

Gender identity



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Our identities are influential and personal components of who we are.

Gender identity is one of the most basic characteristics that children learn, both about themselves and about other people, at a very young age. A child's understanding of what is expected of a boy and what is expected of a girl begins during the first year of life. There are psychological, cultural, and social characteristics associated with a person's gender identity. The terms feminine and masculine are often used to describe behaviors commonly associated with females or males. A gender role of identity refers to the various attitudes and behaviors that are considered normal and appropriate for people of a particular sex (Gender Identity and Gender Confusion in Children). These attitudes and behaviors vary between cultures and societies and involve a set of expectations about how females and males should think, act, and feel. For example, women are thought to be more emotional and talkative, while men ought to be more pragmatic and ambitious. Talking of hobbies, contact sports have typically been considered mainly masculine activities, as well as fishing, hunting, and motorcycle riding; while taking care of babies, cooking, and shopping have been thought of as feminine activities. Just as men are influenced by society, women also are equally influenced by society. Therefore, outside the explicit characteristics of parenthood, where men and women perform entirely different functions, there are many social changes to be made towards gender equality.

Nowadays gender roles in society slightly transform, nevertheless, there are still too many stereotypes about them.

Our gender identity is constructed through interaction with our parents; interaction with our peers at school, at work and at home, and interaction

with the media. Today's culture changes our attitudes and views on life more than our genetic make-up. The trend starts at birth. Baby boys are wrapped in blue or green blankets and come home to a room decorated with trains or jungle themes. Baby girls are wrapped in pink or yellow blankets and come home to a room decorated with lacey pink frills or a princess theme. From that moment, the gender roles for boys and girls become very clear; their paths have been paved. Boys grow up learning they play with trains and trucks, play in the dirt, and play war or firefighter. Girls grow up learning they play with dolls, play house, and play school. This leads to children learning about gender-related occupations at a very young age (Lovingood). While playing with dolls, girls develop their maternal instinct, and boys, while playing hunt and fighting, learn of their future gender role of breadwinner and protector. Children learn these traditional patterns from family and media. These early, playful experiences to careers set the basis for a way of thinking about future jobs. Women's traditional jobs are secretaries, teachers, housewives, waitresses, and nurses. Men's traditional jobs for men are police officers, truck drivers, factory workers, construction workers, and bosses or CEOs of businesses.

Girls, at a young age, are often given Barbie dolls to play with. The girls exposed to these dolls are often confused on how they should look, because they are subjected to beautiful, but fake-looking toys. When young boys watch cartoons, they see superheroes and other awesome characters and while wanting to be cool, they try to act the same way their favorite heroes do. The characters on these shows are usually shown in an aggressive or violent way. The characters portray tough, independent, and powerful roles.

As a result, boys learn that they are expected to act that way. Superhero characters such as Batman or Superman are described as strong, athletic heroes who influence the actions of a young boy every day.

According to investigations, children are also influenced to act in specific ways. The peers affect directly on child's behavior at a young age. A child will be made fun of when doing things considered not characteristic of their gender. For example, if the boy likes to play house or play with dolls he can be teased by his peers. In such case, boy's peers are not his only problem – parents get worried a lot if their child acts inappropriately to his gender role. When a boy plays with dolls or is interested in cooking, his parents might think he has some mental issues, although, he may just have such a personality. Children are influenced by society only to play with certain toys that are meant for their gender. These gender role behaviors, including the toys children play with and activities in which they participate, are influenced by how children are raised, what is expected of them, and the media advertisements they see for gender-specific toys.

People are born not knowing which gender they are. However, through experiences, people discover the way society expects them to act. There is no way that anyone could learn attitudes and behaviors through biological influences. The society has a strong influence on the way people act according to their gender. Everyone has a good idea on how to act toward their own gender—how they are brought up, how they interact with others, and the pressure, and influence the media has on them. These are what influences gender identity.

Advertisements, movies, and TV often portray the female as being promiscuous or weak– a message that can influence how women view their body and their abilities. It has become obvious that the media advertises and promotes a very unhealthy movement of intense dieting and other bad eating habits to women. The cover of many print media display images of very slender females. By advertising such images, they manipulate and pressure the minds of women (Lovingood). As a result, women continue to spend their money trying to reach this socially accepted image they see in print advertisements. Society has acknowledged an ideal body image with the goal of getting people to spend money to achieve that socially sought-after look. We are constantly surrounded by all sorts of media, and we create our identities based on media images we are exposed to on a daily basis. The more girls are exposed to the “ skinny” look in media, the more unhappy they become with their own bodies and, eventually, unhappy with themselves overall. When everything you see is a body type that only a small percent of the population has, it is hard to keep in mind what is realistic to expect of yourself and other’s view of who you are as an individual. You begin to question your identity based on media influences. According to Susan Bordo, “ In the world in which our children are growing up, there is a size zero, and it’s a status symbol. The chronic dieters have been at it since they were 8 and 9 years old” (Bordo 151). Since the early childhood, instead of learning of various shapes and images of beauty, kids learn to see beauty only within strict standards. Having hair color, different from glamour magazines’ standards, or face features, different from TV standards, a child cannot feel himself (or herself) pretty, because he (or she) has been taught wrong perception of beauty by media.

Your body image is how you see, think and feel about your body. This may have no bearing at all on your actual appearance. The majority of normal-weight women tend to overestimate their sizes and shapes. A distorted body image can lead to self-destructive behavior, like severe dieting or eating disorders—the consequences of this trend are enormous. Women who are lacking confidence about their bodies are more likely to buy beauty products, new clothes, diet pills, and other diet gimmicks. Exposure to images of thin, young, fit female bodies is connected to depression, loss of self-esteem and the increase of unhealthy eating habits in women and young girls. According to a study conducted by Kenyon College, around 30% of clothing that is marketed toward young girls is considered “sexualizing.” The desire for physical beauty can have a tremendous effect on a woman’s self-esteem and confidence. The real epidemic is among the girls with seemingly healthy eating habits, seemingly healthy bodies, who vomit or work their butts off as a regular form of anti-fat maintenance (Bordo 151).

The most recent rush of feminism supposedly made life easier and happier for modern women. However, one has to step back and ask, “Is it really easier and are they really happy?” Women are much more than just the average housewife. They have their own talents and abilities beyond the home. Women, at a young age, are taught that they would have a sense of accomplishment and happiness as a wife and mother. It is the traditional feminine roles. However, as women spent more and more of their energy on being a good wife and mother, they felt more and more unhappy.

Housewives are waitresses, house cleaners, nurses, cooks, and teachers. They are the go-to person when someone in the household is in need. Who

are they really? People may argue that housewives have everything – a husband with a good job, a comfortable home, and plenty of money to be content. However, each day is faced with cooking, cleaning, laundry, shopping, etc.—what is there to look forward to? Women boil it down to one question that captures their feelings—Is this all there is in life? The problem lies in a sense of frustration about being only a housewife. Women are caught within the web of expectations that is imposed on them by tradition and family.

‘ I want a wife who takes care of the children when they are sick, a wife who arranges to be around when the children need special care, because, of course, I cannot miss classes at school. I want a wife who will keep my house clean. A wife who will pick up after my children, a wife who will pick up after me’ (Syfers-Brady 117).

Many women, who are asked by their family to give up their job or education after marriage, experience a sense of identity loss. Housewives should be allowed to seek out activities that develop their identity.

Marriage does not demand women to do housework, to raise her children and take care of them, unless the couple agrees to these roles together—not based on society. A woman who believes that she is “ dependent “ on her husband may continue to be dependent for her entire life. A woman who sees herself as strong and competent may be more motivated to strive for advancement in the workplace. Today, more men are staying at home to raise children and more women are heads of powerful corporations. Gender roles are important, because there are real differences between men and

women. Gender roles should not be used to prohibit people from following their interests, developing their talents, or using their natural abilities.

Culture, society, and media have an enormous influence on gender roles. Men and women are exposed to hundreds of messages each day concerning gender roles—including family influences, print advertisements, music, TV, and movies. Men and women assess these messages to understand society's expectations for their gender and how they should function within society. Although, these traditional gender roles are challenged by many people; the influence of culture, society, and media remains evident. Gender identity is a process that begins at birth, is influenced by society and media, and is carried out for the rest of our lives.