

UNDERSTANDING THE THEORIES OF GENDER

OBI, EMEKA ANTHONY****

Introduction:

Gender according to Kendal (2003), refers to the “culturally and socially constructed differences between females and males found in the meanings, beliefs, and practices associated with 'femininity' and 'masculinity'” (pp. 339-340). The Encyclopedia of Sex and Gender: Culture Society History refers to Gender as the condition of being female or male (or sex), but also includes the behavioural, cultural or psychological traits typically associated with one sex into its meanings. To McLeod (2014), Gender refers to the cultural differences expected (by society/culture) of men and women according to their sexes.

In the three definitions above, what is clear is that gender has a strong social inclination, in the sense that though there are physiological differences between men and women (sex), what constitutes gender is socially determined. This is why McLeod states that a person's sex does not change from birth but their gender can. Thus, gender has a lot to do with societal perception and expectations. This is because “in the past people tend to have very clear ideas about what was appropriate to each sex and anyone behaving differently was regarded as deviant. Today we accept a lot more diversity and see gender as a continuum” (McLeod, 2014, p.1). The belief that gender is a societal creation and not biological, made de Beauvoir (1949) to assert that “one is not born a woman, one becomes one”.

One common thread in virtually all gender studies is that gender is socially constructed. In other words, that many societies have established social distinction between females and males that do not inevitably result from biological differences between the sexes (such as women's reproductive capabilities) (Schaefer 2005, p. 282). Part of the norms and values of most societies is to carve out different roles for males and females and then socialize children into these roles. From early childhood, a boy learns how to be a man, while a girl learns how to be a lady. It is from this process that they develop what is called a gender identity, which is a person's perception of the self as being either female or male. In appreciation of social construction of gender, Lorber (1994) has argued that:

Gender is a human invention, like language, kinship, religion and technology, like them, gender organizes human social lives in culturally patterned ways. Gender organizes social relations in everyday life as well as in the major social structure, such as social class and the hierarchies of bureaucratic organizations (p.6)

From early infancy, children observe their parents in the home. Apparently in most families, the mothers engage in household chores like cooking, dishwashing and sweeping while the father engages in more difficult tasks like fixing the car, electric appliances etc. As the child grows up, he or she gradually comes to accept it that women are weaker and therefore should

perform less difficult tasks, while men who are stronger should perform the more difficult tasks. These stereotypes remain with them, for most times all through their lives. In a nutshell, we are simply saying in line with Schaefer (2005) that “it is adults of course who play a critical role in guiding children into those gender roles deemed appropriate in a society” (P. 283)

THEORIES OF GENDER DEVELOPMENT

Gender development simply refers to the process of identifying oneself as either male or female. There are basically four theories of gender development. These are the Biological Approach, the Behavioural Approach, the Cognitive Approach and the Psychoanalytic Feminism.

1) BIOLOGICAL APPROACH

The Biological Approach attributes much of the gender differences to biological differences, especially the chromosomes. Human beings have 23 chromosomes which are referred to as sex chromosome. The female chromosome is XX while the male chromosome is XY.

According to biological theory, differences in chromosomes (X/Y) and hormones (testosterone) determine the behavioural differences between boys and girls. Males are more aggressive in almost all cultures and a male child has higher mortality rate than female child. Biological view explains this phenomenon with the findings that Androgen hormones are linked to disruptive and aggressive behaviours in males. Androgen hormones are related to male characteristics; most important androgen is testosterone. XY chromosomal makeup may not be as stable as XX and therefore play a role in higher mortality rates for men. XX chromosomal makeup and the hormone estrogen seem to make women less vulnerable to physical problems so women live longer (Zeepedia.com).

McLeod (2004) says that the biological approach suggests that there is no distinction between sex and gender as it is biological sex that creates gendered behaviour. Thus, gender is determined by two biological factors: hormones and chromosomes.

According to the Zeepedia.com, the study by Money and Ehrhardt (1972) found that females exposed to high levels of androgens prenatally tend to be more physically active like boys their peers. In the same vein, absence or low levels of androgens lead to development of female characteristics. It concludes that though the biological approach attributes the development of gender roles to biological processes, but it also appreciates the importance of cultural differences, cognitive processes and sex stereotypes.

2) THE BEHAVIOURAL APPROACH

The behavioural approach appears to be the direct opposite of the biological approach. Thus, while the biological approach believes in nature for development of gender roles, the behavioural approach believes that nurture as opposed to nature accounts more for development of gender roles. Thus people's behaviour and personality are products of learning. The Zeepedia.com stresses that early behaviouralists like B.F. skinner emphasized the importance of reinforcement, while later on, in addition to reward and punishment, the

significance of other variables like social context, observation, modeling and limitation were also included in behaviouralism which led to social learning approach. Thus, the learning of gender roles can be explained by:

- a. Classical conditioning
- b. Operant conditioning or the use of reinforcement: positive, negative, punishment, or no reinforcement
- c. Learning by observation.

Classical Conditioning: This happens when a child sees the parents of the same sex putting on particular dress or particular types of behaviour. This helps in the adoption of gender roles.

Operant Conditioning: This is a type of learning in which a voluntary response becomes either stronger or weaker depending on whether it receives a positive or negative consequence. The likelihood of an action being repeated is a function of the rewards it received in the past.

The Social Learning Theory: This is a variant of the behavioural approach or rather one may say that it builds or expands on the traditional behavioural theories. This theory sees gender identity and role as a set of behaviours that are learned from the environment (Sammon nd). The Social Learning Theory was developed by Albert Bandura in 1977. According to Wheeler (2014), this theory spans the gap between behaviour reinforcement from the former and cognitive processes such as attention, motivation and memory from the latter. Bandura's Social Learning Theory asserts that people learn from one another, via observation, imitation and modeling (J.L Social Learning Theory 2015). To Bandura (1977) "most human behaviour is learned observationally through modeling: from observing others, one forms an idea of how new behaviours are performed and on later occasions this coded information serves as a guide to action". The key tenets on which the theory is built are;

1. Learning is not purely behavioural, rather, it is a cognitive process that takes place in a social context.
2. Learning can occur by observing a behaviour and by observing the consequences of the behaviour (vicarious reinforcement).
3. Learning involves observation, extraction of information from those observations and making decisions about the performance of the behaviour (observational learning or modeling). Thus, learning can occur without an observable change in behaviour.
4. Reinforcement plays a role in learning but is not entirely responsible for learning.
5. The learner is not a passive recipient of information. Cognition, environment, and behaviour all mutually influence each other (reciprocal determinism) (Wikipedia).

There are four main factors that affect the information gotten from observation and therefore social learning. These are attention, retention, reproduction and motivation. These are also referred to as mediational processes because according to McLeod (2014), individuals do not automatically observe the behaviour of a model and imitate it. There is usually some thought prior to imitation, which occurs between observing the behaviour (stimulus) and imitating it or not (response).

A) Attention-Before somebody can learn anything, he or she must first of all pay attention to what is being observed. However the level of attention being paid depends on certain characteristics of the observer, which includes cognitive abilities, perceptual abilities, arousal of past performance etc. Also the characteristics of the behaviour affects the level of attention. These characteristics include, relevance, novelty, affective valence and functional value.

B) Retention: For an observer to be able to reproduce an observed behaviour, he must be able to remember the observed behaviour. The factors that affect retention include symbolic coding, mental images, cognitive organization, symbiotic rehearsal and motor rehearsal.

C) Reproduction: After observation and the observed behaviour has been internalized by way of retention the next step in the social learning process is the reproduction of the behaviour.

D) Motivation: Whether a behaviour would be reproduced or not is a function of motivation. What this means is that the expectation of rewards or the actual reward that is contingent upon a particular behaviour would determine whether and how the behaviour would be reproduced. This include motives like past (traditional behaviouralism), promised (imagined incentives) and vicarious (seeing and recalling the reinforced model) ([https://www. Learning theories.com](https://www.learningtheories.com)).

Inherent in the social learning theory are three main concepts:

First is the notion that individuals have the ability to learn through observation, second, that mental states are a fundamental part of this process and thirdly, the theory alleges that when something is learned this does not always follow by a change in behaviour. As external, environmental reinforcement was the only influence to learning and behaviour, intrinsic reinforcement was also considered to play a part in forming the learned, response of an individual. As it is perceived as a form of "internal reward" such examples include "pride, satisfaction and a sense of accomplishment ([https://d2/.deakin. edu. au.presentations](https://d2.deakin.edu.au/presentations)).

THE COGNITIVE APPROACH

The cognitive approach focuses on thinking and perception as the key factors in learning. It believes that the way somebody thinks would determine how the person would perceive the world and this perception would affect the persons behaviours or actions. The theory emphasizes the relationship between the mental schema and social experience (the environment) in shaping gender role behaviours. As children grow up, they gradually assimilate an organized set of beliefs about the sexes. They become conscious of their sexes and the role expectations of these sexes. Thus, girls learn that as girls they are different from boys and are

also expected to behave like girls. To illustrate this, and understand the cognitive theories well, we would look at two popular cognitive theories; Lawrence Kohlberg's Cognitive Development Theory and the Ben and Coltrane's Social Constraint Perspective.

LAWRENCE KOHLBERG'S COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT THEORY

The major kernel of Kohlberg's theory is the concept of gender constancy. This is the understanding and realization by a child that his /her sex is permanent, constant and will never change. This takes place in three stages,

- a. Gender Identity
- b. Gender Stability and
- c. Gender Consistency

Gender Identity: This is the stage where the child becomes aware of his/her sex and differentiates it from that of the opposite sex. This happens between 2-3 years.

Gender Stability: This is the stage where both the boys and girls realize that they would grow as men and women, the way their parents are. This means they now understand that gender is a fixed and permanent characteristic of their persons. It must however be added that their understanding here is on the basis of superficial external appearances and stereotyped behaviour (Zeepedia Com.).

Gender Consistency: This is the stage where these children realize that gender remains the same irrespective of outlook or appearance in terms of dressing or hairstyle, or behaviours.

Though Kohlberg's concept of gender constancy is well known, there are some doubts about it. In the first place, there is not much research to support it. Also different researchers have found contrary results from Kohlberg's hypothesis that gender constancy stage is the point where children actually learn gender roles and relevant appropriate behaviours (Zeepedia.com).

SOME CONSTRUCTIONIST APPROACH

Ben and Coltrane proposed a version of the cognitive development approach, known as the social constructionist perspective. The perspective identified three key "gender lenses" (hidden assumption). These are:

- a. Gender Polarization
- b. Androcentrism and
- c. Biological essentialism

Gender Polarization: This states that men and women are different and these differences remain a central organizing principle of social life.

Androcentrism: This holds that males are superior to females and that male experience is the normative standard.

Biological Essentialism: That the first two lens are due to biological differences between the sexes.

Based on the above therefore, the perspective recommends substituting an “individual differences” lens that emphasizes the remarkable variability of individuals within groups”(www.public.astate.edu). Ben and Coltrane see gender acquisition as a self-fulfilling prophecy. Thus they argue that:

The most important insight from research on gender socialization is that because boys and girls are treated differently and put into different learning environments, they develop different needs, wants, desires, skills and temperaments; in short they become different types of people- men and women- who hardly question why they are different or how they ended up that way. The basic underlying model is that of the self-fulfilling prophecy. Because people think boys and girls are supposed to be different, they treat them differently and give them different opportunities for development. This differential treatment promotes certain behaviours and self images that recreate the preconceived cultural stereotypes about gender. The process repeats itself over and over in an unending spiral across the generations, so that although re-created and modified they seem natural and impervious to changes (Coltrane cited in www.public.iastate.edu).

They conclude by asserting that children “learn culturally appropriate ways of thinking and being as they follow routine rituals and respond to the everyday demands of the world in which they live....to be considered competent members of society they must learn how to fit in as appropriately gendered individuals (Coltrane cited in www.public.iastate.edu).

THE PSYCHOANALYTIC THEORY

The psychoanalytic theory which is also referred as the psychodynamic theory was developed by Sigmund Freud. According to him, gender identity in children develops as a result of strong but unconscious sexual urges they have at that early age. At the ages of between three and five years, a child goes through what he calls the phallic stage in which he or she would develop strong sexual urges towards the parent of the opposite sex. When this happens the child becomes jealous of the parent of the same sex. This is usually resolved by the child deciding out of fear to seriously identifying with that parent of the same sex and then copying his or her behaviour. There are two dimensions to this theory. They are:

- a. Oedipus Complex
- b. The Electra Complex

The Oedipus Complex: The Oedipus complex depicts the unconscious dilemma of a little boy during the phallic stage, where he has developed an attraction for his mother and jealousy towards his father, he is also afraid that his father may castrate him. This fear of being castrated would lead him to gradually reject his mother and then identify with his father. This makes him to start copying his father's behaviour and other masculine attributes.

The Electra Complex: The Electra complex on the other hand, applies to the girl child. At the phallic stage the little girl develops an attraction to the father and jealousy towards the mother. However, this leads to a fear of losing her mother's love. This results in the child deciding to reject the father and identifying with the mother so as to retain her love. This identification with the mother will result in the girl copying the mother's behaviour's thereby developing her feminine characteristics .

Because of the role of both parents in a child's gender development, Freud believes that children who were brought up by one parent would likely end up with a much weaker sense of gender identity. For instance he argues that a boy brought up by the mother without a father would most likely be a homo-sexual.

The criticisms that have trailed Freud's psychoanalytic theory have led to the development of other variants of the theory. For instance, we have the Psychoanalytic Feminism involving mainly people like Nancy Chodorow (1979) and Ellyn Kaschak. There is also Karen Horney. Though their works still fall under the psychoanalytic theory, there are some noticeable differences from the traditional Freudian postulations.

For instance, Horney did not accept Freud's concept of the origin of envy in females. She believes that the envy that females have for males is symbolic and arises out of their desire to attain the higher position that men occupy in societies. On the other hand, men envy women's ability to reproduce and because of this, struggle for achievement in order to compensate themselves for this deficiency. She also disagreed with Freud's idea that women's inferiority arose from their perceived physical inferiority, instead it is men's behaviour coupled with societal masculine bias that inferiorizes women.

THEORIES OF GENDER STRATIFICATION

Virtually all attempts to explain gender roles have ended up with the belief that while sex is biological, gender is social, in other words that gender is a creation of society. Even biological theories of gender still recognize the role of culture, cognitive process and sex stereotypes as already indicated in this chapter. Thus, while the theories and approaches we have looked at try to explain gender, this section will be devoted to explaining gender stratification. Therefore while society has made people realize and made conscious of the fact that they are either male or female, the focus here on gender stratification will examine gender roles and power relationships in society. In doing this, we would look at four perspectives that try to explain these in different perspectives. These are the functionalist, conflict, feminist and interactionist perspectives.

THE FUNCTIONALIST PERSPECTIVE

The functionalist perspective on gender should be seen from the overall theory of structural functionalism. This theory according to Kendall (2003) is:

Based on the assumption that society is a stable, orderly system. This stable system is characterized by societal consensus, whereby the majority of members share a common set of values, beliefs and behavioural expectations. According to this perspective, a society is composed of inter-related parts, each of which serves a function and (ideally) contributes to the overall stability of the society. Societies develop social structures, or institutions that persist because they play a part in helping society survive. These institutions include the family, education, government, religion and the economy. If anything adverse happens to one of these institutions or parts, all other parts are affected and the system no longer functions properly (pp.22-23).

The overall concern of functionalism therefore is social stability. Incidentally, the family is one important institution which it identifies as necessary in maintaining this stability. The functionalists therefore maintain that gender stratification is a form of division of labour which is necessary in order to maintain stable families that would help us maintain stable societies. One of the most important proponents of this perspective was Talcott Parsons. According to him, women naturally assume the expressive emotionally supportive role, while men take the instrumental practical role, thereby allowing the two to compliment each other. This theory believes that women's expressive roles free men for instrumental tasks and vice versa. Women therefore become anchored in the family as wives, mothers and household managers, while men become anchored in the occupational world outside the home (Schaefer 2001).

Gilder (1986) cited in Kendall (2001), has argued that traditional gender roles are important not only for individuals but also for the social order of society. And also that relationship between men and women are damaged when changes in gender roles occur, and family life suffers as a consequence. This is because women provide for the socialization of the next generation and when they fail, society's moral fabric will decay, resulting in higher crime rates, violence and drug abuse. This therefore tries to show that the traditional division of labour between men and women is the natural order of the universe.

Despite the seeming popularity of the functionalist perspective, it has been criticized on some grounds. First, the theory does not pretend to endorse the gendered division of labour, it is simply saying that it is natural and therefore should be accepted. What this means is that both men and women should accept these natural roles irrespective of their personal preferences. What then happens to such people who are confined by gender stereotyping?.

Secondly and arising from the first, is the fact that by arguing that gendered roles are natural without any real scientific bases, calls the validity of the perspective to question. This is increasingly becoming clear now that more and more women are taking up instrumental roles and some men expressive roles in today's industrial societies.

Thirdly, the perspective fails to look at the structure of society that tends to give more opportunities to men (educational and occupational), as the main reason behind the subordination of women.

Finally, it fails to examine the underlying power relations between men and women or to consider the fact that the tasks assigned to men and to women are not equally valued by society (Kenny, 1994 cited in Kendal, 2003).

THE CONFLICT PERSPECTIVE

The conflict perspective believes the basis of gender stratification is power. Thus, the gendered division of labour in families and the workplace which grants expressive and instrumental roles to males and females is a result of control and dominance over women and resources in the society. It emphasizes the fact that men's instrumental skills are highly valued while women's expressive skills are grossly undervalued or devalued. Men are dominant and in control both at home and in the workplace to the detriment of women. Marriage itself as an institution is a reflection of male dominance. There is therefore this argument among the conflict theorists that:

Men of the capitalist class instituted monogamous marriage (a gendered institution) so that they could be certain of the paternity of their offspring especially sons, whom they wanted to inherit their wealth (Kendal 2003, p. 301).

They further argue that gender stratification is a product of private ownership of the means of production and exchange, which enables some men to not only gain ownership and control of property, but also control and dominance over women. Gender difference therefore, may be seen as a reflection of the subjugation of a dominant group (men over the subjugated group (women)).

FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES

The feminist perspective draws on the conflict theory to analyse the reinforcement of gender roles which results in the domination and oppression of women. The perspective tries to identify ways in which norms, values, institutions and internalized expectations limit women's behaviours. It is also interested in demonstrating how women's personal control operates even within the constraints of relative lack of power (Kendal 2003).

There are different but related variants of the feminist perspectives. These are the liberal feminism, radical feminism, and socialist feminism.

Liberal Feminism: Liberal feminists equate gender equality with equality of opportunity. They also attribute male domination and oppression of women on their lack of equal rights and educational opportunities. Based on this therefore, any attempt to tackle this problem must start from addressing the issues of human rights and access to education. This group also believe that since gender-role socialization is a major factor in gender stratification, attempts should be made in the homes (the first and major point of socialization), the schools, and the mass media to correct the skewed gender role impressions.

Radical Feminism: This school of thought believes that male domination is the reason behind all forms of human oppression, while it traces the root of patriarchy to women's childbearing and child rearing responsibilities which make them dependent on men (Kendal 2003). Incidentally, the society has used institutions like the media and religion to justify male domination and oppression of the females. As a solution, it therefore calls for the abolition of patriarchy and that alternative institutions that are not gendered should be developed to meet women's needs.

Socialist Feminism: Socialist feminist blames the oppression of women on their dual roles as paid and unpaid workers in the capitalist system. According to Hartmann (1978 in Kendal 2003) "the primary mechanism in capitalist society that maintains the superiority of men over women, because it enforces lower wages for women is the labour market" (p.313). Since the exploitation of women is a capitalist phenomenon, the socialist feminists are calling for the abolition of capitalism and its replacement with a socialist order which would bring equal pay and opportunities for all whether they are men or women.

Conclusion. In this chapter, we have tried to discuss some of the well known theories of gender. A glance at these theories would reveal that each of them offers a narrow perspective on the origin and sustenance of gender differences and inequality in society. Arising from this therefore, the best strategy is to employ a combination of theories in a real attempt to explain gender issues clearly.

REFERENCES

Australia workplace gender equality agency <https://www.wgea.gov.au>

Bandura, A. (1977). *Social learning and personality development*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Wilson

Encyclopedia of sex and gender culture history men and women in the world's cultures topics and culture A-K-Vol 1; culture 1-2 Zeepedia www.zeepedia.com.

<https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/learning-theory> (education)

Kendall, D. (2003). *Sociology in our time*. Belmont: Wadsworth/ Thomas Learning

Kohlberg L. (1958). *The development of modes of thinking and choices in years 10 to 16*. (Unpublished PhD Dissertation). University of Chicago

Kohlberg L. (1984). *The psychology of moral development: The nature and validity of moral stages (Essays on moral development, vol 2)*. Harper & Row.

Lober, J. (1994). *Paradoxes of gender*. Yale: Yale University Press.

Mcleod, S. A. (2004). *Cognitive dissonance* retrived from <https://www.simplypsychology.org>,

Schaefer, R.T. (2005). *Sociology (9th ed.)* Boston: McGraw Hill

Social learning theory <http://www.learning-theories.com>.

**** Obi, E.A (2018). Understanding the theories of gender. In E. A .Obi, , C.A. Obiora, N. Ebisi, & I.E .Ezeabasili (Eds). *Contemporary gender issues*. Onitsha : Abbot Communication Ltd.