Stereotypical gender characteristics

How Stereotypical Gender Characteristics are Shaped by Society

Generally, when comparing the differences between males and females, you immediately think of their biological body parts. However, there is another way to differentiate males and females; by their behaviours. Males and females are commonly associated with opposing characteristics. That is to say, men are generally seen as being more aggressive while women are associated to being more nurturing (Shaw, 150 class lecture, Oct 19). What is it exactly that creates this difference in behaviour? Some sociologists suggest that it is due to biological factors. However, I believe that these differences in behaviour are the result of society's influences. The social process known as gender socialization is established in early childhood and further developed and supported throughout life (Shaw, 150 class lecture, Oct 19). At an early age, you are introduced to gender differences by your parents. Throughout your childhood and adolescence, these gender roles are supported by the media, the schools and your peers. If you consider some of the other cultures in the world you will notice that the behaviours of the males and females there aren't the same as what we expect here in North America (Haaland & Schaefer, 2009). I believe that gender isn't defined by one's biological sex but rather the stereotypical behaviours that are constructed by society. In this essay, I will be addressing a few important agents of socialization and their impact in constructing these stereotypical gender roles.

Parents: The first agent of socialization

From the moment you entered this world, your parents applied social and cultural stereotypes about femininity and masculinity on to you (Haaland &

Schaefer, 2009). They did so by pre-selecting the colours of your room, your wardrobe, the toys you play with and when you were old enough, they designated certain chores for you to do (Peters, 1994). All these factors played a crucial role in the gender socialization process. For all you girls, your parents probably gave you a pink room, made you wear dresses and gave you dolls and easy-bake ovens to play with. They probably described you as being " pretty", " cute", " sweet" or " angelic" rather than being " tough", " rugged" or " strong" (Haaland & Schaefer, 2009). In a study about the distribution of chores at home, the boys were more likely to end up with maintenance, yard and car work where as girls were more likely to be given housework like laundry and dishwashing (Peters, 1994). Because of this designation, boys and girls grow up performing the tasks that they are more familiar with.

When you consider the types of toys that parents buy for their children, you will notice a general trend. Boys tend to get cars, trucks, building blocks and action figures (Martin, 1998). The toy cars and trucks establish an early interest in vehicles. The building blocks emulate construction work and architecture. The action figures not only suggest physical play but they also illustrate the ideal body image of men. If you look at the male action figures these days, they all illustrate exaggerated muscular characteristics (Haaland & Schaefer, 2009). It is likewise for the girls. However, instead of getting cars and blocks, they get Barbie dolls and baby simulation dolls. The Barbie dolls had equally exaggerated body images. They left the impression that girls needed have ultra thin figures (Haaland & Schaefer, 2009). These toys all

served a common purpose of establishing what it means to be a " boy" and a " girl".

Parents also had control over what movies and TV shows they wanted their kids to watch. This leads to the next agent of socialization; the media.

The Subtle Messages Expressed by the Media
The media has a very strong influence in gender socialization. When I say the media, I am referring to Disney movies, Saturday morning cartoons and video games. Disney movies were a huge part of every childhood. In a video regarding the gender stereotypes portrayed in Disney films, men and women were commonly portrayed in regards to their stereotypes (Shaw, 150 Lecture). That is to say, men were all illustrated as brave, muscular, aggressive people who always save the day with physical violence. Women were portrayed as being thin, delicate, helpless people who always needed to be saved by the males. Children are very impressionable, so of course they will want to be just like their favourite Disney characters. How will they go about doing this? By emulating these stereotypical behaviours.

Cartoons and video games only help to support these stereotypes (Dietz, 1998). In cartoons and video games, you are more likely to see male protagonists who save the day. Also, you are very likely to see females either as the support character who cheers on the male protagonist on his goals or as the helpless damsel in distress. Video games are no different. Take the Mario brother for example. Here you see two male heroes who have to save a princess from a monster. Movies, cartoons and video games are all

the same in the sense that they either lack representation or misinterpret females (Butler, Ciccone, Petrin, Rawlings, & Yi, 2002).

Peer Pressure and the Hidden Curriculum

The next major agents of socialization are the peers and the school. It is through the parents and media that the gender roles are learned. It is at school with teachers and friends that these gender roles are reinforced. In the study conducted by Martin (1998), she observed the daily behaviours of pre-school students. Martin noticed that the boys tended to play with building blocks where as the girls liked to play dress up. When it came to clothing, boys wore primary colours, black, green and orange (Martin, 1998). Girls were commonly seen to be wearing pink. It was observed that about 61% of the girls in the class were wearing pink and roughly 25% were wearing dresses. The girls were frequently complimented by the teacher as looking very pretty and cute (Martin, 1998). Another aspect that Martin examined was the typical sitting behaviour of the children. This was classified as being either relaxed or formal. It was observed that 80% of the boys sat " relaxed" while 82% of the girls sat in a " formal" manner (Martin, 1998). Martin also noticed that the teacher reinforced formal sitting behaviour more strongly for the girls than for the boys.

Not only were the teachers supporting appropriate gender behaviours but fellow peers were as well. In this situation, one little girl wearing a dress-like shirt is leaning her body over to create a " tunnel". As she leans, her shirt rises up exposing her back. This is when another female student comes and pulls the shirt back over her bare skin and gives it a pat to keep it in place (Martin, 1998). This illustrates two things: one of them is that fellow peers

reinforce the " appropriate" gender behaviours and that these " appropriate" behaviours are already imbedded into children at a very young age.

These " appropriate" gender behaviours are continually followed and further developed throughout elementary, secondary and post secondary. In an experiment conducted on university students (Haaland & Schaefer, 2009), students were asked to behave in ways that they regarded to be violating gender norms. Even at the university level, these students identified the same associating gender behaviours as they would have in their childhood.

Cultural Differences Lead to Differences in Gender Behaviours
Although you may believe that all males and females act as we expect them to, you are not entirely correct (Haaland & Schaefer, 2009). Gender behaviours vary from culture to culture. An anthropologist by the name of Margaret Mead explains her findings in favour of gender socialization. If biology did in fact determine the differences between the sexes then cross-cultural differences, like the ones that Mead encountered, should not exist (Haaland & Schaefer, 1998). In her studies of three different cultures in New Guinea she noticed that the behaviours of the males and females differed quite significantly (Haaland & Schaefer, 2009). Mead describes the typical behaviours of the three cultures:

" In one [the Arapesh], both men and women act as we expect women to act-in a mild parental responsive way; in the second [the Mundugumor], both act as we expect men to act-in a fierce initiating fashion; and in the third [the Tchambuli], the men act according to our stereotypes for women-are

catty, wear curls, and go shopping-while the women are energetic, managerial, unadorned partners."

As we can see, the different cultures are a crucial factor in determining the differences in behaviours between the sexes. If males and females were biologically meant to act and think in a certain way, then there wouldn't be so much variation between cultures.

Conclusion

In North America, we have the perception that males need to be aggressive, macho and muscular while females are thinner, smaller and more nurturing. These perceptions are taught to us at an early age and are reinforced throughout our lives. Starting from childhood, we begin to learn about and emulate these gender behaviours. With the help of our parents, Disney movies, toy figures, school and peers, these gender behaviours are more strongly embedded into our minds. Gender differences are constructed by society's influences. Mead clearly observed the presence of cultural conditioning and its effects on the three different cultures in New Guinea. Although our sexes are biologically defined, the way we associate our behaviours and characteristics are not. Our socialized genders are defined by the culture and society that surrounds us.

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