

DEFINING THE CATEGORY OF GENDER: LITERATURE REVIEW

A sex-gender distinction has only recently been articulated but many researchers are working in the new field of psychology. This distinction was aimed at separating the cultural (gender) from the biological (sex). Psychologists who focus on the psychology of gender have struggled with the nuances of the terminology because the terms "sex" and "gender" are often used interchangeably to denote if someone is male or female. They postulate "sex" and "gender" to be different.

«Sex» has come to refer to the biological aspects of being male and female. "Gender" typically refers only to behavioral, social, and psychological characteristics of men and women. Sex is a given: a natural phenomenon, a reproductive duality, an 'irreducible fact' in need of no explanation beyond its biology, anatomy and reproductive functioning. «Gender is determined socially; it is the societal meaning assigned to male and female. Each society emphasizes particular roles that each sex should play, although there is wide latitude in acceptable behaviors for each gender» (Hesse-Biber, S. and Carger, G. L., 2000, p. 91). "Gender relations refer to a complex system of personal and social relations of domination and power through which women and men are socially created and maintained and through which they gain access to power and material resources or are allocated status within society" (IFAD, 2000, p. 4).

To people who study it, gender indicates something about socialized behavior patterns. Every day people receive many messages about gender. Simply living in the world exposes us to plenty of images and ideas about appropriate and desirable masculine and feminine identities. People receive messages from the day of birth about what is appropriate for a male and a female. Cards celebrating the birth of a baby often reflect desirable gender stereotypes – pink, bows and bracelets for a baby girl; puppies, balls and scraped knees for a boy. Advertising, toys, clothing and popular media further disseminate notions of what is 'right' for girls and women; what is 'desirable' for men and boys.

Along the primrose path of childhood children learn something fundamental. They learn that boys grow up to be Dads and girls grow up to be Moms. This is the standard pattern that children incorporate, even when they know these rules have exceptions. The basic stereotypes seem somehow branded on their psyche in the everyday course of growing up. But there are probably as many shades and complexities of sexual identity and gender identity as there are human beings, and there are an equal number of ways of working those gender identities out in the intricacies of daily life. Societies, however, tend to assign some classes of social roles to "male" individuals, and some classes of social roles to "female" individuals (as society perceives their sexes).

But to work effectively on gender issues, understanding the most common gender theories is useful. These theories, or frameworks, are 1)

biological determinism; 2) role socialisation; 3) construction of gender.

Biological determinism. This explanation of gender is based on the belief that all differences between men and women result from biology – the 'anatomy is destiny' argument. Biological determinism is often used to support generalisations about men and women, such as 'men are naturally more able in maths and technology' or 'women are naturally suited to domestic duties'. Biological determinism asserts that certain behaviours are justified and unchangeable because 'boys will be boys' (or 'girls will be girls').

However, this view of 'natural' difference is difficult to support when notions of appropriate gender behaviour are not static, but differ over time, between ethnic and cultural groups, and even between and within families.

Sex role socialisation asserts that gender behaviour is not innate, but socially conditioned – that boys and girls learn to be masculine and feminine through the different social expectations imposed on them by family and peers. The theory is weakened by its reliance on role modelling to provide 'messages' about gender behaviour which are passively 'soaked up' by boys and girls.

The theory of sex role socialisation links with the theory of biological determinism because, by focusing on sex roles, it reinforces difference based on biology. Neither theory can provide an adequate explanation for the wide range of behaviours among women and men.

The construction of gender. This theory acknowledges that men and women are actively involved in constructing their own gendered identities. People are not passively shaped by the larger societal forces such as schools or the media, but they are active in selecting and adapting the behavior patterns into their version of gender depending on situations and beliefs. According to the theory understanding of gender is dynamic, changing over time. Thus, people are active in constructing their own gender identities by particular forms of masculinity and femininity.

The construction of different ways of being feminine or masculine is a dynamic process in which we all play a part.