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Sex, Gender, and Society:

A Theoretical Review of Identity Development Across Disciplines

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Abstract

This paper will try to capture the nuances of various theories that are available at the discretion of sociologists around the world to evaluate the interactions between actors, their families, peers and society, and how these interactions shape and solidifies there perception of self and other. These interaction are critical in shaping one's perspective and stereotypes about gender, both and self and other. This paper will evaluate the work of Cindy Faith Miller, Alyssa West, Beate Krais's, Lev Vygotsky, Micheal J. Carter and Kohlberg's hypothesis from 1966. While the work by these academicians contrast each other at some points, at other junctions they also compliment each other giving a complete sense to how a child perceives and solidifies gender identity and later becomes an adult that conforms to these gender roles in a social setting of a collective of such individuals. It is a viscous cycle where this knowledge is passed from one generation to another endlessly. In our paper we will try look for such agreements and disagreements in the existing literature of the dominant works on gender and develop our own understanding about the concept while doing so.

Introduction

"In sociology, gender refers to the social and cultural roles, behaviours, and expectations associated with being male or female. It goes beyond biological differences and explores how societies construct and reinforce ideas about masculinity and femininity"[1].
Many theorists, sociologists and academicians have tried to deconstruct and analyse why people perceive the gender of self and of others the way they do. Human is considered to be a rational animal amongst all the creatures of the animal kingdom, yet its prejudice and judgment leads it to operate as per gender expectations and stereotypes. In a sense an individual's gender identity heavily dominates its everyday interactions an this behaviour is explained in a variety of scholarly articles. Most of the work assesses how these interactions and development of a consciousness about gender is a two way lane. That is, they are both additive in nature and a simultaneous journey of an individual over the course of a lifetime while navigating through these interactions solidifies gender identity. At the same time, world's preconceived knowledge of one's gender also amalgamates their response with prejudice towards an individual. This process starts as early as in childhood where an infant's interaction with its parents bolsters a child's perception about two separate gender. This perception is often rewarded or punished as per the child's expression of their identity through various activities which conforms to or off-shoots gender affirmative or non-affirmative action respectively. These inculcate a sense of consciousness in a child towards their own biological sex which later is solidified into a gender role. The foundation of these biases start with a fear of fluidity in gender identity i.e. a child's fear of turning into the gender non-confirmatory of their own biological sex, which is again instilled by adults around them. This fear melts down into a belief that gender is permanent as a child grows older. The young individuals then lean on to their peers and adults other than family (like teachers) to observe and learn about gender and their social interactions. Lastly, they become their own adult self to practice the stereotypes they have learned so far in life.

Evolution, Sex, Gender and 'Doing Gender':

The idea behind strict gender norms somehow relates to evolution and adaptation of these gender roles in order to preserve and propagate the species through designated roles of a

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[1] Source: It is a self-understanding of different definitions available on internet.

'man' and a 'woman'. Therefore, a biological approach is employed to assess these behavioural and psychological differences between the two genders.

"Evolutionary theorists, such as David Buss and David Geary, emphasize that the survival of the human species is dependent on successful reproduction; genes responsible for the strategies that lead to successful reproduction are more likely to be passed on to our descendants than the strategies that do not lead to reproductive success. This evolutionary process is believed to lead to psychological gender differences because the behaviours needed for successful reproduction require gender differences (Geary 1998; Buss 2000)."[2]

In other words, the stone age survival instincts instilled in our species as a whole, have been predominantly responsible for the genetic and hormonal differences between the two sexes in question. These further dictate the course of behaviours followed or experiences by the two which in turn aids to the gender identities. For instance, in the stone age era, mother's required to be protected for a certain span of time during pregnancy and later to protect the young offspring. Therefore, they were always accompanied by fellow females and elderly from the herd, instilling an instinct of collective living and sense of communities. On the other hand the males had to hunt for the mother and his child, instilling an aggressive and alert demeanour amongst them.

Although, while biological factors such as hormones and evolution are responsible to an extent for this visible difference in males and females, there also exists a social approach. This approach sees gender differences as a biproduct of the social interaction of individuals as the main caterer to their perception of idea of gender. This socialisations occurs through family, institutes like schools and colleges, workplace and society in general. Individuals from a very young age are exposed to messages stereotyped as per gender. Males and females are shaped overtime so that they learn to conform to the identity associated with their respective gender which is highly associated with the biological sex. This gender constancy knowledge is believed to develop through three stages which are gender identity that instils the knowledge of being a boy or a girl, gender stability that informs an individual that gender remains same throughout the life and finally gender consistency which is the knowledge that gender does not change through superficial alterations.

Gender Consciousness and Development:

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[2] Quoted from the article "Gender Development" by Cindy Faith Miller

The idea of one's own gender is first instilled by parents. A child learns by observing its family and which heavily shapes an individual's perception about their own gender and the other gender. For example a child's interaction with his or her mother and her role in their life heavily shapes how they perceive gender roles. The girls learn about their own gender roles which includes nurturing and caring characteristics, whereas, boys learn what their gender isn't. This is also responsible for the fact that girls mature a sense of their gender way earlier than boys. Further, the way their actions are rewarded or punished also heavily shapes their relation with their respective gender. For an instance, girls are encouraged to sit in small groups and play sophisticated games like tea party, etc. whereas boys are encouraged to go out into field and play rough games that involve running, jumping, etc. An observation on this matter points back to previous section where a stone age man had to hunt and be aggressive while women were supposed to stay in groups to nurture the offsprings. Thus, what we offer our children is very much influenced by the instincts carried on in the species through generations. This learning is maintained in silos and dictated strictly through interactions with parents for a child who is 3 to 5 years old. Therefore, as per Carter, the rigidity in gender belief is also considered to be peaking during this age, although, later it floors down and stabilises. This is explained by Kohlberg in his writings as he illustrates this trait as 'pseudoconstancy' and that this relation could be misleading. Kohlberg's theory interprets gender rigidity to be infused due to the fear that participating in non-confirmative gender activities might cause one to transform into the opposite sex.

The learning environment for a child enlarges and it starts accommodating adults other than parents like teachers along with other peers from the same age group. At this age the rigidity for gender roles lowers as a child observes beyond a family setting of nurturer (mother) and provider (father). Nevertheless, the interactions with the world outside home is often dictated via gender stereotypes accepted by the society. For an instance a teacher's interaction with kindergartners is crucial in shaping their ideas about men and women. At the same time, the perspectives that these children bring from home also shape how they perceive a male teacher versus a female teacher. This can be illustrated in any playground of a kindergarten setting. The girls will often be seeing skipping ropes, playing stapoo or an imaginary tea party in small groups whereas boys would be running around and kicking rocks. The way these children would perceive their teacher is also dominated by a premature understanding of gender that they carry. For an instance, Alyssa west in her writings analysed if children's cognitions of

emotions are stereotyped through an experiment by Parmley and Cunningham in 2008. They observed that the female teacher in distress would be perceived as sad by the pre-schoolers whereas, a male teacher in distress would be perceived as angry. Again, these perceptions very much resonate from the ape characteristics of stone age woman and man where predominant emotions would be caregiving and aggression respectively. At this stage, while gender is no more a rigid construct for a child but rather turns into a belief via interplay of interaction between him or her and the society. The child comes to a realisation that their gender is stable and stays the same.

Lastly, the idea that gender cannot be changed through superficial alterations is solidified, wherein, a child's perception of other people and their gender is bolstered. Herein, child would be receptive to gender before other characteristics. In an experiment conducted first by Hirschfeld in 1996, the children were presented with a few drawings to match a given description with attributes pertaining to generation (age), sex (male, female) and physical feature (dimples, scars). Kohlberg in his writings demonstrated through this illustration that even at young age, gender predominates judgment over physical appearance. For an instance if a child were asked to mark a man with freckles and there is only a diagram of a girl with freckles, the child would choose a man's picture with no specific feature. This stands very crucial in shaping gender norms for a child and ultimately the society we live in. This experiment helps answers the irrationality demonstrated by the rational man introduced in the beginning of the paper.

Culture, Language and Gender Schemas:

The gender roles that the individuals accept during their formative years are crucial in forming an individual schema that help in constructing the interpretation and individual meaning for gender relevant information for a lifetime. This is explained by the Alyssa West in her writings through three cognitive theories which are Cognitive-developmental theory, gender schema theory, and social cognitive theory of gender development. These theories help explain the role of cognitive process in attaining gender constancy, gender based schemas that an individual develops during the earlier stage and conforms to for interpreting gender related information and finally the importance of cognition itself in processing gender-relevant information from the surrounding environment.

This stands true and conjecturing to Vygotsky's demonstration on language and its role in cognitive development. Vygotsky states the significance of culture in learning with its roots in language (tool) and lastly how individuals learn within their role as constructed by the society. As per Vygotsky social interactions are enabled only by speech which develops in three phases which are external where baby interacts with parents, whereas the parents approve or disapprove certain behaviour; egocentric where an individual starts rationalising their actions or behaviour internally, helping them to reason and organise thought by talking to self; and lastly inner speech where cognitive development is influenced largely by what's acceptable by the society as they adopts morals and ethics for self. Both West and Vygotsky indicate a self-feeding loop of cognitive development of an individual that gains its values from the surroundings and later give it back to the same surrounding thus, affirming to accepted norms.

Habitus, Actors and Social Agents:

The society we live in has a lop sided favourability for male actors and Bourdieu in his article 'masculine domination' have tried to interpret why this construct shall be an accepted norm. He was engulfed in the debate on feminist movement that critically evaluated his stand and Krais has elaborated on the missed spots that entails Bourdieu's one-sided romance with archaic ideas of gender. The work entails division of labour on the basis of sex and sexual reproduction and how that is accepted as 'pure nature' and further, dominates the basis of division of world. The actors (man and woman) in this lineage of thought are considered active players operating in a habitus on a simple 'dichotomy' of gender. The interactions in a habitus are dominated by gender as the key discriminatory factor. In other words gender is not perceived as a product of cultural patterns but rather a natural norm.

In the above sections it has been clearly demonstrated how the individuals are fed from an early age which gender roles they should conform to incentivising or disincentivising gender appropriate actions. It has been clearly demonstrated that while sex is a biological characteristics, gender-confirmatory behaviour is simply a social construct. Bourdieu in his 1990 text has simply missed on the ever-changing struggles, living conditions, practices and views of today's women and for that he faced heavy criticism. Bourdieu missed on assessing the works of his female counterparts and wherever he did, he craftly and conveniently only picked arguments that supported his stand. His major argument that the habitus, actors, social agents and their interactions shape the gender biases in a society stand true, but his stand that

it is naturally bound for male domination does not fit in todays' world where women play multiple roles at power with men.

Conclusion:

The works demonstrated by the above mentioned authors stand crucial in understanding how an individual starts developing an understanding of gender and develops biases that are introduced by family, peers and other social actors. What stands crucial here is how they reaffirm those biases on others when they group thus, creating a viscous cycle of fixed social constructs. This is illustrated beautifully by West where she talks about gender schemas that are formed during cognitive development of an individual through social interactions. Kohlberg's illustrations furthers the hypothesis by adding the elements of importance of family and peer interactions during development. What's worrisome in this is how these beliefs if formed on notorious and lop-sided foundations, get upcycled to the next generation of individuals via social interactions. Consciously or unconsciously adults expose and to an extent super-impose their gender beliefs on children which they inherit and abide by for the rest of their lives. Vygotsky has stated in his work that an individual internalises his or her belief system through social interaction and therefore, is capable of learning and developing only inside their role in the community. In such a situation, superimposition of an accepted belief system might lead to underutilisation of an individual's potential who is made to believe that he or she fits a specific cast since a young age.

Writer	Description	Drawback
Beate Krais	Elaborates the work by Bourdieu on gender with the centrepiece being Habitus	Bourdieu is his writing does not entails the work by feminist writers therefore, creating a lop-sided understanding of gender.
Diane N. Ruble, Lisa J. Taylor, Lisa Cyphers, Faith K. Greulich, Leah E. Lurye and Patrick E. Shrou	Elaborates the Kohlberg hypothesis on Role of Gender Constancy in Early Gender Development	Sample taken in the illustration is divided further in age groups which reduces the sample size to give meaningful output
Dr. Serhat Kurt	Lev Vygotsky describes the role of language and social cultural theory in cognitive development	There has been lack of experimental tests to strengthen Vygotsky's observations. The work is in Russian and hard to translate.
Michael J. Carter	Use of identity theory and identity control theory to understand the socialisation process. The centrepiece here is interaction of a child with the family rather than division of labour in a household to understand how gender ideals are maintained.	The generalisations made require further test to affirm the hypothesis made.
Cindy Faith Miller	It tries to provide a wholesome understanding of gender roles and how and why world perceives them. It encompasses biological, psychological and social understandings of gender	The article lacks tests and instances that affirms to the conclusion provided by the author.
Alyssa West	It tries to assess the process through which one develops an	The generalisability of the theories is limited to western understanding of world.

	understanding of gender via three cognitive theories.	

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2. "Gender Development, Theories of" by Cindy Faith Miller, Arizona State University

3. "Gender, Sociological Theory and Bourdieu's Sociology of Practice" by Beate Krais

4. "Lev Vygotsky – Sociocultural Theory of Cognitive Development" by Dr. Serhat Kurt

5. "The Role of Gender Constancy in Early Gender Development" by Diane N. Ruble, Lisa J. Taylor, Lisa Cyphers, Faith K. Greulich, Leah E. Lurye and Patrick E. Shrout

6. "Gender Socialization and Identity Theory" by Michael J. Carter