the past, women were only expected to be homemakers, even though this began to change in the early twentieth century as women began to work outside of the home and also take on the role of the provider, the husband was still seen as the primary authority in the family. This excerpt shows Bernadette as the breadwinner, which Howard is very uncomfortable with. In this scene, Bernadette not only destroys Howard's manhood by giving him an expensive present which symbolises her significant salary but also by implying he has a problem with "premature ejaculation." Later, Howard receives an allowance from Bernadette, which is mentioned, for example, at the end of Season 9 (Lorre and Prady 2016, S09E16, 6:47). Thus, it is obvious who has the breadwinner role in the family.

Nevertheless, like Penny, Bernadette's dream was not always to start a family. Bernadette's successful career has caused her to become more career-oriented, leading to a new issue in her relationship with Howard. In this relationship, Bernadette is not portrayed stereotypically; she is quite the opposite since she lacks maternal instincts besides her main interest in her career. This is atypical because women are often perceived as less competent in the workforce. Their work commitment is considered a lower and less significant factor due to their caregiving responsibilities, affecting the performance criteria used to judge the profession (Kuchařová and Retter 1999, 184).

However, in the later season, this is not the case for Bernadette, who is eager to climb the career ladder. Bernadette evolves during the seasons from a cute and humble waitress to a very successful and ambitious woman who knows what she wants and ignores what other people think of her. In Episode 12, of Season 05, "The Shiny Trinket Manoeuvre," Howard is excited to perform a magic show at the birthday party of his little cousin and suggests Bernadette may be his assistant, but she does not seem interested. When Howard confronts her about her lack of enthusiasm, she reveals that she is uncomfortable around children, which upsets Howard, who expresses his desire to have children (Lorre and Prady 2012, S05E12, 6:44). Bernadette shows no interest in becoming a mother by saying, "Right when it's our kid that's ruined my body and kept me up all night, and I've got no career and no future and nothing to be happy about for the next 20 years, sure, that'll be completely different" (Lorre and Prady 2012, S05E12, 10:13). Eventually, when Bernadette and Howard are doing a magic performance at a birthday party, she is not very friendly with the children, which makes Howard significantly disheartened.

Later in the episode, Bernadette introduces an innovative solution that breaks the traditional stereotype: Howard stays home with the children they have. During the conversation below, Bernadette reveals that she earns more money than Howard, challenging the conventional belief that men are the primary breadwinners (Rupp 1981, 275-277). Furthermore, Bernadette proposes that Howard stays on paternity leave, further subverting traditional gender roles (Fox 2009; Glauber 2008; Sanchez and Thomson 1977 as cited in Rehel 2014, 110):

Bernadette: Well, seeing as how I make way more money than you anyway, what if I work and you stay home with the kids?

Bernadette: (...) You'll watch Barney and pull Cheerios out of their noses and go on play dates, and I'll work and have conversations with people my own age and enjoy my life. (Lorre and Prady 2012, S05E12, 19:23)

When Bernadette gets pregnant (Lorre and Prady 2016, S09E16), she does not want to take maternity leave from her job at a pharmaceutical company because she fears that a co-worker will take over her job while she has gone since it is believed that having a family affects a woman's connection to their career as it hampers their capability to fully concentrate on their job (Kuchařová and Retter 1999, 185). Bernadette's fear is only justified because taking time off for child care hinders women in the job market since employment opportunities are linked to a woman's age, family status and the interplay between these factors (Kuchařová and Retter 1999, 180).

Later, however, Bernadette's point of view starts to change. Eventually, she resorts from the careerist she was to the traditional division of childcare roles later in the season. Her maternal feelings take over, and Bernadette remains a stay-at-home mum with their newborn daughter. Nevertheless, when Bernadette gives birth to their second child Neil Michael in the episode "The Neonatal Nomenclature" (Lorre and Prady 2018, S11E16), Howard starts to think he would like to stay at home with the kids:

Howard: Here's my dilemma: I... (sighs) kind of want to stay home. But Bernadette is a way better parent than I am.

Raj: Wait, does Bernadette want to stay home?

Howard: I don't know. She's really invested in her career, and she's doing great.

Howard: I think it should be me.

Raj: Wow, I admire you, Howard. I-It would be hard for me to buck traditional gender roles like that. (Lorre and Prady 2018, S11E17, 4:37)

Precisely as Raj highlights with this statement, he challenges the traditional gender role of mothers staying at home with the kids.

Throughout the show, it is possible to witness a profound transformation in Bernadette's character. She evolves from a children-hating woman believing she would never have them into a caring and loving mother and subject to nurturing stereotypes. Ultimately, she places great importance on being an integral part of her children's lives. Her partner, Howard, is shown to be actively involved in his children's lives, despite his job's demands as an aerospace engineer. He often expresses his love and pride for his children and is willing to sacrifice to ensure they are happy and healthy.

Finally, I want to touch upon hand proposals traditionally associated with men proposing to women. In this popular television series, it is possible to witness women taking the initiative and proposing to men. For instance, in Season 12, Episode 03, Anu, who is briefly dating Raj, since they were supposed to enter into an arranged marriage settled by their Indian parents, proposes to him on their second date. Raj considers himself a hopeless romantic, so he is considering to end the relationship because it is not the story he imagined for himself. However, Anu believes that they will understand each other well based on the questionnaire they completed, as they share many similarities, so she is not willing to give up and proposes to Raj because she believes that their relationship is worth fighting for (Lorre and Prady 2018, S12E03, 18:15).

In addition to Anu's proposal to Raj, there is a similar scenario in Season 07, Episode 12, where Penny proposes to Leonard. However, Leonard turns her down, citing her poor mental state and alcohol as factors that may have influenced her decision to propose. This is a significant departure from the traditional gender roles, where men are expected to propose to women, often in a romantic setting, by getting down on one knee. The fact that a female character proposes to a male character breaks this negative stereotype. It shows that women are more active in relationships and in charge of their romantic lives. (Schweingruber, Anahita, and Berns 2004, 147).

5.5. THE “MACHO” STEREOTYPE AND HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY

As Connell and Messerschmidt point out, hegemonic masculinity refers to a dominant form of masculinity that is socially and culturally constructed as the norm and ideal in a given society. It represents the standards and expectations associated with being a “real man” and often involves traits such as physical strength, emotional stoicism, assertiveness, aggression, and the control and dominance of others (2005, 832). The macho stereotype indicates a specific manifestation of hegemonic masculinity characterised by exaggerated displays of traditional masculine qualities. It often includes physical toughness, sexual prowess, risk-taking behaviour, and a disregard for emotions or vulnerability (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 840).

The Big Bang Theory challenges and satirises the macho stereotype by subverting established expectations in character portrayals. The four central male characters, Sheldon, Leonard, Howard and Rajesh, are labelled as “nerds.” Cross explains that nerds are typically perceived as socially inadequate, introverted, or excessively intense while possessing high intellectual capabilities (2005, 26). These scientists, as it initially seems, defy the conventional ideals of masculinity by their lack of typical physical attributes and behaviours associated with traditional notions of manhood. The male characters portrayed in the series defy conventional expectations of strength, aggression, and hypermasculinity. Weiss and Weiss (2012) notice that *The Big Bang Theory* presents a refreshing departure from stereotypes by showcasing alternative expressions of masculinity and offering viewers diverse performances that challenge hegemonic masculinity. *The Big Bang Theory* emphasises sensitivity, education, and a strong focus on nurturing friendships and relationships of males, which deviates from traditional norms.

However, as Willey and Subramaniam (2017, 28), observe, there is a specific masculine hierarchy among the nerds, where Sheldon is the “alpha nerd,” while Howard, Rajesh and the female scientists are at the bottom of this pyramid.

Howard’s lack of a doctoral degree becomes a recurring topic of critique from Sheldon and the rest of the group. Despite Howard’s attempts to defend his credentials, his educational status as a master’s degree holder is constantly belittled. When Bernadette, his fiancée, announces her acceptance of a doctoral degree, it leads the group to question Howard’s masculinity due to his partner’s higher educational attainment and bigger salary,

as already mentioned in the “Reversed gender role” chapter. His friends’ criticism of his lower educational status contributes to his insecurity about his masculinity:

Leonard: So, Howard, tell us, how’s it feel knowing that when you two get married, you’ll be referred to as Mr and Dr Wolowitz?

Sheldon: Unless he takes Bernadette’s last name. And considering her advanced status, that could open some doors for him.

Howard: Please, this isn’t about me. I’m proud of you.

Bernadette: Well, you’ll be really proud of this. I was headhunted by a big pharmaceutical company. They’re gonna pay me a buttload of money!

Howard: What?

Leonard: Bernadette, that’s great. Howard, do you make a buttload? (Lorre and Prady 2011, S04E24, 1:37)

Howard is initially portrayed as a typical “player” solely driven by pursuing sexual encounters, such as in Season 03, Episode 09, “The Vengeance Formulation,” where he finds more satisfaction in a fantasy life with a character from *Battlestar Galactica* than in pursuing a real relationship with Bernadette, whom he is dating at the time. Nevertheless, Howard gradually undergoes personal growth throughout the series. His transformation is evident as he develops a deeper understanding of relationships and demonstrates tremendous respect and commitment towards his partner, Bernadette.

Rajesh’s character frequently defies conventional expectations of masculinity by openly expressing tenderness and emotions and displaying vulnerability. Rajesh challenges traditional gender norms and expectations in various ways throughout *The Big Bang Theory*. Furthermore, Raj has more effeminate behaviour, such as frequent whining or complaining about his weight and his strange relationship with the Yorkshire terrier he dresses or bathes with. Also, he is acting more feminine by, for example, crying or having a female interest and maybe overly “cares” about himself:

[Penny and Raj sitting on a couch with a face mask on]

Raj: I can actually feel the toxins being pulled out of my skin.

Penny: Well, this is a moisturising mask.

Raj: Oh, well, then I can actually feel the moisture going into my skin.

Penny: Hey, I hope you don’t mind; I used a little of your eye cream last night.

Raj: I thought someone looked brighter and tighter. (...)

Penny: Hey, after this, how about we all go out and do something together? (...)

Raj: You want to go shopping? (Lorre and Prady 2017, S10E19, 5:49)

Thus, Raj and Penny are spending a fun afternoon in the mall at the makeup artist and buying new clothes, during which they pick the same flower shirt.

In the initial seasons, Sheldon's character is characterised by a shared fascination with science and lacks physical and sexual contact. Sheldon is a brilliant character with social ineptitude. He challenges conventional understandings of masculinity by prioritising his intellectual pursuits over romantic and sexual relationships and, therefore, manifest complete disinterest in conforming to traditional masculine ideals. However, unlike Howard's wardrobe, Sheldon's superhero t-shirts could still fall within the boundaries of conventional masculinity.

However, despite his disinterest in sexual matters, Sheldon is aware of the societal expectations surrounding sexuality and feels compelled to uphold the appearance of being interested. In Season 06, Episode 14, "The Cooper/Kripke Inversion," he fabricates a story about having a sexual relationship with Amy, leading Penny to question his underlying motives for deceiving others:

Penny: I don't understand. Why didn't you just tell Kripke the truth?

Sheldon: Because the truth made me look bad. Whereas a ridiculous bald-faced lie made me look good. [Turning to Leonard] Anyway, if Kripke asks, tell him my coitus with Amy is frequent, intense and whimsically inventive (Lorre and Prady 2013, S06E14, 15:30):

This interaction highlights Sheldon's awareness that his asexual approach to relationships diverges from the expectations of hegemonic masculinity. Acknowledging the significance of conforming to societal norms and seeking validation from his peers, Sheldon recognises the necessity of fabricating actions that align with traditional notions of masculinity. Traditionally, possessing a male body is often associated with being male and harbouring heterosexual desires towards females (Butler 1999, 147-148). However, as the series unfolds, Sheldon's character undergoes development.

In later seasons, he becomes physically intimate with Amy, signalling a shift in his willingness to participate in and derive pleasure from sexual encounters as a man.

Moreover, Sheldon's engagement with hegemonic masculinity elements can also be found in Season 07, Episode 15, "The Locomotive Manipulation." After numerous seasons of anticipation, Sheldon and Amy share their first kiss, which brings them enjoyment in their unique ways. Despite Sheldon's initial lack of self-awareness regarding his capacity for such pleasures, he eventually discovers that he, too, can enjoy them (Willey and Subramaniam 2017, 30).

Another manifestation of certain masculinity in Sheldon's character is after he insults Amy by not acknowledging her success in the sphere of biology (which he considers inferior), which makes Amy mad. As an apology, Sheldon decides to give her jewellery:

Sheldon: (...) Amy, I'd like to apologise. Your accomplishment was impressive. And I'm proud of you.

[Amy is being strict with Sheldon]

Penny: Okay, look, he bought you this.

Amy: Jewellery? Seriously? Sheldon, you are the most shallow, self-centred person I have ever met. Do you really think another transparent manip..oh! It's a tiara! A tiara! I have a tiara! Put it on me, put it on me, put it on me, put it on me, put it on me, put it on me, put it on me. (Lorre and Prady 2012, S05E12, 17:33)

This gesture can be considered a manifestation of the hegemony of masculinity because men often use it as an empty excuse, and Sheldon is trying to solve the problem with money (De Hooze and Straeter 2023, 1). Nevertheless, in this situation, in contrast to her feminist principles, Amy enthusiastically accepts the gift and forgives Sheldon.

The power of money also reflects in "work romances," which are often in the show connected with physical harassment. For example, in Season 04, Episode 15, Leonard volunteers for a scientific study where he agrees to go on a date with a wealthy older woman named Mrs Latham in exchange for funding for their physics project, and Sheldon prepares a few stuff for him that would come in handy for "coitus":

Leonard: Are you insane? I'm not going to prostitute myself just so we can get some new equipment.

Sheldon: Oh, come on! Why not? (...) Given how much time you spend engaging in pointless self-abuse, you might consider, just this once, using your genitalia to actually accomplish something! (...)

Scene: The stairwell. Leonard is returning home looking dishevelled.

Sheldon: I'm so proud of you! You sold yourself out like a common streetwalker! (...)

Leonard: Uh, I'm gonna go lie down.

Sheldon: That's a good idea; get your rest. There are a lot more rich old ladies out there, and Daddy needs a new linear accelerator. (...)

Seibert (boss): [Leonard enters cafeteria] Ah, there he is! The man of the hour! He took one for the team!

Leonard: I didn't do it for the money!

Seibert: Keep telling yourself that; it makes it easier. Trust me, I know. (Lorre and Prady 2011, S04E15, 15:36)

This scene can represent sexual harassment since everyone, especially Sheldon, pressures Leonard to have an intimate relationship with an old lady with the prospect of a financial reward. Afterwards, their boss indicates that he knows this situation, which implies that he, too, was probably forced to do similar things.

Another situation arises when, on the contrary, Leonard exploits Penny and her good looks to make an impression at work. After the passing of Leonard's colleague, all the friends meet each other at his funeral ceremony to get his job position, since a tenured position has just opened up due to his death. Each of the guys brings their girlfriends as support:

Amy: I'd like to know why Penny's here.

Penny: I'm here to support my man, just like you. (...)

Leonard: Do it!

[Penny removes her coat and reveals a mini dress with a plunging neckline] (...)

Amy: She plans on flirting with members of the tenure committee to further Leonard's cause.

Sheldon: Well, that's a fine how-do-you-do. Don't just stand there. Take your breasts out. (...)

Amy: You're all wasting your time. Sheldon is the most qualified for the job, and no amount of gravity-defying bosom's going to change that. Seriously, is that tape? Like, how are they staying up like that? (...)

Raj: You two should be ashamed of yourselves. Using women to advance your cause with sexuality and whatever Amy plans on doing. (Lorre and Prady 2013, S06E20, 14:33)

In this scene, there is a concerning instance of sexualisation aimed at Penny, which also extends to Amy. Both women are reduced to being objects of desire for the male characters, who view them as means to fulfil their goals. This dehumanising treatment reaches a troubling point when Amy joins in by referring to Penny's breasts. This represents a very typical macho stereotype behaviour, as described by Connell and Messerschmidt (2005, 840).

6. CONCLUSION

This bachelor thesis aimed to determine which gender stereotypes were contradicted and which were perpetuated throughout *The Big Bang Theory*. By examining whether the show's changing stereotypes at least partially correspond with the change in dynamics of American society, the theoretical part of the paper discussed stereotypes, explained gender stereotyping and the recent changes in American society, highlighting the feminist movements.

The analytical part of the thesis analysed selected episodes of *The Big Bang Theory* throughout the show to investigate which stereotypes were rejected and which were uncritically showcased during its long broadcast. The analytical part closely focused on the representations and ideas about women in the sciences, reversed gender roles within the family, the “dumb” blond stereotype and finally, the remnants of “hegemonic masculinity” among the nerds.

The thesis findings show that *The Big Bang Theory*, despite its abundant depiction of women scientists, reinforces the negative stereotype of portraying women in sciences as often cold, socially awkward and unattractive. Even when the show presents an attractive scientist such as Bernadette, it does not emphasise her education but her beauty and feminine site and this stereotypization remains practically the same for the whole series. Amy is the only character who overcomes these stereotypes and can be labelled as the perfect combination of “beauty and brains” by the end of the show. She is a neurobiologist portrayed as a brilliant and respected figure who is always trying to be friendly; her modest dress and valued opinions indicate the show's positive representation of women.

On the other hand, the show perfectly presents the balance and equality of gender by portraying Penny and Bernadette as the breadwinners, career-focused and strong personalities, despite their initial portrayal as women dependent on men. The show also introduces the concept of paternity leave and depicts a proposal where women ask men to marry them. Therefore, the show successfully takes down the stereotype of male dominance in the household and empowers women as successful and earning a decent amount of money. This balancing of gender roles represents adhering to the recent developments of American society in this regard.

The stereotype of a dumb blond was undoubtedly greatly strengthened and amplified in the beginning, which is very typical for many American shows which were aired around the same time; however, during the broadcast of the show, even the creators

themselves realised that Penny's character has much greater potential, and therefore this show (unlike others such as *Two and a Half Man*) recasts this stereotype. Penny becomes intelligent and sophisticated; however, in the case of Bernadette, this stereotype remains present in the background.

The macho stereotype, albeit latently, is strongly present in the show. All the men are desperate to even get close to some traits of hegemonic masculinity. Most of this stereotype is encouraged by Sheldon's behaviour. He is self-centred, egoistic, even sexist and very well aware of the importance of appearing as an "alpha" in any sphere of his life. On the other hand, Rajesh is the complete opposite of Sheldon. He actively, but vainly, seeks a way to be more masculine and desperately longs for a stable relationship. Howard experiences notable transformations in his character, shifting his priorities from solely pursuing sexual gratification to valuing emotional connections and committing to a substantial relationship. This chapter also focused on sexual harassment, which was present on the show. At the time of its broadcast, the #MeToo movement did not exist or only just started; therefore, the creators did not realize how significant this problem is and failed to address it as a serious issue.

In conclusion, the portrayal of these stereotypes reflects to some extent the evolving social and cultural context in the United States, aligning with the notion put forth by Stafford that comedy evolves alongside changing stereotypes. However, the traditionally stereotypical portrayal of female scientists, masculine hierarchy, and sexual harassment are still present throughout the show. Thus, exploring female and male stereotypes in *The Big Bang Theory* provides valuable insights into the complexities of gender representation in popular media, since these stereotypes are present in many other American sitcoms and significantly influence their viewers.

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