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Definitions as Social Constructs

A few months ago, I was scrolling through my Tumblr feed when a photograph made me stop and scroll back up the page. There was a picture of a young woman holding a sign that proclaimed, “I don’t need feminism because I made my own choice to be a stay at home mother and my working husband should not be harassed.” At first I was angry because of her ignorance: feminism is not about shaming stay at home moms or blaming men. It is about equality for all people regardless of their sex. I dismissed the woman as uneducated and naïve and moved on. However, I continued to come across pictures like hers—as well as pictures from the opposition—and I began to notice that “feminism” as a term does not represent the same ideas to everyone. There is a disconnect between pro-feminists and anti-feminists. While some people define the feminist movement in the same way I do, as a push to include both women and men equally, others see it as bitter females trying to enact revenge on the male population while throwing guilt at stay at home mothers. Even Merriam-Webster dictionary’s definition of feminism as “the theory of the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes” is nothing but a socially agreed upon construct.

In 2009, Phyllis Schlafly, a lawyer who is well known for her conservative viewpoints and her vehement opposition to modern-day feminism, wrote an article for the online edition of *Townhall Magazine*. In this article “Why Women are Unhappy,” Schlafly argues that feminism “taught women to see themselves as victims of an oppressive patriarchy in which their true worth

will never be recognized and any success is beyond their reach.” For this reason, the modern-day woman is eternally unhappy and unfulfilled. She references back to a better time when women had “higher levels of happiness” due to the fact that they were married to men who “held jobs that enabled their wives to be fulltime homemakers.” Schlafly believes the progression and persistence of the feminist movement has led to a mass of deeply unhappy, career-minded women. She defines feminism as a “long-running campaign to make husbands and fathers unnecessary and irrelevant.” Schlafly states, “The feminist movement worked tirelessly to make the role of fulltime homemaker socially disdained.”

Five years later, in September 2014, Emma Watson gave a speech to the United Nations in honor of the launch of the HeForShe Initiative. Watson, a 24-year-old celebrity, is well-loved and respected not only for her role as Hermione Granger in the *Harry Potter* movie series, but also for her involvement as a Goodwill Ambassador for United Nations Women. In her speech, Watson insists that feminism is an all-inclusive battle that should be fought by both men and women. Unlike Schlafly, Watson sees feminism as a route to a more equal and more just world. In her speech, Watson explicitly defines feminism as “the belief that men and women should have equal rights and opportunities. It is the theory of political, economic and social equality of the sexes.” While Schlafly believes feminism causes damage, Watson argues that it prevents it. With the implementation of feminist ideals, Watson points out that the world could stop unfair practices like unequal pay, child marriage, and limited education for girls. In both these artifacts, the rhetors Schlafly and Watson use a definition of feminism as a terministic screen in order to convince their audience of the deleterious or beneficial effects of the feminist movement.

Kenneth Burke, a twentieth century rhetorician, created the term “terministic screens” to describe how “every set of terms or symbols becomes a kind of screen through which we

perceive the world” (Herrick, 212). Burkean rhetoric focuses around the idea of language being inherently rhetorical. Every word—written or spoken—is strategic and therefore effects how we view reality. In his book *Language as Symbolic Action*, Burke explains terministic screens by referring to a series of photographs: “They were *different* photographs of the *same* objects, the difference being that they were made with different color filters” (1341). Terministic screens are like the same picture with different tints and shades. These screens are created through a reflection, selection, and deflection of reality, and Burke stresses that “any given terminology” encompasses all three of these aspects (1341). The first of these, reflection, refers to language reflecting reality. Burke writes, “. . .the nature of our terms affect the nature of our observations” (1341). What we observe in the world is what we consider to be reality. According to Burke, terminology mirrors this observable reality. Selection refers to terminology as only a specific selection of reality. Rhetors can select what part of reality they want to reveal in order to make their argument more attractive or effective. Finally, deflection refers to language deflecting reality. Burke states that this deflection of reality “concerns simply the fact that any nomenclature necessarily directs the attention into some channels rather than others” (1341). Reflection, selection, and deflection of reality all serve to draw the audience’s attention to one aspect of a situation over another. With their attention focused on only the good or only the bad, an audience can be much more easily persuaded for or against something.

In her article, Schlafly uses the claim that modern-day women are decreasingly unhappy to condemn feminism. This rhetorical action concerns the reflective element of a terministic screen. Her definition of feminism, which functions as a terministic screen, as a deleterious movement is a reflection of reality—the reality that “women’s happiness has measurably declined since 1970” with the “rise of the so-called women’s liberation or feminist movement.”

Schlafly reports that this statistic comes from a survey conducted by The National Bureau of Economic Research. By including a reputable survey, Schlafly ensures that her readers know that women's unhappiness is an evidence-backed reality, not merely her own opinion. She points out the correlation between the rise of feminism and the decline of female happiness by stating, "In the pre-1970 era, when surveys showed women with higher levels of happiness, most men held jobs that enabled their wives to be fulltime homemakers." This second reference to surveys further emphasizes how Schlafly's definition of feminism as an attack against stay at home mothers reflects the reality that women are reporting increasing unhappiness. Further into the article, Schlafly uses another reflection of reality to denounce feminism and its effects on the happiness of women. She discusses how "feminist organizations such as the National Organization for Women held consciousness-raising sessions where they exchanged tales of how badly some man had treated them." Schlafly observes that these ranting sessions only further increase the misery of women saying, "Grievances are like flowers—if you water them, they will grow...." Again, Schlafly's reference to a real-life situation draws her audience's attention towards the negative effects of what Schlafly defines as feminism.

Watson also uses her definition of feminism to reflect reality and to persuade her audience. However, unlike Schlafly, who reports on the negative effects of the feminist movement, Watson focuses on the horrific reality of a world without feminism—a world that still exists today. She recounts personal stories of being "sexualized by certain elements of the media" at the young age of 14 and of her male friends being "unable to express their feelings" around the age of 18. Watson goes on to talk about her "father's role as a parent being valued less by society" because in a world without feminism, males cannot be seen as emotional or sensitive beings. These are real stories that her audience can relate to from experiences in their

own lives. These stories are direct reflections of society. Just as Schlafly uses surveys to illustrate the harmful results of the feminist movement, Watson uses real-life stories to show the dangers of a society that lacks feminism. At the end of her speech to the UN, Watson states, “Because the reality is that if we do nothing, it will take seventy-five years, or for me to be nearly 100, before women can expect to be paid the same as men for the same work. 15.5 million girls will be married in the next 16 years as children. And at current rates, it won’t be until 2086 before all rural African girls can have a secondary education.” Watson actually uses the term “reality” to reiterate that her argument about what she defines as feminism would solve these very real problems.

Terminology also inherently selects reality. Schlafly uses her definition of feminism to present only a select part of reality by implicitly defining the term “feminism.” Rather than outright stating exactly what feminism represents, Schlafly chooses to discuss the goals of the feminist movement. She says that feminists work to “make the role of the fulltime homemaker socially disdained” and to “make husbands and fathers unnecessary and irrelevant.” By skirting around her definition of feminism, Schlafly can make a claim about the harmfulness of the feminist movement without discussing every aspect of feminism. She is using a selection of reality to increase the effectiveness of her argument. Most of Schlafly’s definition of feminism stems from the rhetoric of early feminists such as Betty Friedan, the author of a 1960s book *The Feminine Mystique*, and Simone de Beauvoir, a French feminist from the mid-1900s. Schlafly quotes Friedan as calling the home “a comfortable concentration camp” and also recalls de Beauvoir saying, “We don’t believe that any woman should have this [choice to stay at home to raise her children].” By selecting two women from the 1900s with radical views on feminism, Schlafly can better convince her audience that what she defines as feminism—the unfair

harassment of stay at home mothers—seriously impacts the happiness of the modern-day woman.

In contrast to Schlafly's implicit definition of feminism, Watson delivers an explicit definition of feminism. However, Watson's explicit definition functions in the same way as Schlafly's implicit definition. Watson's definition chooses what it wishes to expose about the feminist movement in order to reveal only a select part of reality. Towards the beginning of her speech, Watson explicitly states, "For the record, feminism by definition is the belief that men and women should have equal rights and opportunities. It is the theory of political, economic and social equality of the sexes." She enforces her definition of feminism by stressing that this movement is about human rights, as females are humans, too. Watson also formally invites males to take part in the feminist movement saying, "Gender equality is your issue, too... Men don't have the benefits of equality, either." Since her definition of feminism focuses on equality and justice, she chooses to talk about how the feminist movement can help both women and men. By explicitly stating that men should "take up this mantle so that their daughters... can be free from prejudice, but also so that their sons have permission to be vulnerable and human, too," Watson can better persuade her audience that the term "feminism" refers to a movement which strives to give every human, male or female, equal opportunities.

In *Language as Symbolic Action*, Burke says that if terminology is both a reflection and selection of reality, it must also be a deflection of reality (1341). Since Schlafly's definition of feminism functions as a terministic screen, it deflects most of the parts of reality that Watson's speech reflects. She fails to quote any feminists from the 21st century, focusing only on 20th century radicals like Friedan and de Beauvoir. She discusses how "the feminist movement taught women to see themselves as victims of an oppressive patriarchy," but avoids mentioning the

reality that many women do suffer from domestic abuse and sexual harassment. She states that “more women than men request same-sex marriage licenses in Massachusetts so that...they can create a ‘family’ without husbands or fathers, but avoids mentioning the idea that maybe these women are not homosexual because they hate men but because they love women. Domestic abuse and sexual harassment are both parts of reality. Homosexuality has been part of reality since humankind roamed the earth. The screen through which Schlafly defines feminism fails to consider these alternate viewpoints and therefore deflects reality. This rhetorical tool allows Schlafly to keep her audience from recognizing this counter-argument against Schlafly’s definition of feminism.

While Schlafly’s definition of feminism deflects many issues Watson brings up, Watson’s definition of feminism deflects some of the points raised by Schlafly. Watson observes that “fighting for women’s rights has too often become synonymous with man-hating.” She does not mention women like de Beauvoir who in her book *The Second Sex* said, “Society, being codified by man, decrees that woman is inferior; she can do away with this inferiority only by destroying the male’s superiority.” A quote from someone who is considered to be one of the major feminists of the 20th century that suggests “destroying the male’s superiority” would probably not help Watson effectively recruit men to join the feminist movement. The term “destroying” is a terministic screen in itself that suggests a violent movement that is not synonymous with Watson’s progressive feminist movement. Watson’s deflects the reality that there are people considered to be feminists who might approach the road to equality in a more hateful manner. This deflection allows her to gain more supporters of the feminist movement because she avoids discussing radical ideologies.

Terministic screens allow a rhetor to reflect, select, and deflect reality in order to direct their audience's attention towards certain ideas while at the same time blinding them to opposing ideas. Both Schlafly and Watson use definitions of the term "feminism" as terministic screens that allow them to convince their audience that the feminist movement is either hurting or helping society. Burke states, "Definition itself is a symbolic act...." This article and this speech prove that there is a disconnect between many of the anti-feminists and pro-feminists. They are looking at the same photograph of a woman in modern-day society, but seeing completely different stories. The anti-feminists see that woman as a loving wife and dependable stay at home mother who is being sneered at by a career-focused society, while the pro-feminists look at the photograph and see a woman who never received the opportunity to attend higher education. By labeling an extremely complex social movement with a single term, society has created an immense amount of tension and confusion. Proclaiming oneself as a "feminist" tells us little to nothing because the definitions of the terms are social constructs that can never become concrete. Halfway through her speech to the UN, Watson states, "And if you still hate the word [feminism], it is not the word that is important. It's the idea and the ambition behind it...." Watson could not be more correct in this statement. Rather than passively labeling ourselves with words like pro-feminist or anti-feminist, we should have the ambition to act on our ideals, to stand up for stay at home mothers who selflessly give their whole lives to their children, to stand up for girls who are married off before they have a chance to be children, and to stand up for ourselves whatever our beliefs may be.

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