

Gender Is a Culturally Prescribed Role, Rather Than a Biological Sex

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Introduction

The debates concerning the notions of “sex” and “gender” have been going on over the years. The recent point of view is that gender roles are not universal for everyone, whereas some individuals regard them as fundamental and build their lives according to the rules and standards that society prescribes. The historical background of gender development theories shows that the major ones discussed gender roles from social, cultural, biological, anthropological, and psychological points of view. The biological theory was a leading one, and it influenced many researches covering the development of gender roles. However, the findings of the previous studies have revealed that gender roles are the results of social and cultural influences, rather than being a biological sex. These prepared the ground for modern differentiation between the concepts of “gender” and “sex”.

Psycholinguistic Theory

In the past, the majority of psychological theories suggested that the gender development occurs in early childhood as the idea suggested by Freud. Psychoanalysis theory had a significant impact on a study of gender roles; however, there was a lack of empirical research that led to various reformulations of the notion “gender” and approaches to its analysis. According to Kohlberg's theory (1966), the formation of gender identity starts in the early childhood. Thus, children “develop the stereotypic conceptions of gender from what they see and hear around them” (Bussey & Bandura, 1999, p. 680), and they adapt their habits and behavioral patterns to these stereotypes. Thus, their understanding of this notion was based on biological differences between

men and women and defined their behaviors and habits. In addition, gender identity was considered stable and unchangeable for the whole life. However, the findings in contrast did not support this theory.

Anthropological Approach

Based on the assumption that men and women are biologically different, there have always been cultural and social factors that shaped the gender roles that both sexes had to follow and perform in the society. The study by Gilligan reports that “anthropological research published in that decade uncovered a set of oppositions between maleness and femaleness primarily derived from studies of non-class-based societies” (Stack, 1986, p. 321). Over decades, women tended to be more involved with private concerns, relationships, and the welfare of their families. As opposed to them, men have always been more universalistic and concerned with a welfare as a whole (Stack, 1986).

Confusions around Terminology

The distribution of gender roles based on biological differences contributed to confusions in terminology. The works of Unger and Crawford (1993) attempted to define the concepts of “sex” and “gender”. They stated that there was a great confusion among social scientists about the appropriate use of the terms “sex” and “gender” (Unger & Crawford, 1993). The researchers studying this area for many years can easily document examples of such confusion.

A “gender” was used as a linguistic term solely. However, “in the mid-1970s feminist scholars began to use the term to refer to the social organization of the relationships between sexes” (Unger & Crawford, 1993, p. 123). Feminist researchers

also provided the idea that sex-related differences are the products of social expectations (Unger & Crawford, 1993, p. 123). Further findings showed that “gender is problematic, and sex-related effects are consistent” (Unger & Crawford, 1993, p.124). Later they proved that gender identity develops in the social context and can be seen differently in various periods of the individual’s life. Thus, the biological approach lost its leading position, and scientists began to focus on social factors that influence the development of gender roles.

The study by Bussey and Bandura (1999) analyzed the gender role development from the perspective of a social cognitive theory. In the past, gender was addressed from the perspective of three major theories based on different dimensions, such as psychological, biological, and sociocultural. Psychological theories were concentrated on the role of intrapsychic processes controlling gender development (Bussey & Bandura, 1999, p. 679) and discussed gender from the psychological perspective. A gender identity was viewed as the result of a psychological development, and thus it was considered a psychological issue.

Social, Cultural, and Psychological Theories

Sociocultural theory emphasized the role of social and cultural factors that influenced gender roles distribution. In addition, biological theories were based on biological roles of men and women in reproduction (Bussey & Bandura, 1999), emphasizing the biological differences between men and women. Social cognitive theory provided by Bandura was based on psychological and socio-structural determinants (Bussey & Bandura, 1999). Thus, it suggested that gender self-perceptions and role behaviors result from the interaction between a wide range of

social aspects (Bussey & Bandura, 1999, p. 684). An individual defines his/her gender identity in the process of cultural development and socialization. The hypothesis that gender self-perception is stable and remains unchangeable during the whole period of life was disproved.

Conclusion

Consequently, a number of studies conducted in the last decades explore the historical development of the concept of gender. The background of the issue provides evidence that gender is a result of social development and reflects culturally prescribed roles rather than just being a biological sex. Social cognitive theory was a major contribution to a better understanding of gender and it could also be used as a basis for further research.

References

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