

Socialization of gender roles from a young age



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

If you've ever wondered why you felt compelled to behave in a manner specific to your sex, you've been socialized into a certain gender role. There is first a distinction to be made between your 'sex' and your 'gender.' Your 'sex' refers to your biology as either male or female. Your gender describes which set of characteristics you associate with socially (masculine, feminine, male, or female). These are key concepts to understand before delving into the socialization of gender roles.

Socialization is the process by which customs, norms, or ideologies are inherited (Arndorfer & Stormshak, 2008), and it plays a large part in your development as what society deems a 'man' or a 'woman.' Socialization occurs over a wide range of topics, such as ideals about races/racism, stereotypes, economics, and politics, to name a few. This paper, however, is an exploration into the core of gender identity and a juxtaposition of gender identity between males and females from a young age into adulthood. The examples will shed light on many socialized behaviors and also clarify the reasoning behind androgynous behaviors/development.

Early On

Believe it or not, gender socialization starts just as soon as the nurses dress a child after birth. A girl is dressed in pink and a boy in blue. The blue outfit might include some kind of sports reference such as a baseball glove or a football where the pink outfit might come with flowers or other flashy colors. From the youngest of ages, the female gender is assigned 'feminine' colors and attributes and the males 'masculine' ones. As soon as the child gets home, family and friends begin to identify with the baby's gender and offer

the baby gifts accordingly. For example, a boy will receive 'action figures' while a girl gets a 'doll.' A boy gets a Big Wheels or a Tonka electronic miniature truck while a girl gets a doll house complete with a dish-washing station, laundry facilities, rooms, and chores. The list goes on, but one can identify with these early examples of socialization.

Socialization of this kind is not only present in the activities of the child but also in parents or adults. An adult's reaction to something a child does or plays with is often an indicator of their own socialization. For example, in an episode of the popular television series Friends, Ross becomes distraught over not being able to get his little boy to play with a monster truck over a doll, thus demonstrating Ross' masculine development. In research conducted by Hollingworth and Buysse, it was found that male children are often times scared into behaving as a man and involving themselves in so-called 'masculine' activities with punishment or shame otherwise (Hollingworth & Buysse, 2009). These and many other examples indicate the extreme socialization of the parents in such cases which becomes inherent in their own children. In light of this evidence, it's easy to see why traditional gender roles are slow to evolve; from the youngest ages, children are essentially being taught homophobia indirectly - that is to say, to stray from the box into which specific gender roles and attributes are assigned is to violate the social norms being taught to these children and thus to disappoint parents/adults. These are huge concepts to be instilling in young minds, and many are inherited non-verbally.

The Middle Years

As a child enters the school setting and becomes exposed to other children and the opposite sex, many of these values are reinforced by teachers, administration, school policies, and the other children themselves. The school setting begins the opportunity for friendships and interaction with peer groups. Friendship is described as "voluntary and reciprocated relationships between two or more children who exhibit a mutual liking for and attachment to one another, a frequent proximity to one another and engagement in shared activities, and evidence of enjoyment and positive affect" (Buysse, Goldman, West, & Hollingsworth, 2008). Same-sex and other-sex friendships both provide an opportunity for peer-rejection and the development of antisocial behavior over time, and thus shape a person's interpretation of the world around them (Arndorfer & Stormshak, 2008). Accordingly, a child who experiences exclusion from the opposite sex develops an underlying hostility toward that sex and generally doesn't relate well with it. As demonstrated by many adults, hostility between people of the same sex revert to gender-socialized means of handling a conflict. For example, men who clash usually assert their dominance, raise their voices, and perhaps even get physical. Women who clash become passive, hold grudges, perhaps argue, but overall do their best to avoid confrontation. These could easily be imitations of what that child saw in his/her own household between parent and parent, parent and friend, parent and other adult, or in the school or public setting between peers, other adults, or elders.

Early friendships provide the framework for establishing relationships for the rest of one's life, which is why children who demonstrate difficulty

establishing peer-relationships and other-sex relationships early on may be at risk for communicative problems at an older age (Hollingworth & Buysse, 2009). Since these kids have been socialized from a young age to understand the framework of being a man or woman, it is especially difficult for them to cope with falling short of those requirements, and is most often communicated non-verbally through antisocial behavior and/or lashing out against others from his/her peer groups (Calkins & Keane, 2009).

Teen-Age Development

As a child becomes a teenager, the box into which they've been taught to fit becomes increasingly more important. The unspoken attributes of 'the box' suddenly have names and definitions. The following is a short (incomplete) illustration of the concept:

Masculine Feminine

Strong Good Looking

Tough Tempered

Assertive Protective

Intelligent A good leader

Kind Instinctual

'Manly'

Cut

Responsible

Pretty athletic but not cut

well-kept assertive but not dominant

Good Cook cleanliness

Submissive gentle

Good with kids long hair

Good with chores makeup

Organized 'lady-like'

Even this very incomplete and non-universal list demonstrates the extreme closeness to which males and females must adhere to either feminine or masculine qualities, especially in high school. In high school, sports also become a prominent descriptor of masculine or feminine qualities. Men play sports like hockey, football, and baseball, while sports like dance, cheer leading, color-guard, softball and volleyball are often reserved for the "less resilient" females. A male who dances, for example, doesn't fit the masculine agenda and therefore is labeled as homosexual.

Many young homosexuals of this age fight an even tougher battle: repression of self. Homosexuals are taunted, tortured, teased, and bullied for challenging the social boxes. A study conducted by Sally Theran concluded that "girls experience a relational impasse in adolescence during which they are forced to choose between maintaining relationships and advancing their

own sense of self" (Theran, 2009). As a result, girls, too, are forced to repress themselves upon discovering that a balance between the two is unattainable. She goes on to say that girls " end up maintaining inauthentic relationships, thus culminating in lower 'level of voice'" (Theran, 2009). Perhaps this is the unconscious reasoning behind the submissive nature of women, or at least that which is dictated by society.

Adulthood

Adulthood is the culmination and maintenance of this socialization. That is not to say that ideals don't ever change; certainly one grows up and out of the high school stage. These learned/inherited qualities last forever, though. Prime examples are found throughout the Republican party; in fact, their conservative nature is absolutely an attempt to maintain the social values instilled in them from a young age.

One culmination of these values in an adult is not to either extreme, however. Androgynous development is a mix of the two boxes, masculine and feminine. Now, some of these qualities are inherited and some are purely integral, but it cannot be argued that socialization was never involved. In the homes of young androgynous people was most likely a liberal attitude toward the world. Open mindedness toward topics such as homosexuality, feminism, outcasts, politics, and more have proven to have a heavy hand in androgynous development. An androgynous male has not bought all of what the media sells are pure masculinity. Jackson Katz, an anti-sexist speaker and author, promotes androgynous viewpoint as " the

solution to misrepresented masculinity in the media" in his film, *Tough Guise* (Katz, 1999).

Conclusion

In any case, it's socialization that has brought us to where we are in this world. Our ideals about gender identity have been formed from birth and through a series of stages. From the nurses in the delivery room, to parents, to peers, teachers, and other adults, our vision of male or female has been built into us over time. Our identity as male or female is important but it is more important to understand how we arrived at that identity and why. A better understanding of this leads to a better understanding of self, our peers, and the world around us.