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Module Overview



Gender and Self

In traditional cultures, gender roles tend to be sharply divided, and during adolescence boys' and girls' daily lives are often separate. Girls spend their time with adult women learning skills important for child care and running a household, whereas boys learn the skills necessary for the requirements of the male role: provide, protect, and procreate.

In earlier periods of American history, adolescent girls were constricted in many ways, but they also benefited from a "protective umbrella" of involvement and concern by adult women. Ideals of manhood have also changed in the course of American history; from "communal manhood" to "self-made manhood" to the "passionate manhood" that is the current ideal.

In American society today, boys and girls receive differential gender socialization from birth, and gender-related socialization pressures intensify at adolescence. Research shows that pressures to conform to gender expectations come from the family, peers, and teachers. For girls, the magazines they like best relentlessly emphasize physical appearance. The cognitive-developmental theory of gender and gender schema theory state that people tend to organize their perceptions of the world according to schemas of male and female, and people categorize a wide range of behavior and objects on this basis.

Research indicates that there is a widespread tendency across cultures to classify some traits as "feminine" and others as "masculine." Androgyny is the term for combining "feminine" and "masculine" traits within one person. Among adolescents, androgyny tends to be acceptable for girls but not for boys. Among emerging adults, gender stereotypes sometimes lead them to evaluate women's work less favorably than men's. However, gender stereotypes appear to be weaker in emerging adulthood than in adolescence.

Although research generally finds few substantial differences between males and females in

most respects, perceptions of gender differences persist, partly because gender schemas are resistant to change once established and partly because males' and females' social roles seem to confirm stereotypes about gender differences in some respects. Views of gender have changed substantially in the West in the past century and are likely to change in developing countries in the future as a result of economic development and globalization.

Theories and research have established quite well how gender socialization takes place and have identified the specific influences in adolescence that promote conformity to gender expectations. The evidence also portrays quite vividly the costs that gender expectations exact from adolescents and emerging adults. For girls, the emphasis on physical appearance in adolescence is a frequent source of anxiety and distress. Also, girls are sometimes dissuaded from pursuing certain high-status, high-paying educational and occupational paths because they learn to regard these paths as incompatible with being female; as emerging adults, their work may be regarded less favorably simply because they are female. In traditional cultures, girls are often excluded even from opportunities to attend secondary school.

Adolescent boys face different sorts of gender-based restrictions and obstacles, no less daunting. Boys in traditional cultures have to achieve manhood by developing the required skills for providing, protecting, and procreating. The price of failing to meet these requirements is humiliation and rejection. In the West, gender socialization pressures on boys are less formal but nevertheless formidable. Regardless of their personal inclinations, adolescent boys must learn to use verbal and physical aggressiveness to defend themselves against insults to their manhood from other boys. Adolescent boys who cross the gender divide and display "feminine" traits such as sensitivity to the feelings of others risk ridicule and rejection, like their counterparts in traditional cultures.

Students might wonder, given the negatives associated with gender socialization in adolescence and emerging adulthood, and given the limitations that gender roles place on the development of young people's potentials, why gender socialization is so highly emphasized and why conformity to gender roles is so highly valued across virtually all cultures and across history as well. Perhaps the answer lies in the ways that gender roles provide us with schemas, with frameworks for understanding how the world works. Because they are just reaching sexual maturity, adolescents and emerging adults are especially eager for information about what their potential mates may find attractive (Steinberg & Cauffman, 1996). Gender schemas and gender roles provide them with that information.

Although beliefs about gender may be useful in some ways for making sense of the world, they can also be misleading because they oversimplify the complexity of real life. Remember that any statement about gender differences involves comparing 3.5 billion of the world's people to the other 3.5 billion. Although overall differences exist between males and females, there is

THE OTHER 5.5 BILLION. ALTHOUGH OVERALL DIFFERENCES EXIST BETWEEN MALES AND FEMALES, THERE IS ALSO A TREMENDOUS AMOUNT OF VARIABILITY WITHIN EACH GROUP ON NEARLY EVERY CHARACTERISTIC.

As you think about gender issues in your own life, as you read social science research, and as you review the module resources, any time you find broad statements about gender characteristics—males are more [fill in the blank] than females, females are more [fill in the blank] than males—it would be wise to keep this in mind and approach such statements with a critical eye.

At this point, researchers know relatively little about how young people themselves perceive the gender socialization process. Future studies may investigate this question. It may be especially interesting to investigate this question with emerging adults.

References

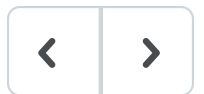
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