

Which femininities  
are created and  
reinforced in  
contemporary society  
essay sampl...



Everyone at birth is born as a blank slate, it is our families and our environment that socialise us and teach us the appropriate ways of behaving relative to our gender. We learn our gender roles in society from primary socialisation (the family) initially. These initial ideas are expanded on and reinforced by secondary socialisation, (peers, media, education, workplace and religion) throughout our lives.

Firstly, the family socialises femininity in a number of ways. A study by Ann Oakley argues that gender socialisation takes place in 4 ways:

1. Manipulation – parents encourage behaviour which is seen as normal for the child's gender and discourage deviant behaviour. For example, girls are encouraged to take ballet lessons whilst they are discouraged from getting dirty, playing football.
2. Canalisation – this involves channelling the child's interests to toys and activities seen as 'normal' for her sex. Such as girls playing with Barbie dolls, giving them an interest in hair and clothes; traditional 'girly' interests.
3. Verbal appellation – the names that children are called which teaches gender appropriate behaviour, for example, calling little girls 'princess' and the tone of voice used is generally softer with girls than it is with boys.
4. Different activities – children encouraged to involve themselves in the appropriate activities. E. g. girls helping their mothers in the kitchen.

These four ways can be used to socialise young girls into what behaviour is seen as 'right', although Ann Oakley did her research 30 years ago, and is considered out of date, a more recent study by Joanna Smith (1997)

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reinforces Oakley's points. Another recent study by Charles (2002) also said that the family is stereotypically gendered to males as the breadwinners and females as the caring role. This shows that girls can learn these roles from looking at their mother's behaviour.

One other argument comes from Talcott parsons ( ) he believed in biological determinism, that it was in our 'make up', in our DNA, to act the way we do gender-wise and that for females these caring, gentle attributes are innate and could be explained simply in biological terms.

Other agents of socialisation go further to reinforce what we take from childhood.

Education plays an important role in secondary socialisation because of the number of years spent there. By this stage a child will already have a sense of his/her gender. Up until the 70's and 80's the educational system had a strong masculine aura. Textbooks often used male examples and reading books were stereotypically gendered, for example, the Janet and John books, portrayed women in a narrow role such as helping mother in the kitchen and wearing dresses whilst the boys were out playing, getting dirty etc.

It wasn't until recently (1988) that women were even allowed to learn the same subjects at school, when the national curriculum act came in, this allowed girls the freedom and opportunity to choose what subjects they wanted to study, however, you still find that today, girls tend to choose the 'softer', more essay based subjects, (psychology, sociology, media etc) and boys tend to choose the slightly harder ones (maths, physics, chemistry etc.).

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There is also the 'informal curriculum' this is what we pick up from the environment around us whilst we are at school, for example, the uniforms, boys wearing ties, girls wearing skirts and the type of language used by different genders and how they interact with each other. From the playground in a primary school giving off messages, the boys taking up space to play football whilst the girls are standing around talking, to female teachers asking the boys to help them move tables, this is showing us that in education today there are still many influences that shows girls what is and what isn't socially acceptable.

Our peers are a huge influence on how we should behave. Peer groups can exert pressure so that people accept the dominant norms and values of those of similar age, status and more importantly, gender. We have all heard of 'peer pressure', this is just that, as everyone feels the need to have friends, to be accepted and people tend to like people that are like themselves. So it is all too easy to be socialised by peer groups, especially in school. For girls, peer groups show them what they should and shouldn't be doing. You can see this as groups of young girls all tend to spend a lot of time on the phone together, gossiping, talking about boys, sharing make-up tips. Things that boys of the same age certainly wouldn't be doing!

The media all around us gives off messages and the media produces gender-specific consumer products. Even when the product is the same (e. g. deodorant or cars) it is marketed and sold differently to males and females.

There are films directed at women (chick flicks) and novels alike (chick lit).

There are magazines in which women can buy, directed specifically at

women, these magazines can tell you what you should be wearing, when you  
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should be wearing it, what the latest hairstyle is, where to shop and can even give you advice on how to structure your week so you can fit in looking after the children, going to work and doing the housework!

These magazines, although give off the image they are portraying women in a strong and independent role, are actually doing the opposite and are still stereotyping females. All the women shown in magazines are notoriously thin, fashionable and beautiful, making women feel as though that's what they should look like. We can actively choose what we watch on the television and which magazines we do read, however, to a degree, it is all around us. The adverts that are on in between programs we watch, the posters on bus shelters and billboards etc.

Even shopping catalogues show what is and isn't suitable for the genders, for example, the Argos catalogue. The girl's toys pages are in all light, pastel colours and show the girls in 'pretty party dresses' etc. Quite a contrast to the boy's which are in dark colours and show them crashing around with toy aeroplanes and so on. As you can see media is a strong influence as it is all around us constantly reinforcing the appropriate roles for females.

Religion, although we aren't living in such a religion-dominated society these days, gender roles are reinforced through this as we all get taught in schools the basics and principles of various religions, as R. E (religious education) is on our national curriculum, this links is with socialisation in education. Many faiths offer an image of a male God and teach traditional marriage and gender roles. Many religious ceremonial roles are carried out by males with

women only supporting them, for example, vicars in churches are usually men.

Linking into media, there is a popular television program called *The Vicar of Dibley*, about a female vicar. Whilst this program is a comedy, it has stronger implications and shows the troubles and prejudices the vicar has to face being a woman. These sorts of things give off the image that although in the 'olden days' there was an ideology that men were dominant and more important, religion still has traces of this belief and can show girls certain behaviours and traditions that are seen as 'socially acceptable'.

In the workplace there are agents that reinforce strongly a women's role in society. In business, you tend to see that women are still getting paid less than their male equivalents and the 'glass ceiling' still exists, this is where women can get promoted and move higher up in the business yet, they can't quite get to the top, they are so close they can 'see' everyone just above them but they just can't break through the metaphoric ceiling and move up to the top positions in business. This gives off a message that, in business, males are more dominant and women aren't as equal as our 'modern-day equal opportunist's society' likes to boast.

In conclusion, there are still traditional gender roles in our society that emphasise the dominance and power of men, encouraging and reinforcing that women should be more passive and domestic. However, there is more awareness today and these roles are forever being challenged, for example, the new 'ladette culture' that has come about recently, where girls and

young women are taking on what has traditionally been male behaviour, ladettes involve themselves in binge drinking, casual sex and swearing.

Also the 'poxy cupid' where in schools the slightest hint of sexism, is being challenged by fierce female pupils, behaviour designed to scare the teachers and even the most dominant males. Despite this, the roles we are 'taught' are still very powerful and influential because they are socialised into children from birth in the home, then reinforced in wider society, having an impact on their adult roles and personalities.