

# The development of gender essay



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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this report is to find out how gender identity, gender roles and sexual identity influences and shapes the subsequent development of an individual. The report shall also look at different theories of gender development, namely, Psychodynamic, Biological and Social learning theory. Further, the report will examine the essential components of the Nature and Nurture debate on gender development. The changing nature of gender roles in the 21st century is discussed and some practical examples of these changes being investigated. Then, it will critically analyse the role media plays in shaping human behaviour. Lastly, the report will look how gender roles are acquired through the observation of male and female social role models.

## 2. FINDINGS

The awareness of who we are and whether we are female or male is an important aspect of human development. Some eminent psychologists have raised concerns about how we come to be identified as male or female. They ask, does the process of identification of who we are starts right from the moment the child is born? Or does she/he learn about its identity from the social environment in which it is raised? Also, what effect does it create and how does it shape our emotional life and future relationships.

When the baby is born, the first question anybody asks is “ is the baby a girl or a boy?” From then on, the sex of the child becomes an integral part of our perception of it. While the physical characteristics of the child like its external genitalia indicate the baby’s sex, it is no proof of the baby’s gender.

In fact, many parents are not aware of this duality between sex and gender. Ignorance of this can mislead the parents and caretakers into trying to impose unnatural and inconvenient habits and behaviour upon the child. In reality though, the distinction between sex and gender is the starting point to analysis gender development (Wood, 1995). Therefore, gender is a term that has psychological as well as cultural connotations. It is the degree to which the significant others perceive the child's gender that shows induces the child into male or female behaviour patterns, which are accepted and tolerated by the particular culture and society.

## 2. 1 SEXUAL IDENTITY

At this juncture, a discussion on the difference between sex and gender is quite relevant. The difference between sex and gender is that, sex is limited to biological characteristics at the time of conception. That is, a sperm from the male parent fertilises an ovum of the female parent. Normal ovum and half of all sperms carry x chromosomes. The other half of normal sperms carries a y chromosome. Inheriting a xy chromosome confers maleness on the future child. Y chromosome controls supplies of endogens which will affect the development of male sex organs and the brain while it is in the foetal stage. The absence of endogens results in the development of a female baby.

Usually one tends to expect a correspondence between chromosomes and sex, that is, if the chromosome is xy the physical appearance and the character should be that of male. However, this is not always the case. The presence of arendogenital syndrome in females can alter appearance and

behaviour similar to that of a male. Likewise too, the presence of testicular feminising syndrome causes chromosomally male children who are insensitive to testosterone to develop a female external appearance.

Normally women produce greater amount of progesterone and oestrogen, while men produce more testosterone and androgen. The level of endogen in male stops hypothalamus from regulating hormonal production, but it does help in female menstruation and ovulation cycle. Hormones can influence behaviour, personality and emotional disposition. (Coy and Phoenic, 1971)

Animal experiments might provide evidence for the link between androgens and aggressive behaviour:

Castrated male rats tend to fight less. While female rats given extra androgen after birth are more aggressive in adult life than other female rats. Coy and Phoenix (1971) claims that, female monkeys given extra androgens display more rough and tumble play than other female monkeys. Studies carried out by Archer and Lloyd (2000) shows a direct link between testosterone in human male and aggression.

## 2. 2 CRITICISM OF FINDINGS

\* All the experiments were conducted on animals. It is dangerous to assume that the same hormonal changes in animals would result in the same changes in behaviour of human beings. The experiment with rats simply looked at one side, that is: the aggressiveness in animal behaviour, yet they used the same explanation of female aggressiveness throughout its social life.

\* The monkey experiment failed to consider the fact that androgens produced masculine genitalia in female monkeys. This implies that the behaviours of monkeys could have resulted from them being treated as males because of their appearance. Social factor was not put into consideration as well. Oakley (1981), accepts that dominant males in monkey groups have higher testosterone levels than less dominant ones. However, Oakley argues, that the social context also affects hormone levels. Experiments show that when less dominant monkeys are caged with females only, their testosterone levels rise.

\* Archer Lloyd studied testosterone and aggression in twelve and thirteen year old boys for three years and found out that, although their levels of testosterone increased rapidly, the boys did not become more aggressive. In other words, there were no correlation between levels of testosterone and levels of aggression over the last three years.

### 3. GENDER ROLE

Gender role starts as soon as children start to realise their instinct sex-type difference at the age of two or three years. Similarly, there is a situation whereby a child acquires behaviours and characteristics that a culture considers sex-appropriate (Atkinson, 1993). Soon after the baby is born, boys and girls are dressed differently and given different toys to play with. Boys are perceived as strong, more alert and coordinated than girls, whom parents describe as being smaller, softer and less attentive than boys. Parents have sex expectation towards their child.

Most psychologists believe that boys are treated differently. For instance, babies are treated more roughly when they realize that the baby is boy, than when it is a girl. The difference comes from different socialisation practices for girls and boys due to gender stereotypes and gender roles (Martyana and Watson, 1976).

In adolescence, the difference in behaviour is reflected in someone's interest, attitude and occupational choices. In daily life, women are supposed to be ' nice', ' kind', and ' helpful' and follow the ' rules' than being successful. Those who challenge the rule are looked down and devalued (Dweck, 1978).

However, attitudes about gender roles are changing. Females are now independent, relatively passive emotionally and good at verbal tasks. They now participate in politics, look after the finances of the home. Previously, there were some sports which were known to be men's domains, but now, women also participate in them; two good examples are boxing and football.

Nevertheless, occupational choices are expected to reflect these qualities as well. For example, boys are expected to become scientists or medical practitioners and girls expected to become secretaries or nurses. By studying development processes, psychologists have come out with alternative explanations, which help understand whether nature and nurture play an equal role in gender development.