The development of gender roles in modern world

Sociology, Identity

The development of individualistic identity is perhaps the way that we best define ourselves as human, and the first steps in this process begin with gender. Gender identity, or an “ image of oneself as relatively masculine or feminine in characteristics” (Berk, 2014, p. 215), has been conceptualized in many different ways. Views range from Lawrence Kohlberg’s simplistic definition of “ knowing one’s sex,” to the degree one perceives oneself as conforming to gender stereotypes, to a fundamental sense of belonging (Perry, 2006, p. 563). Susan Egan and David Perry proposed a more multidimensional view of gender identity, suggesting five areas that contributed to the whole. These components are membership knowledge (knowledge of oneself belonging to a gender), gender typicality (feelings of similarity to others within that gender), gender contentedness (satisfaction with being that gender), pressure felt to conform to gender stereotypes, and intergroup bias (the feeling that one’s sex is superior to the other) (Perry, 2006, p. 563). This dynamic view of gender identity deals with more than just the physical knowledge of being either male or female, looking more into the overall sense one makes of that belonging. While knowledge of one’s gender comes quite young, forming an identity is a process that spans an entire lifetime.

Membership knowledge beings early, around age three. At this point, children are aware of whether they are a boy or a girl. However, gender constancy, the understanding that gender does not change based on clothes worn or toys played with (Berk, 2014, p. 215), does not develop until about age six. Soon after gender constancy is settled, the other aspects that form identity begin to emerge. Gender typing, the association of objects,

activities, or traits with one sex or the other in stereotypical ways, develops and plays a role in this identity as well. Both a child's home life and school relations help to strengthen gender typing. Cultural stereotypes have different expectations of girls and boys, and this is reflected in the expectations placed on children by their parents. Girls are encouraged to display more nurturing, " lady-like" qualities (Berk, 2014, p. 214), while boys are supported in their independence and competitiveness. This parental molding supports children's development of felt pressure to conform to gender stereotypes; with gender contentedness arising around the same time.

By age three, children have already begun to show preference for playing with others of their own sex. This is strengthened in the preschool years, with girls preferring the quieter, cooperative play of other girls; and boys preferring the active, competitive play of other boys. Same-sex peers play a heavy role in the solidification of gender typing in each other, supporting play that is considered gender-typical in the two sexes, while criticizing " cross-gender" play, especially in boys (Berk, 2014, p. 215). The two sexes also develop drastically different styles of social interaction. Boys tend to have a more domineering style, relying on command and force to get what they want in social groups. Girls, on the other hand, have a more sensitive social presence, with a strong awareness and consideration for the feelings of others. Because of this disconnect, the sexes begin to associate less and less with each other. It is in tandem with that social change that children develop gender contentedness and begin to show " intergroup cognitions"

(Perry, 2006, p. 564), such as hostility towards the other sex and a feeling of superiority for one's own.

The development of gender roles takes place quite young as well, with an ability to rudimentarily distinguish between the sexes appearing as young as infancy. Researchers Diane Ruble and Carol Martin separated the study of gender role development into four different sections: concepts or beliefs, gender identity or self-perception, verbalized gender preferences, and display of gender-typed behaviors (Perry, 2006, p. 566). The sense of what is appropriate for one's sex, such as clothes worn or toys played with, is already present by ages two to three, a sense which strengthens through the toddler and preschool years. As children enter middle childhood, their expanding knowledge of gender stereotypes is balanced by their advancing cognitive development, which allows for more flexible views of gender roles. Trends for verbalization of gender preferences progress alongside stereotype knowledge, becoming well-established by age five.

As children enter adolescence, they develop an especial concern for their gender typicality – the amount that they are similar to others of the same sex. A theory by Hill and Lynch in 1983 suggested that this is a time of gender intensification, or " increased gender stereotyping of attitudes and behaviors, and movement towards a more traditional gender identity" (Berk, 2014, p. 328). However, research on this has yielded varied results, with some studies showing evidence of this but others finding little. Gender intensification, where it does appear, tends to be stronger in girls. Though

still less gender-typed than boys, some girls may feel less free to act outside gender stereotypes than they felt in middle childhood.

For those teenagers that do display gender intensification, it is likely that biological, social, and cognitive factors are all involved. With the onset of puberty and the sex differences it throws into relief, teenagers may begin to think of themselves in more sex-linked ways. The physical changes may also prompt parents to push “ gender-appropriate” activities more than they did before (Berk, 2014, p. 328). An increased concern for what others think of them may also make teenagers more aware of gender role expectations. Though gender intensification tends to decline by late adolescence, not all adolescents move past it as easily as others. In general, teenagers who are encouraged to have non-gender-typed experiences and question gender stereotypes tend to develop more androgynous gender identities; they show a strong degree of both masculine and feminine personality traits. Teenagers with androgynous identities have been shown to have better psychological health, including boosted self-confidence, a willingness to express their opinions, and identity-achievement.

It is during adolescence that the identity of the individual begins to develop as well. Teenagers are able to examine many different aspects of the self, constructing a realistic view of their strengths and weaknesses as a person. This evaluative ability, along with the high levels of self-esteem that teenagers tend to experience, allows for the cognitive foundation of identity. Erik Erikson’s psychosocial theory attributes the development of identity to the criteria of exploration and commitment. James Marcia broke this stage

further down into four “ identity statuses”: identity achievement, in which an individual has had ample time to reflect on and make a commitment to their identity; identity memoratum, in which an individual is in the process of reflection and commitment; identity foreclosure, in which a person has made an identity commitment without reflection; and identity diffusion, in which an individual has given little concern to identity (Jackson, 2010, p. 207).

Adolescents take various paths through these statuses, with some remaining in one while others traverse many. Often teenagers will transition from the “ lower” statuses of foreclosure and diffusion to the higher statuses of memoratum and achievement. Teenagers who go to college experience more identity progress than they did during high school, given the many exploratory opportunities that college presents them. Those who go from high school directly to work often develop a self-definition earlier than their collegiate counterparts, but are at a higher risk for identity foreclosure or diffusion should they encounter occupational obstacles because of their lack of higher education (Berk, 2014, p. 319).

During middle age, an interesting change takes place in a person’s gender identity. Many studies show that women become more masculine during middle age, while men become more feminine. Women begin to display such characteristics as increased confidence and forcefulness, with men developing emotional sensitivity and dependence. These trends appear in both Western industrialized nations and village societies (as cited by Berk, 2014, p. 430). Though the existence of this change is well-documented, its causes are not agreed upon. The evolutionary “ parental imperative theory”

suggests that parents identify with traditional gender roles while actively parenting to ensure the survival of their children, but are then free to show their " other gender" selves once the children reach adulthood (as cited by Berk, 2014, p. 430).

This account has only found scattered support, however. Though children's departure from the home can correlate to the development of feminine traits in men, it does not equally correlate to masculine trait emergence in women. Rather, this role reversal may be a response to other demands that are placed on a midlife identity. Men may feel a need to enrich their marriage now that the children are gone, and thus explore more emotional sensitivity. Women on the other hand are increasingly likely to experience economic and social disadvantages compared to their male counterparts; including divorce, widowhood, and discrimination in the workplace. It is perhaps in response to these difficulties that women develop more self-sufficient traits. Clearly, the development of identity is a dynamic and constant process throughout life, becoming more complex as we age. From knowing what gender one identifies with, to learning how to come to terms with one's " other gender" side; it is the quest to discover and establish this self, both within and without gender, that defines our humanity.