

Lesson 8

Sexual Stereotypes

Activity 3

Consider each stereotyped group discussed below. To what extent do you think these or similar stereotypes exist in your community today?

Black Men

The sexual stereotypes surrounding Black men in lynch law society are the most salient. These stereotypes say that Black men are:

- hypersexual
- sexually deviant
- sexually aggressive or uncontrollable
- animalistic and primitive in their sexuality
- dangerous

These controlling images of Black male sexuality are embedded in lynch law. They provided justification for lynching, because they spread the idea that Black men were sexually dangerous and therefore needed to be sexually controlled.

With these controlling images present, imagine what it would be like to be a black man at this time.

- How might these stereotypes affect your romantic and family life? How might you feel if asked to do a favor for a white woman, like carry her bags to her room?
- Would you be afraid to work as a gardener for a white woman?
- Have you read the book *Native Son*? How did these stereotypes affect the main character of that book?

White Women

How do you think the stereotypes of Black men would be related to the stereotypes of white women?

White women were sexually stereotyped in these ways:

- innocent or pure
- fragile and vulnerable

- self-controlled
- asexual
- valuable
- property of white men

How could these sexual stereotypes of white womanhood enable myths about Black rape and help to justify lynching?

It is also valuable to note how these stereotypes limited white women's expression of sexuality and their choice of romantic partners.

- If you were a white woman at that time, would you be able to take a stroll with any potential suitor? Could you accept the courtship of any man that you liked?
- Do you think these stereotypes impacted white women in any positive ways?

Black Women

"Called Matriarch, Emasculator and Hot Momma. Sometimes Sister, Pretty Baby, Auntie, Mammy and Girl. Called Unwed Mother, Welfare Recipient, and Inner City Consumer. The Black American Woman has had to admit that while nobody knew the troubles she saw, everybody, his brother, and his dog, felt qualified to explain her, even to herself."

--Trudier Harris, 1982 (as cited Collins, 1991, p. 67)

Black women were stereotyped as:

- sexual animals
- seductive
- sexually valueless (i.e. their virginity was not valued by white society)
- enjoyed sex with white men

These stereotypes reflect many black women's sexual exploitation and abuse, both during and after slavery. Enslaved women were frequently raped by or coerced to have sex with slave-owners and male family members of slave owners. Black and mulatto (today, mixed-race) women, during and after slavery, were sometimes sold into prostitution or became concubines, providing long-term sexual services to white men for financial support.

- How could the sexual stereotypes above justify black women's sexual exploitation?
- According to these stereotypes, how do black women feel about their own sexual abuse?
- How might these stereotypes have affected a black woman who worked for a white man?

- Why were white men allowed to rape black girls? How do you think society understood black childhood? Do you think these men were pedophiles?

White Men

Stereotypes of the white male during this era are perhaps the least visible, mainly because the white man was seen as the “norm” against which other social groups were measured. However, there were some sexual stereotypes about white men which relate to lynching. White men were understood to be:

- owners and protectors of white women’s sexuality
- caretakers of society
- benevolent
- sexually civilized and controlled

These stereotypes of white men, sexual and otherwise, helped to justify the lynching of black men as necessary and right. They also obscured white men’s violence against women, especially against black women.

- How did the stereotypes of white men reflect stereotypes of other groups? Look, for example, at the idea that white men were protectors of white women. What does that idea say about white women, black women, and black men?

For example, the idea that white men were protectors of white women implies that white women are innocent, weak, and require protection, but that black women aren’t worthy of protection. At the same time, this idea is based on the assumption that black men’s sexuality threatens white womanhood.

In what ways would these stereotypes benefit you as a white man? In what way would they harm or limit you?
