

The factors that influence gender identity essay sample

[Literature](#), [Russian Literature](#)



What does one mean when they talk about gender? Gender must be defined before the factors influencing it can be identified. Are gender identities classified as male, female? Or is there a much more complex way at looking at what we constitute as gender. " Gender identity...a from sense of ourselves as either male or female." (Patrice Dow-Nelson, 2003). But this definition is far too simple as words such as feminine and masculine have connotations attached to them which can alter peoples view on what constitutes gender. Gender roles and gender identities are ever changing so it raises an interesting question can factors influence gender at different times of development and do different factors have different levels of significance at different times in our lives.

If we define gender as being whether one is male or female then there is a strong case that sexual developmental factors have a great influence on gender. To identify someone as male or female then three categories are looked at before the determination is made. Genetic make-up, as in the presence or absence of a Y-chromosome; internal genitalia; and external genitalia. If a person has female chromosomes, female internal genitalia, and female external genitalia then they can be reasonably concluded to be female.

The first stage of male or female development begins with the inheritance of sex chromosomes. Females have two X-chromosomes (XX); males have XY. Human's always inherit one X from their mother, and then either an X or Y from their father. The Y-chromosome inherited by the father controls the development of the testes from the foetal gonad, via a series of instructions.

If after 12-13 weeks no instruction has been given, that is there is an absence of a Y-chromosome, the foetal gonad develops into an ovary.

The hormone MIH controls the Mullarian system, which influences the development of the female internal genitalia; Androgens, particularly Testosterone, control the Wolffian system which influences the development of male internal genitalia (Corning, 1921). The external genitalia develop from a common structure that consists of labial-scrotal swelling, the urogenital fold, the urogenital groove and the glans. Unless instructed by the relevant process to become a male, these structures become the external and internal labia, the bottom two thirds of the vagina and the clitoris. If instructed to become a male the structures become the scrotum, the shaft of the penis and the glans penis (Spaulding, 1921)

Using the definition of gender as being either male or female, inherited sex chromosomes at conception, along with the release of certain hormones during the foetal process can be used as a case for important factors influencing gender identity. This factor is however too simplistic and has a number of flaws. Genetics does not answer the question of why can peoples gender identities change over time. Your genes are inherited and if it is agreed that they cannot fluctuate over time, then there is no genetic answer for those that start with a gender at birth, defined by their genetic make up, and grow to alter their gender identity due to other factors.

The fact that we have gender specific words which can apply to both male and female, must imply that gender identities are not solely exclusive to

genetic or biological appearances. The words we associate with masculine; 'macho', for example can be given to women, however the women who exhibit and fit into the definition of the word are seen more like men than women. These women are still biologically women but display 'manly' features. Can this be what gender is? Is gender not just what a person is biologically; can it be the way a person behaves? If so then how human have's come to decide what is acceptable behaviour for the opposing genders.

From a very young age, once a child has been identified as being male or female, the parents of that child along with all the other social characters it may interact with treat the child according to its gender classification. Boys play with guns, girls play with dolls. If a baby in a pram wears a blue outfit it is commonly assumed to be a boy. The possibility that the baby may be wearing clothes that belonged to an older sibling is not usually considered.

At school, teachers expect young boy's to be boisterous and clumsy, while girls are expected to be quiet and diligent. The nursery rhyme which calls girls 'sugar and spice and everything nice', while the boys were 'frogs and snails and puppy dogs tails'; this shows the expectations of boys and girls from an early age. Even as adults, people whose gender identities do not conform to the gender roles that their sex should have are stigmatised in our society. "When did Girls get so Brutal?" (Daily Mail May 16th 2000), an article depicting the violent assault, robbery and murder of an OAP, showed how these acts were seen as so much worse because they were committed by young girls.

These stereotypes that occur shape the way the different genders are perceived and expected to behave. These are our gender roles and gender identities that don't conform to these roles are seen as abnormal. It is however notable that the way society treats an individual can still not fully shape their gender identity. Society does play a major part in influencing gender identity but there is an argument that hormones released into the body at certain time, be normal or abnormal, can greatly influence the gender identity of a person.

A case that gives evidence for this argument is that of identical twin boys. During circumcision, at 5 months, the penis of one of the boys was burned off. Deciding that the child could not function as a boy the doctors performed a sex change operation. The child was renamed and then socialised by the mother as a girl. This 'boy' took on the gender role of a 'girl', but during puberty the 'girl' was having problems with 'her' sexuality. Studied again later 'she' was now living very happily and comfortably as a 'man' (Diamond and Sigmundson, 1997). This person had not only changed their perceived gender role, but had rejected the gender identity that had been formed for them.

There are two syndromes that can affect genetic girls. One PIH (Progesterone induced hermaphroditism). This is a mild case and causes slight changes to the external genitalia and some behavioural changes. Female behaviour is not uniform and can range from 'tom boy', to 'girly girl'. PIH girls sit at the 'male' extreme, yet have no problems with their gender identity. CVAH (Congenital virilizing adrenal hyperphasia) is a more serious syndrome. The

adrenal gland produces steroid hormones, which in large doses act as androgens; 'male makers'. This happens at the early stages of development and persists. At the mild end they are very like PIH girls, and the changes to the external genitalia can be corrected. However, at the extreme end it is difficult to know how to categorise the child. These are usually brought up as boys but are very confused about their gender identity and are often extremely unhappy and depressed.

Another case is that of Pseudo-hermaphrodites. They are genetic males with male internal genitalia but due to the foetal tissue being non responsive to testosterone, their external genitalia is predominantly female. At puberty the sex organs do begin to respond and the external genitalia begins to resemble that of a male. These 'machehembra', as they are sometimes called, are raised as girls but at puberty switch to being men (Imperato-McGinley et al., 1979). This study suggests that social environment is not important, but due to the fact that all the cases were of related individuals it is not altogether clear.

From the evidence what influences gender identity is very complex. This is because gender and gender identity are not the same thing. One's gender can be allocated as being inherited and controlled by the sex chromosomes; however gender identity seems in some cases to be unstable. It can be influenced by many things. In the case described earlier; the botched circumcision, when found living as a 'man', the subject claimed to have always felt something was wrong. At a young age his sex organs had been changed to make his gender female but he felt that the identity that came

with this was not suitable for him. It seems like foetal hormones play a big role in gender specific behaviour and perhaps there is some influence on gender identity as well, but that is too simple a solution. So many factors come into affect making it a very subjective phenomenon. People see their own gender identity as something that is appropriate to their own bodies, and there is no simple answer to a governing body that can determine a person's gender identity.