

DATE: 1/1 Gender Studies

What are the theories of social construction of gender? (2016)

INTRODUCTION

The sociologists argue that gender is socially constructed, negating the biological essentialist's debate that view gender as a biological construct. Gender socialisation begins at an early age when an individual is born an assigned sex. Family, peers, media, education system, environment, culture all play a significant role in shaping gender identities and roles. Various theories including symbolic interactionism, social ^{learning} labelling theory, gender role theory, gender performativity, hegemonic masculinity and emphasised femininity, ^{and} social stratification show the social construction of gender. The prominent work is done by Margaret Mead. The concept of gender roles is also relative with time and space, across cultures. Some feminist proponents of the social construction of gender include Charlotte Perkins, Simone de Beauvoir, Erving Goffman, Kate Millet, and Judith Lorber.

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION THEORY

Social Construction theory was proposed by Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann in their work "The Social Construction of Reality" in 1966. In this theory, they explored how individuals collectively create and maintain a shared understanding of reality through social processes. All aspects of human life are not inherently given but are constructed through social and cultural processes. It posits that reality is subjective and relative and is shaped through language and symbolic interactions (symbolic interactionism).

THEORIES OF SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER

The social construction of gender begins at an early age through the process of gender socialisation. There are some sociological theories that explain this social construction of gender.

1. Symbolic Interactionism

Proposed by George Herbert Mead, it emphasizes that symbols and language play a significant role in shaping social reality. Gendered symbols include colours, clothing, and specific behaviours associated with being masculine or feminine.

Example

In Pakistan, traditional shalwar kameez with duppatta symbolise the cultural expectations with women and kurta pajama for men.

2. Social Learning Theory

Proposed by Albert Bandura, the theory posits that individuals acquire gender roles through observation, imitation, and reinforcement. Children learn gendered behaviour by observing adults.

Example

When a boy is praised for being tough while playing, he internalises this as a desirable masculine trait.

Similarly, girls learn cooking skills by observing their mothers which reinforces the expectation of women in domestic roles.

DATE: / /

3. Gender Role Theory

This theory examines how societal norms and expectations shape the behaviors, attitudes, and roles of individuals based on their gender. These roles are learned through family, peers, media, education system.

Example

In 'Pride and Prejudice' by Jane Austen, she explores the limited roles available to women in the 19th century emphasizing how societal expectations dictate their behavior and choices.

4. Gender Performativity

Judith Butler argues that gender is not an inherent identity, rather it is a repeated performance. It is performed through various ways including clothing, speech, body language which reinforces the societal expectations.

Example

In the novel 'Orlando' by Virginia Woolf, the protagonist Orlando changes gender from male to female. Woolf explores how gender identity is created and performed through Orlando's experiences and behaviours that shift drastically based on their gender presentation.

DATE: ___/___/___

5. Hegemonic Masculinity and Emphasised

Femininity

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In theory, R.W. Connell explains that the society expects men to be assertive and women to be nurturing. Hegemonic masculinity privileges heterosexuality, aggression, and dominance over women.

Examples

The character of Sultan Rabi from Pakistani cinema and the Marlboro ~~Boxo~~ Man from cigarette advertisements depicts hegemonic masculinity.

While the character of Cinderella in Disney movie depicts emphasised femininity through her beauty, kindness, and patience who ultimately finds happiness through her relationship with a prince.

6. Intersectionality

Proposed by Kimberlé Crenshaw, the theory recognises the interconnectedness of social categories and how they intersect to shape individual experiences. Gender intersects with race, class, and other factors to create unique experiences of oppression or privilege.

Example

In the novel "The God of

"Small Things" by Arundhati Roy, the character Ammu faces social restrictions based on her gender and caste.

7. Margaret Mead's Theory

In her most famous work, "Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies", she explores three societies in Papua New Guinea.

Arapesh Both sexes acted in ways American consider 'feminine'

Mundugamor Both sexes acted in ways American consider 'masculine'

Tchambuli Men acted in ways American consider 'feminine' and women acted in ways American consider 'masculine'

Margaret Mead's research shows that gender traits are not universal but socially constructed.

8. Social Stratification Theory

This theory examines how societal structures and hierarchies contribute to unequal distribution of resources, privileges, and opportunities based on gender.

Example

The most evident example is gender wage gap, where women are

DATE: _/ _/ _

paid less than men for the same job.

GENDER

RELATIVITY

TIME

A century ago, pink was associated with males and blue colour with females, however, today it is reverse.

CULTURE

Matriarchal and Patriarchal societies

FEMINIST PROPONENTS

1. Charlotte Perkins

In her work, "The Yellow Wallpaper", she challenged traditional gender roles and critiqued the confinement of women to domestic roles.

2. Simone de Beauvoir

In her book, "The Second Sex", she challenged the traditional notions of femininity and argued that "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman."

3. Erving Goffman

In his work, "The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life", Goffman explored how individuals perform gender in social interactions.

4. Kate Millet

In her work, "Sexual Politics", she critiqued the power dynamics in gender relations, examining how patriarchy shapes social institutions and influences gender.

5. Judith Lorber

In her work, "Paradoxes of Gender", she challenged the essentialist view and highlighted the social construction of gender.

CONCLUSION

From the various theories discussed above, it can be concluded that gender is a social construct and the gender roles vary across different societies and cultures through time and space.

DATE: / / Gender Studies

Masculinity and femininity are the deeply engraved realities since the distant past in human history. Discuss various theoretical debates on the construction of masculinity and femininity to make it explicit that the formation of both is either natural or social reality. Support your arguments with real life examples. (2021)

INTRODUCTION

Masculinity and femininity are the formations of social reality. Kohlberg's Cognitive Development theory and Freud's Psychoanalytic theory show that children ~~confirm~~ develop their gender identity at a young age. Masculinity as a social construct is supported through social cognitive theory, Connell's hierarchy of masculinities, machismo, toxic masculinity, metrosexual, and New Man concept. Femininity as a social constructed is also supported by social cognitive theory, cult of domesticity, beauty conceptions related to femininity, and Simone de Beauvoir's work. Both masculinity and femininity are shaped by the society, history, and culture and are reinforced overtime through family, peers, schools, and media.

KOHLBERG'S COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT THEORY

This theory posits that children actively seek to understand their gender identity as they grow and cognitively develop. Gender identity formation takes place in two stages.

Gender Labelling

By the age of 3, children acquire a fixed gender identity. They learn to categorise themselves based on the labels provided by society. By the age of 4, they are capable of applying these gender labels to others.

Gender Constancy

It is developed around the age of 5 or 6 where children come to understand that their gender remains consistent over time despite superficial changes in appearance or behaviour.

PSYCHOANALYTICAL THEORY

Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytical theory posits that gender is deeply rooted in unconscious mind and influenced by early

DATE: ___/___/___

childhood experiences. He argues that children develop their gender identity through interactions with their parents and caregivers.

FORMATION OF MASCULINITY

The formation of masculinity is a social reality shaped by cultural norms, societal expectations, and learned behaviours. It can be further substantiated with the help of following theories.

1. Social Cognitive Theory

Proposed by Albert Bandura, the theory posits that people learn behaviours through observation, imitation, and reinforcement within social contexts. Boys learn what is deemed masculine by observing behaviours reinforced by family, peers, or media. Acts like aggression, emotional stoicism, and competitiveness are awarded and imitated in case of men.

2. Connell's Hierarchy of Masculinity

Raewyn Connell distinguished different types of masculinities.

- | | | |
|-------|---------------------------------|--|
| (i) | <u>Hegemonic Masculinity</u> | Male dominance and subordination of women and other marginalised masculinities.
Heterosexual, Physically strong, Assertive, Emotionally stoic men |
| (ii) | <u>Complicit Masculinity</u> | Men who are not overtly assertive or dominant but reap the benefits of patriarchy through privileges like higher pay or social status. |
| (iii) | <u>Subordinate Masculinity</u> | Marginalised or gay men, often perceived as weak, or those who challenge traditional gender norms |
| (iv) | <u>Marginalised Masculinity</u> | Men who are marginalised due to race, class, or ethnicity |

Connell's hierarchy is socially constructed due to positioning of hegemonic masculinity at superior level. Society reinforces this masculinity and those who do not conform are marginalised.

3. Machismo (Hypermasculinity)

It is a cultural ideology that promotes

DATE: / /

an exaggerated sense of masculinity. It emphasises the traits such as dominance, sexual prowess, emotional stoicism, and aggression. Machismo teaches men to behave in ways that highlights these traits, as a proof of manhood. This whole conception is a social construct reinforced through culture, media, and peers.

Example

The movie "Fight Club" portrays a group of men who embrace hyper-masculinity and machismo as a response to the feelings of impotence in modern society.

4. Toxic Masculinity

It refers to the harmful cultural expectations of masculinity. It is a result of societal pressure on men to conform to a narrow and damaging view of masculinity that discourages emotional expression and vulnerability and encourages behaviors that lead to violence and suppression of others.

Example

In the movie "American Psycho", the protagonist Patrick Bateman embodies toxic masculinity through his obsession with wealth, power, and physical appearance.

5. Metrosexual

It describes a man from urban settings who adopts grooming and fashion habits associated with femininity. The rise of metrosexual men shows that masculinity is fluid and socially constructed.

Example

Singer Harry Styles and social media influencer ~~Ken~~ Adnan Zafar aka Kendall can be categorised as metrosexual.

6. New Man (Effeminacy)

The concept of New Man emerged in the 1970s and 1980s as a model of masculinity that embraces traditional feminine qualities like emotional sensitivity, nurturing, and active involvement in child care. This New Man represents a shift in social constructions of masculinity.

Example

It can include men who take on primary caregiving roles in family and share household chores. In Sweden, the government's paternity leave policy encourages fathers to take time off work to care for their new born, embracing the idea of both nurturing parents.

FORMATION OF FEMININITY

Just like masculinity, femininity is also a social reality, constructed through historical, social, cultural, religious contexts and shaped by family, peers, education, and media.

1. Social Cognitive Theory

Albert Bandura, in this theory explains that individuals learn behaviours and gender norms by observing and imitating the actions of others. Thus, femininity is also formed and reinforced through societal norms.

Example

TV advertisements show girls and women as caring, nurturing, cooperative, and focused on their appearance which reinforces young girls to adopt these gender roles.

2. Cult of Domesticity/True Womanhood

This emerged in the 19th century defining femininity in terms of woman's

DATE: / /

role within the home centered on virtues such as piety, purity, domesticity, and submissiveness. This is a socially constructed ideology which confines women to private spheres where they are expected to be dutiful wives and mothers.

Example

Magazines like "Akhbar-e-Jahan" and "Masala Cooking Magazine" promote the cult of domesticity by providing homemaking tips, cooking recipes, and advices on child-rearing.

3. Beauty is the Beast

Femininity is a socially constructed concept driven by unrealistic standards of beauty that women are forced to adhere to causing many to base their self-worth on external appearances rather than inner qualities or achievements. Femininity proposes the idea that men are instrumental and women are ornamental.

Example

Procedures like Chinese foot binding, African Tribal Scarification, Lip plates in Mursi and Surma Tribes, Ear and nose piercing in South Asia, and body hair removal showcase the extent to which women go to fit in to societal

expectations.

4. Simone de Beauvoir

In her book "The Second Sex", she argues that femininity is not inherent, rather, it is socially constructed.

She asserts that women are made to fit into the societal rules through socialisation, not biological destiny.

"One is not born, but rather becomes a woman."

(Simone de Beauvoir)

CONCLUSION

The above discussed theories show that both masculinity and femininity are social realities, not biologically inherited. They are shaped by societal norms and values and reinforced over time through various social agents like family, peers, school and media.

DATE: 1/1

Gender Studies

Is 'Sex' also a social construct? (2024)

INTRODUCTION

Biology defines 'sex' on the basis of visible genital structures and chromosomes. The def categorization of sex has evolved into 5 different categories in biology. However, sex is not just a biological construct, it is a social construct too. The evolving definitions of sex in biology from the five categories to hormones and chromosomes testing which still leaves out the individuals who fall beyond the typical XX and XY chromosomes categories show that sex is a social construct. The fluidity of sexual characteristics evident through surgical corrections at birth, sex alterations also reflect its social construction. The legal systems also allow for the change of sex designation on documents shaping the different understandings of sex. Moreover, the word 'sex' also carries different connotations which implies different meanings associated with the word.

SEX IS A SOCIAL CONSTRUCT

The World Health Organisation defines sex as "the biological and psychophysiological characteristics that differentiate men and women." The biological definition focuses only on the visible anatomical structures on one's bodies to categorize them either as male or female. However, it can be proved from the following arguments that sex is not just a biological but a social construct.

1. Evolving Medical definitions of Sex

The criteria used to determine sex has evolved over time, from relying on genital appearance to the presence of sex hormones and chromosomes. For example, Theodore ~~Kbe~~ Klebs and Anne Fausto Sterling classified anatomical sex into five categories in the 19th century. Today, the most recent methods focus on hormones. For example, Caster Semenya faced scrutiny over her appearance for the Olympics and had to go through various sex-testing ways and was found to be hyperandrogenic.

(Excessive presence of male sex hormones)
This case led to the development of hyperandrogenism policies by the International Olympic Committee. ~~*~~ This shows that sex is not a fixed or universal concept, but shaped by social and historical context.

2. The tools used by scientists to define biological sex are themselves influenced by cultural assumptions about gender.

The tools like hormones and chromosomes used to define and categorize sex are influenced by cultural assumptions about gender. For instance, XX and XY chromosomes are used to assign sex but even this categorization leaves out many genetic variations like XXY or XO conditions. This shows that the rigid binary of sex is inadequate. Also, the example of people with complete androgen insensitivity syndrome, who have XY chromosome but develop female secondary sex characteristics, shows the limitations of using chromosomes alone to define sex.

3. Fluidity in sex characteristics

Some people have physical characteristics like hormone levels or body composition that changes over time, such as those

with Polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS) and Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome (AIS). This shows that sex characteristics can be more fluid than previously thought influenced by social decision about which traits are considered to be defined male or female.

4. Legal and government systems shape how sex is understood

^{laws}
The legal and government policies that regulate people based on their assigned sex at birth, like in bathroom access, hospital wards, military service, demonstrate that sex is not merely biological but is enforced through social institutions, regardless of the intersex person or varied gender identities.

5. Surgical corrections at birth

The fact that a person with ambiguous genitalia is often surgically "corrected" at birth reflects societal discomfort with non-binary categories of sex. Hormone treatments for transgender individuals or intersex further shows that society plays a role in defining and enforcing sex characteristics, rather than these traits being fixed or purely biological.

Sex alteration through medical or therapeutic means

The procedures like Hormone Therapy, Sex-Reassignment Surgery, Facial Feminisation/Masculinisation, Vocal Therapy, shows that sex can be altered. This demonstrates clearly that sex is not a biological reality but a socially constructed category.

7. Legal systems allow for the change of sex designation on documents

Various legal systems around the world allow transgender individuals to undergo sex reassignment surgeries and legally change their sex. This shows how society, rather than biology, is the ultimate authority in defining sex.

8. Sex categorization is a crucial part of being recognised as a person in Society

The question of "What is it?" asked of new parents shows the fundamental social importance of assigning sex at birth. This shows that sex categorization is a crucial part of being recognised as a person in Society implying that sex has a socially constructed dimension.

9. The word 'sex' also implies different connotations

The late US Supreme Court Judge Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg viewed the words sex and gender synonymous. She freely swapped them in her briefings to avoid having the word "sex" pop up too often. It is thought that her secretary supported this practice by suggesting to Ginsburg that "those nine men (the other Supreme Court Justices) hear the word and their first association is not the way you want them to be thinking" (Case. 1995).

This anecdote shows that both sex and gender are socially defined variables whose definitions change over time.

CONCLUSION

The above arguments show that sex is not merely a biological construct as its biological definitions are constantly evolving and even the tools used to define it are influenced by cultural assumptions about gender. Moreover the sex reassignment surgeries, legal policies and laws all show the social construction of sex.