RESEARCH STARTERS
ACADEMIC TOPIC OVERVIEWS

# Gender Socialization

Sex, Gender & Sexuality > Gender Socialization

## Table of Contents



## Abstract

The following article summarizes the topic of gender socialization from both a theoretical and research perspective. A brief history of the study of gender is discussed, as are some of the challenges inherent in defining gender. After introducing the major theoretical perspectives of gender socialization – social learning theory, gender schema theory, and psychoanalytic theory – findings from research on parent, peer, and media socialization are discussed. Some of the limitations of current definitions of gender appropriate behavior – for both men and women – are suggested in conclusion. Gender scholars attempt to challenge our 'taken-for-granted' assumptions about men and women, point out the ways in which our behavior is culturally rather than biologically produced, and encourage us to imagine different ways of being male and female.

## Overview

As topics of study, both gender and gender socialization are relatively new areas of interest within sociology, and the social sciences more generally. As Chafetz (1999) explains, "with few exceptions, the best that can be said for our classical tradition [of sociology] is that gender issues were peripheral" (p. 4). With the advent of the women's movement in the late twentieth century, however, feminists began criticizing the academic disciplines for their 'male bias' and demanded that women be included as subjects of study. As a result of their efforts, courses on the sociology of women were added to the core curriculum in what became known as the "add women and stir approach" (Wharton, 2005, p. 5). Gradually, however, the sociology of women morphed into the sociology of gender with the recognition of gender as relational; that is, sociologists began to recognize that "understanding what women are or can be requires attention to what men are or can be" (Wharton, 2005, p. 5).

The increasing focus on gender introduced as many new questions as it answered. When do children first develop a gender identity, recognizing themselves as a member of one sex group or the other? Are our behaviors as males and females determined by our environment – through culture, our interaction with others, our social institutions – or are they determined by biology and genetics? Sociologists admit that the answer to such questions remain elusive. Stockard (1999) writes, "the extent to which physiological factors influence differences between the sex groups is an active and contentious issue and will probably not be resolved any time soon" (p. 217). Nevertheless, sociologists believe that social influences matter most, and as a result, have turned their attention to the study of gender socialization, the "processes through which individuals take on gendered qualities and characteristics…and learn what their society expects of them as males or females" (Wharton, 2005, p. 31).

**Keywords**

Cognitive Developmental Theory

Gender

Gender Schemas

Gender Segregation

Media

Parental Socialization

Peer Group Socialization

Psychoanalytic Theory

Sex

Social Learning Theory

## Definition of Gender

One of the first steps sociologists take in defining gender is to distinguish it conceptually from the term sex. Burn (1996) writes, "In most contexts, psychologists prefer the word 'gender' because it includes the idea that many differences between men and women are culturally created while the word 'sex' implies that the differences are caused directly by biological sex" (p. xix). Thus, when referring to anatomical or reproductive differences between men and women, many social scientists use the term sex; when referring to differences not directly caused by biology – for example, different hair or clothing styles of men and women – social scientists prefer the term gender.

Unfortunately, the distinction between sex and gender is not quite so clear. Whereas defining key conceptual terms typically clarifies, the varying definitions of sex and gender often muddy the waters. As Wharton (2005) explains, "there is no firm consensus on the appropriate use of these two terms among gender scholars. Some reject the term 'sex' altogether and refer only to 'gender.' Others use the terms almost interchangeably…" (p. 18). The confusion stems largely from the varying degrees of emphasis placed on biology and culture in understanding what it means to be male and female. On one end of the spectrum are those who believe gender is entirely socially constructed, and therefore not grounded in any physiological reality (Wharton, 2005). On the other end are those who believe the two sexes are a biological fact. And in the middle is the biosocial perspective, the idea that gender is constructed within limits already established by our biology.

Although most agree that biology and society interact to shape human behavior, sociologists place their emphases on the social influences on our behavior. Accordingly, one of the working definitions of gender used by many sociologists features three characteristics:

- Gender as a process rather than a fixed state;
- Gender as a characteristic of society as well as individuals; and
- Gender as a system that creates differences and inequalities (Wharton, 2005).

In addition, sociologists often study gender using different frameworks. Some emphasize gender as a characteristic of the individual, some as a product of social interactions, and others as a characteristic of social institutions (Wharton, 2005). Wharton (2005) explains that all frameworks are "necessarily partial and selective" and that none alone is sufficient for understanding gender. Those who are interested in socialization processes, however, usually study gender as a characteristic of the individual; as such, much of the theoretical work on socialization is drawn from psychology as well as sociology (Burn, 1996; Wharton, 2005).

## Theoretical Approaches to Gender Socialization

Several theories that attempt to explain gender socialization – social learning theory, and gender schema theory, for example - fall within the category of learning theories more broadly (Wharton, 2005). Such theorists understand the processes by which children learn gender appropriate behavior in the same way children learn in general. Other theories focus on gender and sexuality exclusively. Psychoanalytic theory, for example, emphasizes the unconscious processes involved in developing gender identity. Stockard (1999) suggests that all three theories help explain the process of gender socialization, even though evidence for some – as comprehensive, stand-alone, explanatory theories – is lacking.

### Social Learning Theory

Social learning theory, most closely associated with the work of psychologist Albert Bandura, is an outgrowth of the behaviorist tradition, which defines learning in terms of stimulus and response. According to this perspective, children are reinforced – both positively and negatively – for gender appropriate and inappropriate behavior (Burn, 1996; Wharton, 2005). A young boy playing with dolls, for example, might be ignored by his father; the lack of attention serves as a negative reinforcement, so that the boy eventually stops playing with dolls altogether. Or, parents might hug a young girl who cries – the hug serving as a positive reinforcement – thereby increasing the likelihood the girl will cry again in the future. In this way, the theory suggests, boys and girls learn which behaviors are expected of them. Boys learn that playing with dolls is 'inappropriate'; girls learn that expressing emotion is consistent with being female. Social learning theory also suggests that children learn by observing and imitating the behavior of same-sex adults. A young girl learns what it means to be female by observing her mother, whereas a boy learns what it means to be male by observing his father.

First proposed in the 1950s and 1960s, social learning theory has not withstood the test of time. Research has shown, for example, that parents who themselves exhibit sex stereotypical behaviors

are not more likely than other parents to have children who exhibit strong sex stereotypical behaviors, thus discrediting the idea that children imitate same-sex adults (Stockard, 1999). In addition, children – and especially boys – display gender appropriate behaviors even in the absence of reinforcement (Wharton, 2005). Finally, evidence is mixed with regard to the extent to which parents reinforce male and female children differently. All of which suggests, critics argue, that children are more actively engaged in their socialization than the theory acknowledges. Wharton (2005) writes, "To simplify somewhat, we can say that social learning theory tends to view children (and other targets of socialization) as lumps of clay that are modeled by their environment" (p. 32).

**Cognitive Development Theory**

Cognitive theories of gender socialization offer a different perspective, emphasizing the developmental nature of the socialization process, as well as the active role the child plays in the construction of his or her gender identity (Stockard, 1999). Lawrence Kohlberg, best known for his theory of moral development, was one of the first to apply theories of cognitive development to gender identity. Specifically, he argued that "children's views of appropriate gender roles ...change as they grow older, reflecting their changing cognitive development" (Stockard, 1999, p. 218). Younger children between the ages of five and eight tend to have the most rigid definitions of gender, and apply the most severe sanctions for violations of gender norms. As they age, however, children are able to develop more complex and flexible definitions of gender (Martin & Ruble, 2004). In general, however, Kohlberg believed that once children develop gender constancy – the recognition of themselves as male or female and the stable, unchanging nature of their gender – they become more motivated to demonstrate gender appropriate behavior (Wharton, 2005).

Critics of Kohlberg's theory pointed to contradictory evidence – the fact that children demonstrate gender-typed behavior as young as two or three years of age, long before they develop gender constancy – to discredit his theory (Martin & Ruble, 2004). They also argued that Kohlberg's theory failed to explain why children use gender, rather than some other construct, to organize their view of the world (Wharton, 2005).

**Gender Schema Theory**

In response, Sandra Bem introduced a second cognitive theory of gender socialization known as gender schema theory. According to Bem, in cultures where distinctions between men and women are emphasized, children learn to use gender as a way to process information about the world. The cognitive structures, or gender schemas, help children organize information, and maintain a sense of consistency and predictability (Stockard, 1999). For Bem, two characteristics of gender schemas are particularly noteworthy. She argues that gender schemas tend to be polarized, so that children believe "what is acceptable and appropriate for females is not acceptable or appropriate for males (and vice versa)" (Wharton, 2005, p. 34). And secondly, gender schemas tend to be androcentric; that is, children internalize the message that males and masculinity are the standard or norm, and are more highly valued than females and femininity (Wharton, 2005).

**Psychoanalytic Theory**

Psychoanalytic theory differs from both social learning and cognitive developmental theories in two important respects; it isn't a learning theory, and it suggests that some aspects of gender identity result from unconscious psychological processes, rather than more conscious processes such as modeling or actively seeking information consistent with schemas (Wharton, 2005). The psychoanalytic approach was founded by Sigmund Freud, but its application to gender socialization was more fully outlined in the late 1970s by Nancy Chodorow. For Chodorow, the key factor in the development of gender identity is the role of the mother as the primary caregiver (Stockard, 1999). Because children spend more time with mothers than fathers, Chodorow argues, their first identification is with the feminine. Eventually, however, children need to develop a sense of themselves as separate, as individual identities. For girls, the process is easier because by identifying with the mother she has already learned how to be female. Boys however, in developing a male gender identity, must first reject their identification with the feminine. "Because the boy knows most intimately what is feminine," Stockard (1999) writes, "he comes to define masculine as being 'not feminine'" (p. 222). In the process of separation, boys often learn to devalue femininity as well. The psychoanalytic theory, like other socialization theories, has not escaped criticism. Gender scholars argue that it's difficult to verify empirically, that it reinforces gender stereotypes – that women seek connection, whereas men prefer separation, for example – and that it places too much emphasis on the unconscious (Wharton, 2005).

## Further Insights

Theory has been used to conduct gender socialization research in many ways. Various themes introduced above – reinforcement, the child as active participant in the socialization process, and developmental changes – will be discussed in relation to research findings. Some findings are more conclusive than others. The gender-segregated nature of childhood play, for example, is demonstrated repeatedly in study after study. The belief that parents treat male and female children differently, however, has been met with mixed results. As a relatively new field of study, gender socialization research will continue to evolve.

### Parents as Socialization Agents

According to those who study gender using the individualist framework – gender as a characteristic of the person – parents are believed to be the most significant source of gender socialization. In one of the first studies to document the differential treatment of male and female infants, researchers asked parents to indicate the extent to which a list of adjectives described their babies (Rubin et al., 1974, as cited in Wharton, 2005). Parents of female infants selected adjectives such as 'soft,' 'fine-featured,' 'little,' and 'inattentive' more often than parents of male infants.

The researchers concluded that "because the infants were physically very similar…parents were not reacting to real differences between children as much as they were applying gender stereotypes that could possibly result in differential treatment of their male and female children" (Wharton, 2005, p. 124). More recent research continues to document differences. Clearfield and Nelson (2006) showed that mothers engage in more conversation with female infants and also interact more with female infants. Even first-hand observations of new parents often reveal differential treatment. As Coltrane (1998) writes, "male and female infants are similar to one another, but most adults go to great lengths to make them appear dissimilar" (as cited in Wharton, 2005, p. 123).

On the other hand, a significant amount of evidence suggests that parents do not treat male and female children differently. Lytton and Romney (1991, as cited in Wharton, 2005) conducted a meta-analysis of over 150 published studies and concluded that parental treatment of boys and girls has become significantly less differentiated over the last sixty years. Their research suggests that in areas such as "encouragement of achievement or dependency, warmth of interactions, restrictiveness, and disciplinary practices, parents tend to treat boys and girls similarly" (Stockard, 1999, p. 217).

Although much of the research on parent socialization is ambiguous, it is more conclusive in one respect – with regard to parental attitudes toward toys, games, and activities. Research demonstrates that when given a choice, parents tend to offer different toys to boys and girls (Stockard, 1999, Wharton, 2005). They are more likely to choose a football for a boy, for example, and a doll for a girl. In addition, the choice of toy influences the types of activities parents engage in with their children; parents' play with boys – and especially the play of fathers – tends to be more physical, rough-house play (Wharton, 2005). Research also shows that parents have different attitudes toward cross-gender play for boys and girls. As Freeman (2007) notes, "researchers who describe adults'…responses to cross-gender play consistently report that boys who engage in 'girls' games' are more likely to be criticized by parents [and] teachers…than are girls who enjoy activities and materials labeled as 'for boys'" (p. 58). Additionally, it appears that fathers react most negatively to cross-gender play, especially when engaged in by their sons. Such evidence supports the notion that gender roles for girls and women are expanding, while those for boys and men are narrowing (Freeman, 2007).

## Peer Group Socialization

Gender scholars who study peer group interaction bring a different perspective to our understanding of socialization. Too much socialization research, they argue, has been conducted using the 'transmission model' of socialization – the idea that socialization is a hierarchical, top-down process in which adults socialize children (Tholander, 2002). They prefer a dialogical model instead, studying the ways in which children socialize one another. Those who study peer groups view gender through a different lens – focusing on interactions between children, rather than on characteristics of the individual children themselves (Tholander, 2002).

One of the most consistent findings in peer group socialization research is the sex-segregated nature of childhood play. Both boys and girls, beginning by age three, prefer same-sex playmates (Wharton, 2005). This preference is found across various cultures, is not influenced by adults, and generally lasts until adolescence. Although the preference first appears in girls, boys become more rigid about gender segregation than girls, and are less likely to interact with adults as well. As a result of this self-segregation, boys and girls learn about what it means to be male and female from same-gender peers. Stockard (1999) refers to this as a 'cult of childhood;' a pattern of games, activities, norms, and roles passed down from one generation to the next. It is not easily influenced by adults, and is highly gendered, with distinct roles for males and females, and severe sanctions against those who violate them.

Research provides one possible explanation for gender-segregated play; boys and girls play very differently, and therefore may actively seek others whose play style is most similar (Stockard, 1999). Specifically, girls tend to form close, intimate friendships with one or two other girls. They are more likely to take turns speaking, and express agreement. Boys, on the other hand, play in larger groups, engage in rougher activities that take up more space, and use interruptions, threats, and boasts (Stockard, 1999). As Stockard (1999) explains, "both boys and girls successfully influence others in their interactions; they simply tend to do so through differently styles" (p. 221). While girls successfully influence other girls, they find it more difficult to influence boys; as a result, Maccoby (1990) suggests, girls intentionally avoid boys, thereby reinforcing gender segregation (as cited in Stockard, 1999). The theory is less successful, however, in explaining why boys avoid girls.

On a final note, it is important to acknowledge that peers, like parents, significantly influence cross-gender behavior. Just as parents have more negative attitudes toward cross-gender behavior for boys, peers also seem to 'punish' boys for engaging in girl behaviors and activities more than they punish girls for behaving like boys. The term tomboy, for example, was found to be a label rarely used to describe girls who act like boys, even though it was widely understood; on the other hand, the use of the term 'sissy' was widespread for boys acting like girls, and was used consistently as a negative label (Thorne, 1993, as cited in Wharton, 2005). As Wharton (2005) concludes, "Girls seem to face less pressure than boys to conform to gender stereotypes, are more likely than boys to cross gender boundaries, and girls receive less negative attention than boys when they do participate in activities or games with the other gender" (p. 133).

## Media Socialization

In addition to parents and peers, the media – television, computer games, and literature – also communicate ideas about what is gender appropriate behavior for boys and girls. Research has shown that children's books, for example, are beginning to portray girls and boys in non-stereotypical ways; however, many of the books that predate this change are still available in libraries and book stores everywhere. These classic books tend to portray

girls in traditionally gender-appropriate ways – doing household chores, for example – while showing boys engaging in a wider variety of activities. They also show girls holding household cooking and cleaning objects, while they are more likely to show boys using outdoor tools or building things (Burn, 1996).

Content analyses of television shows also reveal a significant male bias in programming. Male characters typically outnumber female characters, female characters are significantly younger than male characters, and female characters are less likely to be portrayed as working women, according to several studies conducted in the early 1990s (Burns, 1996). Atkins (1991) reviewed over 500 television characters and concluded that "the vast majority [of female characters] conformed to male fantasies of scantily clad half-wits who need to be rescued" (as cited in Burns, 1996, p. 15). In commercials too, the voice of authority is typically a male voice, and men and women are portrayed stereotypically. Researchers estimate that by the time children graduate from high school they will have spent more time watching television than in the classroom (Davis, 1991, as cited in Burns, 1996). Indeed, correlational studies show that children who watch more TV tend to have more sex-stereotypical views of men and women; other studies show that watching sex-stereotypical models on TV influences choice of toys, career aspirations, and self-esteem (Burns, 1996).

## Viewpoints

One of the major assumptions adopted by scholars who study gender from the individualist view is that differences between men and women are greater than differences within each group (Wharton, 2005). Indeed, much of the research on gender socialization attempts to explain how men and women become different. What this perspective obscures, many argue, is the reality that men and women are more alike than they are unalike (Burn, 1996). Even Maccoby and Jacklin's 1974 classic The Psychology of Sex Difference, which was intended to be a catalogue of differences between men and women, concluded that "differences between men and women were fewer and of less magnitude than many had assumed" (Wharton, 2005, p. 24). Feminists argue that the emphasis on differences is problematic, because such differences have often been used to justify unequal treatment (Wharton, 2005). Demonstrating similarities, on the other hand, could help eradicate gender inequality.

For feminists, however, emphasizing our similarities isn't just about eradicating unequal treatment of women. As mentioned in the introduction, the sociology of gender has evolved from its focus on women, to a focus on men and masculinity as well. The way in which we are socialized, and the roles and behaviors we adopt as a result, feminists argue, aren't just limiting to women, they're limiting to men as well (Burn, 1996). Watts and Borders (2005) document, for example, that boys begin feeling gender role conflict during their teenage years. They experience pressure to succeed and to dominate, and intentionally avoid expressions of affection with peers, believing the only appropriate emotion they should express is anger. Researchers have begun looking for a link between gender role conflict in males and some of the academic problems they experience, like poor grades and dropping out of school (Watts & Border, 2005).

In the end, one of the basic intentions of gender scholars is to bring to our attention a topic that is often taken for granted. Because gender is such a pervasive aspect of social life, in many ways it goes unnoticed. As Wharton (2005) writes, "challenging the taken-for-granted is one essential component of the sociological perspective. In fact, sociologists argue that what people view as unproblematic and accept as 'the way things are' may be most in need of close, systematic scrutiny" (p. 2). Indeed, by demonstrating the ways in which we learn to become men and women – through parents, peers, and media – and the ways in which such roles and behaviors might be limiting, gender scholars suggest a different, and perhaps, better social arrangement.

## Terms & Concepts

**Cognitive Developmental Theory**: Cognitive developmental theories of gender socialization emphasize the active role of the child in gender construction, and the developmental changes in children that allow them to conceptualize gender differently over time.

**Gender**: Although gender scholars use the term 'gender' differently, it is typically used to communicate the idea that many of the differences between men and women are culturally constructed, as opposed to biologically or genetically determined. Gender is studied using different frameworks – as a characteristic of the individual, as a product of social interaction, and as a characteristic of social institutions.

**Gender Schemas**: Gender schemas are cognitive structures that allow children to organize information efficiently, and maintain stability and predictability. Gender schema theory, proposed by Sandra Bem, is considered a cognitive developmental theory of gender socialization. Bem believes that gender schemas are androcentric and polarized.

**Gender Segregation**: One of the most consistent findings in gender socialization research is that children, beginning by age three, choose to play with same-sex peers. The self-selected segregation is not influenced by adults, occurs in different cultures, lasts until adolescence, and is accompanied by rigid definitions of gender appropriate behavior and roles.

**Parental Socialization**: According to those who study gender from an individualist perspective, parents are the primary source of gender socialization. Research on parents as socialization agents is mixed, however, with some research demonstrating differential treatment of male and female children – especially with respect to choice of toys, games, and activities – and some research demonstrating similar treatment of male and female children – especially with respect to nurturance, warmth, and disciplinary practices.

**Peer Group Socialization**: Some researchers study gender as a product of social interactions. Rather than viewing socialization as a hierarchical, top-down process - as when parents influence children – they study socialization as a dialogical process of mutual influence between peers. Indeed, because of the gender-segregated nature of children's play, same-sex peers are often the primary source of information for children about what is appropriate and inappropriate behavior for boys and girls.

**Psychoanalytic Theory**: Psychoanalytic theory, founded by Freud, emphasizes the unconscious processes that influence gender identity. According to psychoanalytic theorists, gender identity development is a more difficult process for boys because they must separate from their primary identification with the mother. Boys learn to define maleness as the negation of the feminine.

**Sex**: Gender scholars typically use the term sex to refer to differences between men and women – like anatomical and reproductive differences - that are biologically or genetically determined.

**Social Learning Theory**: Social learning theory is an outgrowth of the behaviorist tradition, which defines learning in terms of stimulus and response. According to this perspective, children are reinforced – both positively and negatively – for gender appropriate and inappropriate behavior. In addition, social learning theorists believe children learn gender appropriate behavior by observing and modeling their same-sex parent. Evidence in support of the theory is mixed; social learning theory is also criticized for its passive characterization of the child.

## Bibliography


Burn, S.M. (1996). *The social psychology of gender.* New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, Inc.

Chafetz, J.S. (1999). *The handbook of the sociology of gender.* New York, NY: Plenum Publishers.

Clearfield, M. W., & Nelson, N. M. (2006). Sex differences in mothers' speech and play behavior with 6-, 9-, and 14-month old infants. *Sex Roles, 54*, 127-137. Retrieved May 2, 2008 from EBSCO online database, Academic Search Premier, http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=19870566&site=ehost-live

Freeman, N. (2007). Preschoolers' perceptions of gender appropriate toys and their parents' beliefs about gender ized behaviors: Miscommunication, mixed messages, or hidden truths? *Early Childhood Education Journal, 5,* 357-366. Retrieved May 2, 2008 from EBSCO online database, Academic Search Premier, http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=24320859&site=ehost-live

Martin, C.L., & Ruble, D. (2004). Children's search for gender cues: Cognitive Perspectives on gender development. *Current Directions in Psychological Science, 13*, 67-70. Retrieved May 2, 2008 from EBSCO online database, Academic Search Premier, http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=12644336&site=ehost-live

Stockard, J. (1999). Gender socialization. In J.S. Chaftez (Ed.). *The hHandbook of the sociology of gender* (pp. 215-227). New York, NY: Plenum Publishers.

Tholander, M. (2002). Cross-gender teasing as a socializing practice. *Discourse Processes, 34*, 311-338. Retrieved May 2, 2008 from EBSCO online database, Academic Search Premier, http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=7386010&site=ehost-live

Watts, R. H., & Borders, L. D. (2005). Boys' perceptions of the male role: Understanding gender role conflict in adolescent males. *The Journal of Men's Studies, 13*, 267-280. Retrieved May 2, 2008 from EBSCO online database, Gender Studies Database, http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=fmh&AN=15851714&site=ehost-live

Wharton, A. S. (2005). *The sociology of gender: An introduction to theory and research.* Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.


## Suggested Reading


Franklin, S. (Ed.). (1996). *The sociology of gender.* Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, Ltd.

Lucal, B., & Blackstone, A. (Eds.). (2007). *The sociology of gender: Syllabi and other instructional materials.* New York, NY: American Sociological Association.


## Essay by Jennifer Kretchmar, Ph.D.

Jennifer Kretchmar earned her Doctorate in Educational Psychology from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She currently works as a Research Associate in undergraduate admissions.