

Women are
essentially different
because of their
biology sociology
essay



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Gender is a range of characteristics of masculinity and femininity. It can refer to both sex (being male or female), social roles such as gender roles or gender identity. Gender and gender development originate from the moment of conception. When a female egg joins with a male sperm to form either a XY or XX chromosome pair, determining which developmental pathway will be taken (male or female). This will determine the physical sexual characteristics. Our sexual appearance as male or female has a significant and powerful influence on how we perceive ourselves and how others perceive us, which is essential when we later develop our gender identity (our inner sense of being male or female). Your gender determines your (expected) behaviour and the characteristics you are socialised into.

However there are some disagreements of whether men and women's gender is resultant of their biology, or the socialisation process they have been through. This is also known as the "nature vs. nurture" argument, whether gender and your gender identities and roles are constructed biologically and naturally or through the effect that people in your life have had over you growing up. In this essay I will be discussing how gender can be explained from both the biological perspective and the social perspective in order to answer the question of whether sociology can in fact explain it.

Clearly there is no doubt that females and males differ biologically, however do we form our gender roles according to the influence and ideas of our society, or do the biological predispositions outweigh the cultural influence?

Biological psychology regards gender identity as a resultant from our biological processes. Gender differences are seen as resulting from sex differences. In other words, women and men act, think and feel differently

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because of differences in how their brains work. These brain differences may result from chromosomal differences and may also be the result of hormonal differences.

Women and men produce different sex hormones in varying quantities. Besides affecting the functioning of various bodily organs (e. g. causing the menstrual cycle in women) these sex hormones appear to have an effect on behaviour. Testosterone, which is produced in greater quantities by men, affects several types of behaviour, some of which are regarded as ' typically male'. For example, Dabbs et al (1995) found that violent offenders had higher testosterone levels than non-violent offenders and Coates et al (2008) found that financial traders with higher testosterone levels took greater risks. Women have higher levels of oxytocin than men. Some researchers have linked this to increased sociability. Oxytocin seems to affect the formation of bonds and attachments between people and Klaver et al (2009) found that higher levels of oxytocin are linked to improved memory for faces.

Gorski et al (1985) injected female rats with testosterone for a period prior to birth. After they were born their appearance and behaviour was compared with a control group of females whose testosterone levels had been normal. The experimental group had masculinised genitals (e. g. an enlarged clitoris) and showed masculine behaviour (e. g. trying to mount other females). This showed that male sex hormones had both physiological and behavioural effects, in rats at least. It is clear from a range of studies involving humans and other animals that chromosomal and hormonal differences between males and females affect a range of masculine and feminine behaviours, <https://assignbuster.com/women-are-essentially-different-because-of-their-biology-sociology-essay/>

which supports the biological view. The biological view of gender is supported by those cross-cultural studies that have found universal features of gender. For example, in all cultures studied, men are found to be more aggressive than women, which suggest an innate, biological difference. Similarly, Buss et al (1990) studied what women and men look for in a potential mate in a large number of cultures and found that whilst men consistently prioritised youth and physical attractiveness, women placed a higher premium on wealth and status. These differences may reflect biological differences between women and men that have arisen because of evolutionary processes.

The definition of gender states that it is typically used with reference to social and cultural differences rather than biological ones. It can be argued that gender is the socially constructed expectation placed on a person as a result of their sex. We are born male and female but this does not make us a guy or a girl. Femininity and masculinity do not come from our genetic make-up, therefore the distinction between boy and girl is taught. If this was not the case then surely in every culture and society, every male and female would have the same masculinities and femininities?

In 1935 Margaret Mead conducted a field trip to Papua New Guinea for 2 years in attempt to discover what extent temperamental differences between the sexes were culturally determined rather than innate. Mead found a different pattern of female and male behaviour in each of the cultures she studies which were different from gender role expectations in the US at that time. Among the Arapesh the temperament for both females and males was gentle, responsive and cooperative. The Mundugumor (now <https://assignbuster.com/women-are-essentially-different-because-of-their-biology-sociology-essay/>)

Biwat), both males and females were violent, aggressive, seeking power and position. For the Tchambuli (now Chambri), males and females temperaments were distinct from each other. The women were dominant, impersonal, and managerial. The men were less responsible and more emotionally dependant. Through this study Mead separated biologically-based sex from socially constructed gender, demonstrating how individuals gender roles were part of our socialization process as if this was not the case, each of the tribes she studied although they were not close to each other, would have the same gender roles. Findings like this suggest that even though biological factors influence gender behaviour, they are heavily modified by learning.

Parental influences have a significant role in the formation of our gender roles. From the very first day of our lives, boys and girls are treated differently. Parents perceive boys to be stronger and rougher than girls, and girls to be prettier and more delicate than boys. Parents hold boys closer to their body than they do girls. They hold boys closer to their body and spend more time verbalizing and cooing to girls than boys. Parents are acting on their stereotypes of male and female behaviour.

Myers (1995) suggests that gender socialisation gives girl's roots and boy's wings. This suggests that girls are socialised to stay at home and boys are socialised to have adventures. Studies of children's books over the last 50 years have shown that girls are four times more likely to be shown using household objects (e. g. pots and pans) than boys who are five times more likely to be shown using production objects (e. g. machinery) than girls

(Crabb & Beilawski 1994). The result is, according to a United Nations study <https://assignbuster.com/women-are-essentially-different-because-of-their-biology-sociology-essay/>

(1991) “ everywhere cooking and dishwashing are the least shared household chores” and “ everywhere, woman do most of the household work”. These expectations define gender roles.

Lytton & Romney (1991) found that there was a significant difference in terms of encouragement of sex-typed play activities which reinforces the fact that girls and boys are treated differently from a young age. Will et al (1976) gave a boy aged 6 months to adults who he then observed whilst they played with the infant. The child was presented in sex-typed clothes, half the adults met the boy dressed in pink and known as “ Beth” and half met “ Adam” dressed in blue. Three toys were available: train, doll and fish. They found the doll was most often passed to Beth and she got more smiles, showing the typical gender stereotypes. Smith & Lloyd (1978) extended this study and found that “ boys” were most likely to be handed a toy hammer whilst “ girls” were given a doll, as well this, the boys were encouraged in physical action more than girls. Parents were also found to give more positive non-verbal responses to their 18-23 month-old children for picking up toys when the selected object was sex appropriate and a more negative response if the object was associated with the opposite sex (Caldera et al 1989).

Children are differentially reinforced with smiles and praise for the kinds of activities associated with their sex. Fagot (1978) found that girls were positively reinforced for activities such as dancing, dressing up and assisting with domestic tasks whilst boys were reinforced for more gross motor activities. To parents, gender is important. Behaving and acting in a way that fits with the femininities and masculinities that come with being a boy or girl.
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Facially and behaviourally it is often difficult to tell the different genders apart, especially with young babies, this leads to parents dressing their children differently, for example the tradition of girls in pink and boys in blue (Jackson 1992).

Although parents play a significant part in the formation of gender roles, the effect of the media must not be underestimated. Of the many influences of the portrayal of men and woman, the media is the most persuasive and one of the most powerful, woven throughout our daily lives and putting ideas and messages into our conscience at every turn.

A primary way that the media distort reality is through underrepresenting women. In prime-time television there are 3 times as many white men as woman (Barsow 1992), or in children's programs in which males outnumber females by two to one, or newscasts in which woman make up 16% of newscasters in which stories about men are included 10 times more often than ones about woman (" Study Reports Sex Bias", 1989). This constant distortion persuades and tempts us to believe that there are more men than women and further to this that men are the cultural standard.

According to J. A. Doyle (1989) children's television often portrays males as dominant, aggressive and engaged in exciting activities in which they get rewards from others for their " masculine" accomplishments. Television programmes for all ages disproportionally show men as serious, competent, powerful and with a high status position. Highly popular films such as Lethal Weapon, Die hard and all of the James Bond films star men who embody the extreme stereotype of masculinity, reinforcing the long-standing cultural

ideals of masculinity with men being tough, sexually aggressive, unafraid, violent and totally in control of all emotions. In no way feminine. On the other hand, males are also underrepresented in many ways through the media. J. D. Brown and K. Campbell (1986) point out that they are typically represented as incompetent at homemaking, cooking and childcare. Each season's new adverts for cooking and cleaning supplies include several that capture and portray men as incompetent fools, who are clumsy and no better at taking care of children. Media images also reflect cultural stereotypes of woman. Media has created two images of woman: good and bad. Good women are pretty, deferential, and focused on home, family and caring for others. Subordinate to men, they are normally cast as victims, angels or loyal wives and helpmates. The other image of women in the media offer us an evil homebody, being seen as a witch, bitch or sexual character who is represented as hard, cold aggressive, all the things a good woman is not meant to be. A good example of this bad woman character is Alex in Fatal Attraction who is an extreme version of how bad women are generally portrayed. In children's literature, we encounter witches and mean stepmothers as villains, with beautiful passive females like Snow White and Sleeping Beauty as their good counterparts. These reinforce the social norms for the role of being male or female, from a young age and throughout individuals life's.

Having seen the Medias stereotypical portrayals of woman and men, we find that the relationship between both sexes is similarly portrayed in ways that reinforce stereotypes, starting with women's dependence and men's independence. The Little Mermaid significantly highlights female's

dependence on males for identity, with the Little Mermaid giving up her identity to be accepted by her lover. Analysis of MTV revealed that it portrays females as passive and waiting for men's attention, while males are shown ignoring, exploiting and directing women (Brown, Campbell & Fisher, 1986). In rap music videos and many advertisements, woman's primary roles appear to be objects of male desires. Manifesting male dominance and female subservience. Men are usually shown positioned above women and women are more frequently pictures in varying degrees of undress. The media often uses gender as a tool for comedy. The television series *Two and a Half men* is almost completely about gender, and represents women as objects of sexual pleasure for the main character. Even the theme song "men, men, manly men" foreshadows the overall theme of gender stereotypes.

The final 2 significant ways the media portrays women and men is with men's authority and women's incompetence and woman as the primary caregivers and men as breadwinners. One of the most persuasive ways in which the media do this is through commercials. Woman are shown routinely anguishing over dirty floors and bathrooms only to be relieved of their distress when "Mr Clean" shows up and tells them how to keep their homes spotless. Magazines play a key role in promoting pleasing others as a primary focus of women's lives. K. Pierce's study (1990) found magazines aimed at women stress looking good and doing things to please others. Telling women how to be "me, only better" by dyeing their hair to look younger, how to lose weight so "you'll still be attractive to him" and how to prepare gourmet meals so "he's always glad to come home". Constantly

these advertisements emphasize pleasing others, especially men, as central to being a woman and the message is lined with the warning that if a woman fails to look good and please, her man might leave (Rakow, 1992).

In conclusion it can be argued that sociology will never fully be able to define gender as we are born with certain biological traits that will always be there and unarguably play a part in our gender. However in answering what gender is, there is constant recognition of our gender roles that come with our gender. The masculinities and femininities of being a man or a woman. These are significantly influenced by our exposure to certain socialisation tools starting at a young age with our parents to then being influenced by numerous external forces throughout our lives such as the media. Sociology is not able to provide a clear definition of our gender as it is primarily biological but gender could be seen as irrelevant without our gender roles which come with our sex, which in theory sociology can help explain and define.