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Transcendence or Immanence: The Case for Healthcare Workers

In the last century, the feminist movement has changed the world over in ways we take for granted today. And yet today, we still see that stigma and social norms not only subject women to being second to man, but also subject great men and women in the healthcare industry to being viewed as lesser. An industry like healthcare already has more pressing issues today and the amazing doctors, nurses and other healthcare professionals who help people should never be subject to prejudice due to stigma against their profession. In this paper I will discuss the stigma associated with healthcare, how it relates to feminist theory and I will discuss two brilliant feminist theorist’s thoughts on the subject.

Before discussing the healthcare system and the stigma associated, we must first discuss the two theorists whose ideas will be discussed in this paper. Our first theorist is Simone De Beauvoir, a French feminist theorist who wrote the book *The Second Sex*; a dialogue on her theories as to why the female gender is “the other” (page 27) to the male gender. De Beauvoir uses this term to describe how women are viewed as secondary, subjects and objects to men. She believes that there are many reasons for this, but one of her most prevalent theories is one revolving around the idea of imminence and transcendence.

De Beauvoir uses the term immanence to describe women’s male authored destiny. She believes that immanence is women’s status quo as “the other.” Doing what is expected and remaining in their doctored position as a subject to men. De Beauvoir argues that therefore women have always been subject to men, because they not only choose to remain in immanence, but also are too afraid to rise to transcendence. De Beauvoir uses the word transcendence to describe the male destiny. To invent, innovate, surpass expectations and to have an external effect on the world around him. De Beauvoir believes that this should not only be the destiny for men, but the destiny for women as well. She believes that the only way to surpass the shadow of man is to become transcendent like them.

De Beauvoir speaks in a great volume about the social norms associated with being a woman in the 1950’s. She says, “Woman is shut up in a kitchen or in a boudoir, and astonishment is expressed that her horizon is limited. Her wings are clipped, and it is found deplorable that she cannot fly.” (page 731). De Beauvoir says this to illuminate the sad truth about being female. Not only are women told that they must be aid to man, to be a housewife and caretaker to the children as the man can do as he pleases. But they are also judged for doing so. Woman are judged for their obedience and given the lesser eye for it. They are judged for the destiny they did not write. And this is not only true for women in the 1950’s, but also for women and some men in healthcare today.

Healthcare has always been a profession surrounded by stigma. To care for others is to put oneself second, which De Beauvoir believes to be immanence. If one does not think of themselves first then one cannot be transcendent; to impact the world with their step. De Beauvoir believes that this has occurred from man’s interpretation of motherhood as a sign of weakness. As a mother your job and instinct is to care for your child completely. And this has been weaponized not only against women, in order to keep them subjected to man. But also to those in healthcare.

To care for another is to put them before yourself temporarily or otherwise. And for that time there is a power exchange. In caring for another De Beauvoir would say that you are then giving them power over you. Making you their subject due to you having an interest in their wellbeing and safety. De Beauvoir would further add that this does not solely apply to being a healthcare professional, but also to many other public service profession. This would include professions such as fire-fighters, police officers, lawyers and other public service professions. These occupations which put people before themselves would be immanent in the eyes of De Beauvoir. However the same would not be said for Carol Gilligan, another brilliant scholar of feminist theory who analyzes differences in morals between men and women in her book *In a Different Voice*.

Gilligan write’s her book *In a Different Voice* to describe the differences in morals between male and females, in response to Lawrence Kohlberg’s study on the subject. Gilligan believes that Kohlberg’s analysis is extremely male centric and does not speak to the differences of view between men and women. Kohlberg argues that the people make decisions based off of principals and morals of justice, duty, responsibility and logic. But Gilligan not only sees this as the male perspective on the situation, but believes Kohlberg is missing crucial ethics which she believes women tend to have more then men. Gilligan believes that women operate in an ‘ethics of care” principal. It is based on the idea that the female psychology consists of different values and moral structures which differ than men. She believes that these values and moral structures are surrounded in the concept of caring and having a responsibility towards others.

Gilligan embraces the notion of caring for others and believes that women have a moral imperative written in their DNA which tells them to help others. And although I agree with her that people have a moral imperative to help other’s I do not believe this is because of biology but rather social norms like De Beauvoir says. It is a proven fact that social norms and ideas have a significant effect on behavior outcomes. And in a world that idolizes heroism and selflessness, it is apparent that people will choose to behave altruistically due to the social benefits that transpire. For this reason, I must also disagree with De Beauvoir’s assessment of the situation in question.

De Beauvoir believes that any profession which serves others is intrinsically imminent due to the social norms which surround the fields. Social norms of caring for others she believes to carry with its ideas of being subject to. I fully agree with this statement but must dive further in to exemplify why I believe she is overall wrong. The social norms of healthcare for instance were indeed full of stigma that was mentioned earlier in the paper. But this was the social norms of healthcare in the 1950’s, where all nurses were women who were subject to the orders of the male doctors, and the whims of the patients they served. In the 1950’s healthcare did not have the reverence and respect it does today.

Today doctors, nurses and other healthcare professionals are heroes who save lives. They are commended for their selflessness in the service of others because of the culture of altruism today. And with this change in the social norms comes benefits to the culture surrounding healthcare and other forms of public service. I believe this to be a contemporary form of transcendence due to this evolution in respect for the selfless and caring. Transcendence is to have the ability to impose will on the world, to be respected so that you may continue to move forward. For someone to rise past the social norm of caretaker and immanent and to then become respected, commended and applauded for heroism must be transcendence.

In summary, although it is true that the caring for someone else is immanent, due to you now being subject to that person. The social norms of morality and heroism surrounding that act in contemporary healthcare today must in turn make choosing to be in the healthcare or public service field transcendent due to the social benefit.