

Date: _____

Q:- What are the theories of social construction of gender? (2016).

Introduction:-

The social construction of gender refers to the idea that gender identities and roles are not innate or biologically determined, but created and maintained through social processes, interactions, language, and culture. Several theories explain how gender is constructed, enforced, and sometimes resisted in society. Below are the major theories of the social construction of gender:

1. Symbolic Interactionism:

Gender is constructed through everyday interactions and the meanings people attach to behaviors, roles, and symbols. People learn "how to be" male or female by internalizing societal expectations through language, gestures, and social norms.

Date: _____

Key Concepts:

- Gender as performance
- Social learning through interaction

Example:

1. When a boy cries and is told "boys don't cry", he learns that expressing emotions is "unmanly". Over time, he suppresses emotions to conform to this expectation.
2. In schools, teachers may call boys "strong" and girls "sweet", reinforcing masculine and feminine traits.
3. Job titles like "fireman" or "policeman" imply gender roles through language, influencing how society views gendered professions.

Date: _____

2. Gender Performativity (Judith Butler)

Gender is not something one is, but something one does repeatedly. Through repetitive actions, behaviors, clothing, and speech, individuals perform gender roles. These performances are shaped by societal expectations.

Key Concepts:

- Gender is performed, not possessed.
- Repeated acts solidify gender identity.

Example:-

1. A woman wearing makeup, dresses, and speaking softly is performing femininity because society associates those behaviors with being female. If she stops performing these acts, others may question her gender.

2. In beauty pageants, contestants walk, talk, and dress in ways that conform to ideal femininity - graceful, soft-spoken, elegant.

ZEENAT

Date: _____

3. A man constantly suppresses emotions, lifts weights, and speaks assertively to maintain a "masculine" image.

3. Social Learning Theory:-

Children learn gender roles by observing and imitating others, especially parents, peers, and media figures. Behavior is reinforced through rewards and punishments. Through this process, individuals internalize gender norms and expectations, illustrating how gender is socially constructed.

Key Concepts:

- Modeling and imitation
- Reinforcement of gender-appropriate behavior.

Example:

1. If a girl helps her mother in the kitchen and is praised, she learns that this is "appropriate" behavior for her gender. If a boy tries to wear a dress and is scolded, he

ZEENAT

Date: _____

learns it's "inappropriate" for boys.

2. Boys watching superhero cartoons try to be "tough" like the characters; parents praise this behavior.

3. A girl is discouraged from climbing trees or playing football because it's "not ladylike."

4. Cognitive Development Theory:-

(Lawrence Kohlberg, Carol Gilligan)

Children actively develop a sense of gender identity through mental processes. Around the age of 2-7, children begin to categorize themselves and others as male or female and adopt gendered behaviors accordingly. They form internal "gender schemas" and seek out gender-appropriate roles, toys, and activities. Thus, gender is constructed as children cognitively organize their understanding of social norms.

Key Concepts:

- Gender Schema

ZEENAT

Date: _____

• Self - categorization

Example:-

1. A child identifies as a girl, forms a schema of what "girls do," and prefers playing with dolls, wearing pink, and being gentle because she believes these are feminine traits.

2. A 5-year-old boy refuses to wear pink to school because he thinks "pink is for girls."

3. A girl refuses to play with cars because she thinks it doesn't align with being a girl.

5. Post-Structuralist Theory:
(Michel Foucault & Judith Butler)

Post-Structuralist theory, influenced by thinkers like Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, argues that gender is not a fixed or natural identity

ZEENAT

Date: _____

but is shaped by language, discourse, and power relations. It challenges the idea of binary gender categories (male/female) and emphasizes that meanings of masculinity and femininity vary across cultures and time. According to this view, gender is fluid, unstable, and constructed through social and institutional narratives.

Key Concepts:-

- Gender is fluid and unstable.
- Power and discourse shape gender norms.

Example:-

1. The idea that men must be aggressive or women must be nurturing is not biological - it is created and reinforced through societal norms and repeated behaviors.
2. In some indigenous cultures like the Hijra community in South Asia, they are recognized third-gender roles - challenging Western male/female binaries.

ZEENAT

Date: _____

3. Historical Shift: In the 19th century, boys wore dresses and pink was for boys. Today, it's reversed - showing gender norms are culturally constructed.

6. Ethnomethodology Theory:-

(Harold Garfinkel)

Ethnomethodology, developed by Harold Garfinkel, explains that gender is not something we are but something we "do" through routine, everyday behaviors. This theory emphasizes that individuals perform gender in daily interactions by following socially accepted norms and expectations. People are held accountable if they fail to conform to these norms. Thus, gender is continually produced and maintained through ordinary social practices.

Key Concepts:-

- Doing gender
- Accountability to gender norms.

Example:-

1. A woman who does not wear makeup or dresses may be seen as less feminine, while a man taking on caregiving roles might face social judgment.

ZEENAT

Date: _____

2. A woman who does not shave her body hair may be judged as "unfeminine" because she's not "doing gender" in a culturally expected way.

3. Men carrying babies in public or being stay-at-home dads are often questioned or praised unusually - revealing how rare the behavior is seen in gendered terms.

7. Queer Theory:

Queer theory challenges the traditional, binary understanding of gender and sexuality (male/female, straight/gay). It argues that these categories are socially constructed, restrictive, and fail to capture the full spectrum of human identity. Influenced by post-structuralism, queer theory sees gender and sexuality as fluid, diverse, and changeable over time and context. Queer theory promotes the idea that there is no single "correct" way to experience or express gender.

ZEENAT

Date: _____

Key Concepts:-

- Anti-essentialism
- Gender and sexuality as fluid spectrums.

Example:-

1. Someone identifying as non-binary or genderqueer resists fixed gender roles, showing that identity is not tied to biology but to personal and social expression.

2. Pride parades celebrate diverse expressions of gender and sexuality that resist mainstream norms.

8. Intersectionality Theory:- (Kimberlé Crenshaw)

Intersectionality, introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw, explains that gender is not experienced in isolation but is shaped by multiple overlapping social identities

Date: _____

such as race, class, religion, disability, and sexuality. This theory highlights how individuals face different forms of privilege or oppression depending on the intersections of these identities. Intersectionality reveals that gender inequality is complex and cannot be fully understood without considering other systems of power.

Key Concepts:

- Multiple identities
- Interconnected systems of oppression.

Example:-

1. A wealthy urban woman may face gender discrimination differently than a poor rural woman or a Black Muslim woman.

2. A Black Muslim woman may face gendered Islamophobia at work - her experience is shaped by her gender, religion and race.

3. In Pakistan, a poor woman in a rural village faces different gender challenges than an urban educated woman - such as limited access to healthcare or education.

ZEENAT

Date: _____

9. Hegemonic Masculinity Theory:- (R.W. Connell)

Hegemonic Masculinity, a concept developed by R.W. Connell, refers to the culturally dominant form of masculinity that upholds male power and marginalizes alternative masculinities and femininities. It promotes traits like toughness, emotional restraint, heterosexuality, and authority as the "ideal" for being a man. This dominant standard pressures men to conform and devalues those who do not, including emotional men, LGBTQ+ individuals, or those engaged in caregiving roles.

Key Concepts:-

- Power hierarchy within masculinities.
- Marginalized masculinities.

Example:-

1. A man who chooses to be stay-at-home father may be viewed as "less masculine" in many societies.
2. Boys in school are mocked for liking music

ZEENAT

Date: _____

or art instead of sports - Because these interests don't fit the dominant "macho" ideal.

3. In corporate leadership, men are often expected to be tough and assertive - emotional men are seen as weak or "unmanly."

Critical Analysis:-

The theories of social construction of gender provide a powerful lens to understand how gender roles are not biologically determined but shaped by social, cultural, and institutional forces.

These theories emphasize that gender is learned, performed, and regulated through various social mechanisms.

In short, while these theories are conceptually rich and socially transformative, no single theory fully captures the complexity of gender. A balanced, context-sensitive, and intersectional approach is needed to apply these insights effectively in both academic and practical fields.

Date: _____

Conclusion:-

Theories of social construction of gender reveal that gender is not a fixed or natural identity but a product of social processes, interactions, and power relations. Together, these theories challenge biological determinism and help us understand how gender roles are created, maintained, and resisted across cultures and contexts. A critical and intersectional approach to these theories enables a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of gender in the modern world. These frameworks challenge rigid roles and open space for a more inclusive, flexible understanding of identity.