

# Two perspectives on the psychology of sex and gender flashcard



The notion of what it is to be a man or woman is a hugely difficult subject to pin. There is a multitude of research into the differences between the sexes, some of which is demonstrated here in this essay. Biological accounts of what it is to be a man or woman present the biological evidence; characteristics such as the biochemistry involved (genes, hormones or molecules) and the imaging studies which have shown differences the brains of men and women. With all this taken into account, the social constructionist perspective uses the discourses created about masculinity and femininity within society, and how individuals reate their own gender through experience. This essay favours the biological perspective; being descriptive in its prose.

The first section focuses on the physical aspects of what it is to be a man or woman. This is further developed in the next section by discussing the discourse generated within society. Other areas which are explored are the cognitive differences between boys and girls, and the notion of masculinity and femininity. An area that has been researched is the physical characteristics of humans and in a small proportion of cases it is unreliable. The physical characteristics e. g.

sexing of humans is not as straight forward as it appears; although from the observation of the anatomical characteristics of a neonate has been more than 98 per cent reliable (Holloway, Cooper, Johnston and Stevens, 2003), the mechanical pressures of vaginal birth and hormones produced by the mother can cause swelling of areas around the genitalia of the baby which can lead to the wrong sexing. Although the physical characteristics of a human at birth may have been determined wrongly, the neonatal infant may

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develop the identity of the opposite sex later on in life; as could an individual whose sex has been correctly determined. This is an argument Social constructionists would use to demonstrate that the behaviour of an individual cannot be fully explained by their biological make up alone. An important point from this argument is that there is this notion of oppositeness; male/female, masculinity/femininity.

Even before we are born, anticipatory socialization is taking place, for example another member of the family may state `it`s going to be a boy and he`s going to be fireman` or the opposite `it`s definitely going to be a girl and she` going to be a nurse` or a child at an early age may begin to identify with a type of work that in western society is identifiable with male or female gender. So, from birth onwards we are categorized as either male or female, Thorn (1993) state`s that `children play in increasingly gender segregated ways, with crossing of gender boundaries only allowed under particular circumstances`. This demonstrates that at an early age children are constructing meaning of through discourse and play. From a biological psychological view, researchers have discovered sexual imorphic brain regions, although, `researchers generally do not find sex differences in these brain regions in children less than 6 - 10 years old` (Hofman and Swaab, 1991). These regions have been researched in animals and have been tested by using Magnetic Resonance Imaging in humans.

Cooke (1998) says that these regions are harder to describe consistently in humans than in other animals. These imaging studies that have shown differences in the brains of male and female are almost always conducted in Western countries; this may not be a true reflection of male and female brain  
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differences overall; this may possibly be due to plasticity within the brain.

Although this research finding is an important factor, we cannot dismiss the influence of hormones and the effects of genes on an individual's sex difference or dismiss the discourse used to construct individual meanings of gender. Social constructionists would argue that the physical differences between sexes are a signpost to which gender difference is attached.

For example: research into masculinity in schools by observation and discourse analysis, suggest two themes, one of which is ... masculine identities are constructed through power relations..

. partly produced by having control over others, access to resources of some kind, or special social status or practices that others do not have. (Wetherell, 1996). To support this notion Francis (1997, 1998) observed school children (aged 7 to 11 years) in imaginary play. Francis found that children played in gender typical roles; boys took on typically masculine roles and the girls took on typically feminine roles. Francis interprets the children's constructions of oppositional gender roles to be part of a process of identity maintenance.

(Gove and Watt, 2004) Money and Erhardt (1972) conducted a study of differences in behaviour and cognitive skills between boys and girls. They looked for a correlation between the effects of progesterin on girls and if they were more masculinized than other girls whom had not been subjected to progesterin. The things they looked for ranged from, whether they played with boys or girls toys, acted in tomboyish ways and what sort of clothes they wore (it is important to take into consideration the context of what it is to be boyish or girlish, it is open to interpretation and can be different amongst

ultures). The progestin in the study that the girls were subject to, came from the administration of an anti-miscarriage drug and also girls who had adrenal hyperplasia (this is when girls have higher than average levels of male hormone testosterone). Money and Erhardt found that the girls played in more tomboyish ways than when compared to their sisters or other girls that had not been subjected to the hormone progestin.

Other factors that they found were that the girls affected had higher IQ scores than other girls who were not affected. Baker and Erhardt (1974) conducted a follow up study and seemingly found one other factor that contributed to the research; that fact that the affected girls appeared to play more energetically. Other research has pointed out differences between boys and girls in cognitive abilities. `.

.. omen tend to do better on verbal tests and men on spatial tests...

may be due to organizational differences in the brain, or influences of early sex hormones. ` (Kimura, 1992) although there are differences between men and women in cognitive abilities, it is difficult to prove when compared to natural abilities. From a social perspective, e cannot dismiss the gendering of people. The differences between people could be developed by the cultural lens of masculinity and femininity, ` a theory proposed that individuals absorb culturally produced understandings of gender.

.. nd make sense of themselves and their behaviour`. (Holloway, Cooper, Johnston and Stevens, 2003), This essay has described some of the salient points involved in what it is to be man or woman. However, having been

through the western schooling system myself, it is not easy to be impartial from the subject matter.

One point which we all can identify with that stems from this essay, is this notion of oppositeness; male/female (biological perspective), femininity/masculinity (social constructionist perspective). Although, sex differences are unequivocally established at birth, the biological psychological perspective accepts that this is the case for most individuals; however, some become engendered during their natural life and change their physical sexual appearance. What is it to be a man or a woman not only has the obvious physical characteristics, it also has notions of gender and identity. Social constructionists accept that biological processes are an integral part of the physical aspect.

Socially created discourses about gender is an individual; as well as a group, process in which individuals create their own gendered position. Gender in social constructionism is seen as a life long process, it can change through people's lives; this shows the diversity of people when compared to the notion of fixity and change. Nature versus nurture, the biological perspective demonstrates this by the sex differences and by recognizing that people can become gendered over a lifetime, what is it to be man or woman appears to be an individual concept.