

Nature nurture  
debate on gender  
with reference to  
david reimer case  
assignment



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David Reimer was born on 22nd August 1967 as a male identical twin. His birth name was Bruce and his twin brother was named Brian. At the age of 8 months while undergoing a circumcision operation, Bruce's penis was burned beyond surgical repair. Ten months after the operation, Bruce's parents became associated with Dr. John Money, a world renowned sex researcher developing a reputation in the field of gender identity. Dr. Money argued it was possible for a person to change gender successfully through surgery, socialisation and hormone replacement. Unaware Dr.

Money had never attempted this before, Bruce's parents, Ron and Janet Reimer consented. On 3rd July 1967 Bruce was surgically castrated and renamed Brenda. Brenda's parents took her home under strict instructions on how to raise her. They were never to tell her she was born a boy and were to visit Dr. Money annually. Brenda had long hair, pretty dresses and girls toys but it soon became obvious that in everything else Brenda was masculine. She borrowed Brian's toys and played with soldiers, cars and guns. Brenda walked like a boy, sat with her legs apart and insisted on urinating standing up.

All of which was confusing for her and upsetting for Brian. Dr. Money passed this off as ' tomboyish' and instructed the Reimer's to continue raising ' Brenda'. Brenda began experiencing behavioural and emotional problems at school. Along with these problems, both Brian and Brenda detested visiting Dr. Money for annual check ups. These eventually ceased when the Reimer's realised they were doing more harm than good. Brenda became increasingly troubled at school. Local psychiatrists reported Brenda knew she was

different to other children and she continued to blame herself for problems within her family.

As time passed and with Brenda's increasing display of a boys persona and a nervous breakdown, it was recommended Brenda be told the truth.

Immediately after being told Brenda reverted to her biological sex, she chose the name David and began having testosterone injections. David went on to marry but after harbouring resentment against Dr. Money, he decided to go public with his story. Tragedy struck when David's brother died. Withdrawing into his grief and blaming himself, his marriage broke up, he lost contact with his step children and he made bad business decisions.

David Reimer committed suicide in 2004. Mrs. Reimer blames the unusual circumstances of her sons upbringing on their deaths. Throughout Brenda's childhood Dr. Money enjoyed continued success on his theory of gender neutrality and the success of gender reassignment surgery despite the torment Brenda was displaying. Many people believe gender roles are instinctive and predicted by our biology and genetics, others assert that we learn to behave the way that we do. This is known as the nature/nurture debate, which has been a prominent topic within psychology for centuries.

Those that support the nature side of the debate would argue that behaviour that goes with male or female is determined by biological forces. The Biological Approach suggests the role of instincts and genetic inheritance explain gender role behaviour in terms of hormones and chromosomes for example, males have XY chromosomes and females XX chromosomes. In terms of hormones, boys produce Androgens which influence general male

characteristics such as body shape, muscle growth, body hair and levels of aggression. Females produce Oestrogens which influence body fat, breast development and menstruation.

In other words, biological theories of gender roles argue that boys and girls are genetically programmed to behave in ways that are compatible with male and female roles. Theories emphasising biological forces look for experimental evidence that link certain kinds of male or female hormones with certain types of behaviour. Research carried out on rhesus monkeys, has shown that their behaviour is greatly influenced by their levels of sex hormones. As cited in Davenport (1992), Young injected a pregnant monkey, whose foetus was genetically female, with a course of testosterone.

When it was born it behaved in the same assertive ways that male monkeys behaved. It challenged other males to fights, joined in rough and tumble games and tried to mate with female monkeys. Other studies of animals being injected with opposite sex hormones produced similar results. It is important not to generalise animal study findings to human beings who are very much aware of their behaviour and are able to control it. Imperato-McGinley et al (1974) studied members of the Batista family who, due to a mutant gene, were born with the external features of a young girl, but physically changed into men at puberty.

The large increase in testosterone at puberty activated a process that should have occurred during prenatal development and so they developed male genitalia and became men also showing masculine behaviour and going on to marry women. The easy adjustment of the Batista children led scientists to

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challenge the usual view that male or female behaviour is determined more by the way we are brought up than by our physiology. They suggest that there may be part of the brain which is different in males and females which governs much of what we think of as sex-role behaviour.

However, critics of the Biological approach would argue the Batista's may have been able to adopt masculine behaviour more readily because of their supportive environment, rather than biological changes. If biological factors explained gender behaviour there would not be such wide variations between cultures and between members of the same sex in one culture. The Social Learning Theory emphasises the nurture side of the debate and does not accept that chromosomes and hormones develop much of an individual's behaviour.

Social learning theorists maintain that children's gender roles are determined through the socialisation process which consists of modelling, reinforcement and punishment and social customs. A child's gender role is largely influenced and encouraged by parents. From the time they are babies, parents treat sons and daughters differently, dressing infants in gender-specific clothes, giving gender differentiated toys, and expecting different behaviour from boys and girls Thorne (1993). Fagot (1978) carried out naturalistic observations of the interactions between parents and their two year-old children.

She found that parents were deliberately shaping the child's behaviour according to their sex. Results showed that girls were rewarded for playing with dolls and helping, whereas boys were rewarded for being independent

and active in their play. Supporting Fagots study, Smith and Lloyd (1978) as cited in Archer and Bloom Lloyd (2002), also conducted a study where they invited mothers to play with a 6 month old child, who would be presented as, and dressed as a boy or a girl. The mothers were found to pick up and show the infants gender-stereotyped toys, and to encouraged those they thought were boys to engage in large bodily movements.

These findings suggest that parental responses to an infants perceived sex were to some extent gender-stereotyped and gender-appropriate behaviours were being reinforced. Evidence from many studies suggest that peer groups also have a profound affect on children's behaviour. Lamb (1979) as cited in Cardwell and Flanagan, observed pre-school children at play and found that when male type behaviour was reinforced with girls, the behaviour continued for a shorter time than when it was reinforced by boys. He also found that children became quite critical for example, if a boy picked up a doll the other boys were very ritical. When a child's peers became critical, the child soon stopped playing with the toy and rejoined the group of its own sex. Social learning theory proposes that the child acquires its gender through observation and imitation of models and reinforcement of behaviour which is considered appropriate to the child's sex. However, it is unable to explain why children prefer same sex toys and activities by around 2 years old. Cardwell and Flanagan (2003) suggest, observational learning and reinforcement are, by themselves, unlikely to produce such strong preferences at such a young age.

Gender is constructed by the society we live in, if we were brought up in a society with different expectations and behaviours for each sex, then gender <https://assignbuster.com/naturenurture-debate-on-gender-with-reference-to-david-reimer-case-assignment/>

identity would be different. The Biosocial Approach takes into consideration both sides of the nature/nurture debate. It focuses on the interaction of biological and social factors. This theory claims that evolution did not design human psychological sex differences. It argues that these are the result of the allocation of men and women into different sex roles, based on physical differences. According to Money and Ehrhardt (1972) as cited in [www. sych. wright](http://www.sych.wright); “ Ones biology has significant impact on ones gender role development. In turn, ones biology has a strong influence on how society reacts. These reactions influence how a child then assumes gender roles. ” Money and Ehrhardt (1972) studied girls with adrenogenital syndrome who were raised as boys because of their male looking genitalia. These androgenised females were tomboys and preferred playing with male appropriate toys. As adolescents they dated later in life, delayed marriage to establish careers and preferred an alternative sexual lifestyle.

The biosocial theory is a strong advocate of the critical period, its maintains there is a critical or sensitive time period in which children acquire gender identity, which is proposed as being from 18 months to 3 years old. If the mistaken classification was discovered and corrected before the age of three then the child would adjust accordingly but this was not the case after three years. Most of the studies supporting the biosocial approach involve individuals with unusual biological conditions, thus they may not be representative of gender role development of the rest of the population.

Some cases have also contradicted the critical age theory of reassignment such as the Batista's. It is quite apparent in most cases gender roles are an interaction of both nature and nurture, with the most influential role being <https://assignbuster.com/naturenurture-debate-on-gender-with-reference-to-david-reimer-case-assignment/>

biology. David Reimer's case seems to contradict the biosocial approach and the theory of a critical period as David was 8 months old when treatment began. However, it should be taken into consideration other studies that support the biosocial theory began when babies were in the womb developing. David's genetic make-up had already been established and formed biologically by the age of 8 months.

The socialisation process of reinforcement had also already begun through parents and family. In 1966, many studies had not yet taken place such as, the Batista family, the girls with Adrenogenital Syndrome and numerous animal studies. Mr and Mrs. Reimer were unaware of any such complications and also not aware this procedure had never been attempted before.

Perhaps had they had such information or fully informed of what may happen should the procedure fail, they may not have proceeded. It was Dr. Money's duty to offer what information he could provide to the Reimer's.

Money did not show any form of informed consent, his procedures were highly unethical. He allowed theories of gender role behaviour to develop and be applied with the belief that his experiment had been successful.

Money dismissed all aspects of Brenda's behaviour as 'tomboyish' and did not listen to his clients nor did he offer any advice or support network. Money never took into consideration the emotional damage this experiment was doing to Brenda's life. Nature had made Brenda a boy, but Money was distinctly trying to fight any possibility of that.

He was undoubtedly biased and duly chose to ignore any suggestion of failure. Mr and Mrs Reimer were aware David and Bruce were distressed by



the interviews carried out with Money but they were never offered any explanation or the right to withdraw. It was never explained to David and Bruce why they were meeting with Dr. Money and they felt pressured into giving answers they felt Money wanted to hear. It has been claimed by David and Bruce Reimer that questions of a sexual nature were asked and photographs of sexual suggestion took place within the interviews. A situation like this in today's society would lead to jail.

Money was a well-educated and authoritative figure, he was there to be listened to and not questioned, a situation which he took full advantage of. Dr. Money never disclosed the identities of the Reimer family, this remained confidential although it could be suggested this was to protect Money and his failure, as much as to protect David. In 1990 the British Psychological Society issued a strict ethical code which currently maintains research can not proceed in the absence of parents. REFERENCES Archer, J. and BloomLloyd, B. , 2002. Sex and Gender. Cambridge University Press. Cardwell, M. and Flanagan, C. , 2003.

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