
Gender Socialization

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Gender socialization is the process of interaction through which we learn the gender norms of our culture and acquire a sense of ourselves as feminine, masculine, or even androgynous. The processes that collectively are known as gender socialization are so common and universal that we usually cannot see them occurring. Despite the fact that socialization can be virtually invisible to those who participate in it, either as agents or as subjects, social scientists, including sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists, and psychologists—study socialization for clues about how children learn to take their places in social systems. One of the most important kinds of social systems into which children in all societies are socialized is the sex/gender system. Feminist scholars have documented how sex/gender systems are different in different societies. However, it is common for adults in all societies to transmit lessons about gender-appropriate kinds of thoughts, desires, behaviors, and aspirations to children.

One sign of the importance different cultures place on socializing children according to the gender norms of society can be seen in the fact that adults in many parts of the world today try to limit children's access to Western media, including films, television, books, and the internet. In many parts of the world, girls' and boys' roles are different than they are in the U.S. In such cultures, gender socialization of children is potentially disrupted by the socializing influences of western popular media. Because processes of socialization are so important to societies, scholars

have dedicated a great deal of attention to understanding how children are socialized and how people learn the messages associated with becoming the kinds of gendered people our society wants us to be. Many theories try to explain these socialization processes. Psychoanalytic approaches to gender socialization place attention on the role of the unconscious and on early childhood experiences within the family. Thus, psychoanalytic theories today might examine the ways in which forms of bonding that are common between girls and their mothers in a particular culture tend to produce specific emotional outcomes that then come to be thought of as "natural" to girls. Other theories, such as social learning and cognitive developmental theories, place a greater emphasis on learning that occurs in stages over the life cycle. So, for example, social learning theories identify particular agents of socialization, such as peers, teachers, television, and organized religion, that play a role in learning gender. None of the theories of socialization is complete; all can contribute part of the complex picture of how infants who are classified as belonging to a particular biological sex at birth become socialized into feminine or masculine systems of behavior and identification.

Feminist scholars have challenged conventional research on gender socialization by pointing out that much of the research was culturally biased. For example, Freud's observations about the acquisition of gender reflect the gender norms of the upper classes of Europe in the Victorian era. Further, Harvard psychologist Carol Gilligan suggests that widely-held conclusions about the development of moral judgment are flawed because of their exclusive focus on boys. In a path-breaking study of moral reasoning Gilligan finds that because boys and girls are socialized differently they may develop different approaches to solving moral dilemmas. Boys often resolve moral dilemmas through the application of rules and assertions of rights while girls emphasize solutions to moral dilemmas that are attentive to the needs of others and the importance of relationships. Subsequent research by anthropologist Carol Stack, elaborating upon Gilligan's work, suggests that when race is added to the equation the results change again. Stack finds that black girls are more likely to develop a style of moral reasoning that combines attention to rights with the need to nurture and protect relationships.

How does gender socialization occur? As we begin to concentrate attention on the transmission of gendered lessons in our

society we might come to believe that we can account for gender very easily. After all, we can always look at the toys children are given to play with, the clothes in which children are dressed, and some of the messages that children receive from adults and other children about gender and begin to perceive socialization at work. It is no accident that girls often come to prefer, and boys to vigorously reject, the color pink in the elementary years since the color pink is identified with femininity on products that range from girls' clothing to diapers to toys. More important, however, are the ways in which girls and boys in U.S. society tend to be subtly discouraged from playing with toys that are designated as belonging to the other sex. Researchers find that children's toys are often strongly associated with interests and competencies in later life. Often, girls are discouraged from playing with toys that require solving problems that relate to the design and construction of artifacts, while boys are encouraged to develop such skills. It should not be surprising that many more boys than girls use these early skills to enter adult fields such as engineering.

Despite the many regularities we can observe in gendering, however, gender socialization does not just come in two varieties in any society. In fact, in a society as complex and heterogeneous as the United States, there is evidence that people of different groups, can, and often do, socialize children as feminine or masculine in accordance with their own group's understanding of what is "natural" or necessary for women and men to be like in that group. Groups in the U.S. include people of different races, ethnicities, classes and religions. For example, the Southern Baptist convention recently affirmed that women should be submissive to their husbands. Because of this belief about the proper authority relation between wives and husbands, it would not be surprising to find that lessons about female submissiveness are an important component of gender socialization both for girls and for boys in some southern Baptist families. By comparison, parents in explicitly egalitarian families attempt to socialize children in ways that do not rely on deeply-held beliefs about women's and men's different "natures."

Differences in the ways subcultures socialize children can make gender and the study of gender socialization a more rich tapestry than it would be if there were only two obvious styles of gender expression. In spite of the many differences in gender and gender socialization that prevail in the contemporary U.S., how-

ever, it is still necessary to recognize that the dominant culture plays an important role in establishing the social norms regarding gender by which members of different groups may be measured. People may be stigmatized because the gender identity into which they were socialized diverges in some way from that of a dominant group.

Many people argue that socialization for gender conformity can be harmful to men as well as women, and feminists concur with this understanding. However, feminists point out that girls and women are more damaged by successful socialization into femininity than boys and men are damaged by successful masculine socialization. Mary Wollstonecraft called attention to the differential impact of gender socialization as far back as 1792 when she published *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. In her book, Wollstonecraft noted that women who learn and adhere to forms of femininity that require gentleness, modesty, passivity (to male activity), nurturing toward others, and fastidious attention to appearance cannot garner the respect or assume the leadership that is closely identified in the minds of women and men with more "masculine" characteristics. If, on the other hand, women assume more "masculine" characteristics, displaying, for example, physical daring and athleticism or a desire for achievement rather than nurturance, they are likely to be "hunted out of society"—rejected as "masculine" women, or as women who are trying to be men. This socialization bind still exists for women in a way that is not reflected in a similar bind for boys socialized to be men. As a result, socialization for femininity continues to disable and disadvantage girls and women in our society.

A final note about gender socialization is in order. After we have learned something about gender socialization and the theories that try to explain it we often assume that processes of gender socialization are so powerful that they always "work" on those who are subjected to them. This means we accept that agents of socialization teach gender and that, as a result, gendered people emerge from childhood as "feminine" and "masculine" in the way that their society understands those identities. Yet socialization is not that simple. As we live in the social world, we are all subjected to many different influences on our personalities and on our way of understanding ourselves. Even within a single family—indeed, even sometimes within a single person—there may be different

conceptions of what is appropriate to a particular gender. We are all influenced by social institutions and practices outside our families, including popular media and schools.

In the final analysis, there are also individual aspects of our personalities and characters that may be quite difficult to understand and trace to their origins. Individual variation does not mean that we each come to our conception and practice of gender in a totally unique way. Our gender identity is inflected, or influenced, by events, experiences, feelings, and attitudes that give an individual flavor to the socially patterned forms of gender socialization into which we are gender-socialized as children. These individual dimensions of our gender identity can be the source of great pleasure to us, and as individuals in our relationships with others. At the same time, they can attract unwelcome forms of attention, punishment, and demands for conformity from those around us and limit us in our enterprises. This is a particular problem for lesbians and gay men who must confront stereotypes about their gender on a daily basis. Fears and anxieties about homosexuality make homophobia a powerful cultural force that provides a foundation for discrimination against gays and lesbians. But homophobia also creates standards that are used by heterosexuals to challenge one another in harmful ways to "measure up" to culturally-defined models of masculinity and femininity. When boys are urged to fight, or are challenged or ridiculed for showing compassion, we can see the operations of gendering and homophobia at work. The same is true when girls are dissuaded from speaking up in class and encouraged to disdain "unladylike" activities. Understanding the ways in which most people both confirm and reject aspects of gender socialization can give us greater insight into the social processes that function around, as well as within, us all.

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