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Impact of Gender on Self concept and Self esteem

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Abstract

Researches in the field of gender studies have found a significant relationship between gender roles and self concept. The literature review in this area depicts that there are observed behavioral differences between adolescent males and females. The gender-identification hypothesis also invokes to explain the socialization process due to gender differences. There is immense social pressure on adolescents to act their roles and behave in stereotypical ways specific to their gender.

Males are conditioned and trained hard into masculine activities that can make them physically strong. Sports like football, baseball, and cricket are meant to make them sturdy. For example, crying behavior is a behavior which is associated with females thus a male attempting to it would be considered as showing up feminine traits within him.

Similarly in case of females, there is a massive demand to shift their interest from sports like basketball and cricket to more feminine playoffs like barbie dolls and kitchen games. They are habituated to dress up in feminine ways and give up all the masculine activities by the time they reach their adolescence. They are also caught up in exploring their physical maturity and to protect themselves from any danger that can happen to them while walking alone at deserted places or during the night, visiting prohibited places like discotheques or pubs or dressing up indecently etc.

In this review, the impacts that gender suited roles can have on the self concept of both the genders has been explored. This self concept largely influences in framing the self esteem of both the males and females.

Key Words: Gender, gender role identity, self concept, self esteem, masculinity, femininity.

Introduction

The most invasive element of an individual's personality is that of a social identity according to which each of us are assigned to either of the two categories i.e. males or females. It defines the roles, behaviors preferences and other attributes that states what it means to be male or female in a given culture. Many of these attributes are a result of environmental/

social learning while others can be determined biologically. Muscular build and deep voice are perceived as attributes of masculinity while long hair and high voice are perceived as femininity. These perceptions are a result of learned stereotypes. There is a serious blend of genetics and environmental learning to interpret the physical attributes of an

individual as a sign of masculinity and femininity.

The term gender and sex are used interchangeably although there is a thin line difference between the two. Sex is more of a biological term determined by genetic factors resulting in anatomical and physiological differences. Gender is a social construct including a wide range of physiological, psychological and behavioral characteristics pertaining to both masculinity and femininity. New parents spontaneously react towards a neonate's sex as the all significant defining characteristics. Parents quickly attach a boy name or a girl's name, selecting pink versus blue clothing and decorating the room in feminine or masculine style by selecting "gender-appropriate" toys. This leads to the phenomenon of gender identity among the infants. Young children are ordinarily not aware about their gender and sex until they are two years old. Gender identity takes place when gender becomes an element of one's self concept, the infant starts developing a sense of self that includes maleness or femaleness.

The observed differences in behavior of male and female were previously assumed to be physiological however recently many of the typical masculine and feminine characteristics are found to be acquired. Two significant theories are proposed in this regards. First is the *gender scheme theory* proposed by Bem in 1984 suggested that small children have generalized readiness to organize information regarding their self based on their culture about their sex specific role. As childhood progresses, the

child learn in detail the stereotypes associated with masculinity and femininity in their culture.

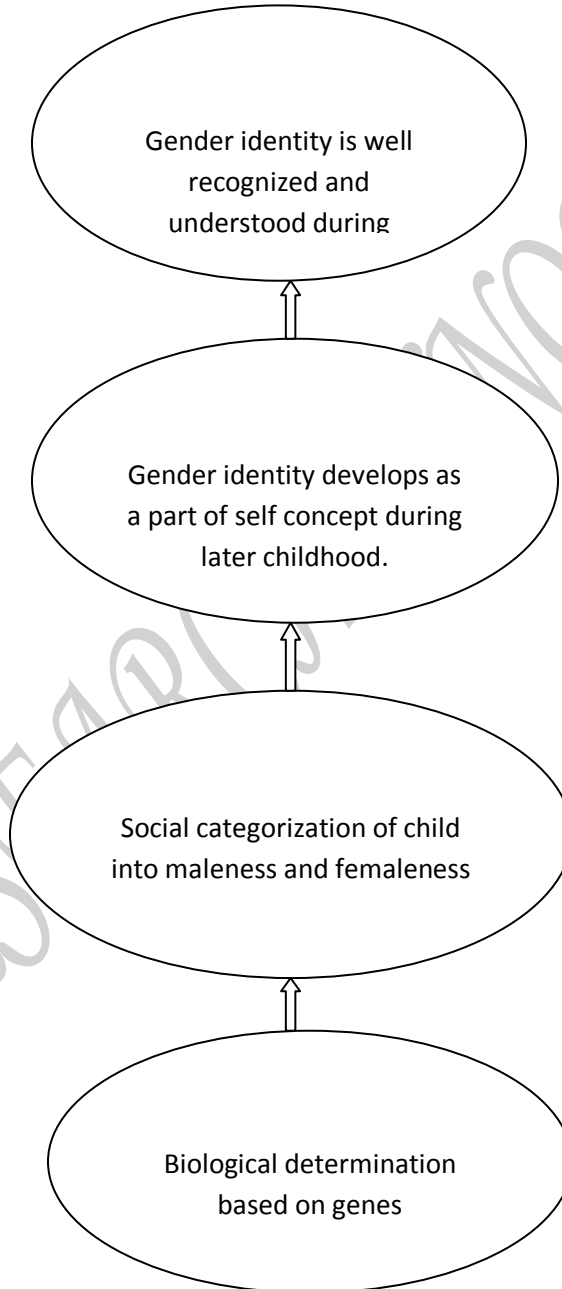
Contrasting to the gender schema theory, Spence in 1993 favored the *multifactorial gender identity theory* which proposes that gender relevant aspects of self consists of many factors rather than an easy separation into male or female. Fraction of what children learn about their gender is based on imitating their parents. Similarly parents keep on rewarding their young ones for gender appropriate behavior and discouraging when children indulge in gender inappropriate behavior. Example of such behavior is a response towards a little girl demanding a kitchen set for her birthday versus the response given to a little boy for the same request. In a parallel sense, parents would again respond differently to a little boy asking for football for his birthday versus response to a little girl asking for the same. Gender suitability is closely associated to the role/ behavior that one has to perform. The specific stereotypes about masculinity and femininity are slowly learned by children. Inappropriate gender behaviors are suppressed by the parents as it may lead to hollow and negative self concept for the individual.

Earlier psychologist had thought masculinity and femininity to be the two ends of a single continuum. Each individual was thus perceived to be either completely endowed with masculine traits or completely endowed with feminine traits. Individuals who are highly stereotyped are motivated to behave in a way consistent to their culture specific gender role. However, later it was

deciphered the varied personal characteristics associated with masculinity and femininity lie on an independent continuum that can range from high degree to low degree in both masculinity and femininity. In a lot many cases individuals might be high on characteristics from both

the genders for example a person can be both competitive and sensitive to the needs of others. This is characterized by psychological androgyny. An androgyny person can be defined as one who combines both the traditional masculine and feminine behavioral traits.

Table I: Showing the Stages of Gender Development



Self Concept and Self Esteem: Gender role is observed to have a significant impact on the self concept of the developing individual. This self concept in turn affects the self esteem in a significant manner. Both the psychological constructs self concept and self esteem are commonly used interchangeably, although there is a difference between the two.

Self concept is developed by gaining knowledge about oneself. It requires the reflection of one's own self and behavior. It is the self perception about oneself. While, self esteem is defined as our total attitude towards our self. It is the degree of respect that person has for oneself. **Rosenberg (1965)** defines the self-esteem in terms of "a stable sense of personal worth or worthiness". **Branden (1969)** defined self-esteem as "the experience of being competent to cope with the basic challenges of life and being worthy of happiness". It might range from being positive to negative. Self esteem is also based upon the feedbacks an individual gets from others. If the feedback received is positive then it leads to high self esteem and if it is negative, would lead to lowered self esteem. Self esteem is based on various traits of personality like how one looks, how successful one is, and what impressions do others have for the individual. However similarity between both the construct remains to be that both are developed by comparing oneself to those around them. If a person has low self esteem the self concept can be skewed in a negative direction. The characteristics of people with high self esteem are:

1. **Genuineness:** people high on self esteem are honest towards themselves and others both emotionally and intellectually.
2. **Positivity:** These people have an optimistic attitude towards the life events. They explore the positive aspects of life and overlook the negativities.
3. **Internal values:** Such people are characterized with high degrees of internal based values in comparison to external based values. They dwell upon the self chosen values instead of the values demanded and expected by others.
4. **Self improvement:** A general tendency among people with high self esteem is to strive for self improvement i.e. is to assess them uncritically and keep enhancing themselves into better human beings.

High self esteem can lead an individual into:

- Confidence in one's own abilities
- Self acceptance
- Internal locus of control
- Optimism

Low self esteem can lead towards:

- Lack of confidence
- Self rejection
- External locus of control
- Pessimism

Gender as related to self concept and self esteem

Researches showing the impact of gender on self concept and self esteem have revealed some interesting findings. For example,

Butterfield (1999) showed that there were statistically significant differences in self esteem by gender on academic competence scale, peer popularity scale and personal security scale. It was found that girls have higher score in some dimensions of self esteem than boys. Similarly **Kumru et.al (2007)** revealed that adolescent with high self esteem and girls scored high in the area of peer attachment and pro social behavior. Further in this area **Kearney (1999)** emphasized the importance of biological, cognitive, environmental and social factors in influencing personal development and self esteem of an individual. A noteworthy finding of him includes that girls tend to have lower self esteem and more negative assessment of their physical characteristics and intellectual abilities than boys.

According to **Frome and Eccles (1996)** perceiving oneself as feminine is positively related to self-esteem for females and perceiving oneself as masculine was positively related to self-esteem for males.

Williams and Best (1990) came up with an interesting study on self concept and found that in nations like India and Malaysia where females are expected to stay back at home and fulfill their respective roles of a wife, mother etc reported to have most negative self concept in comparison to nations like England and Finland where women are more active in labor force and status difference between men and women is less. **McMullin and Cairney (2004)** also concluded that women have lower levels of self-esteem than do men.

Conversely to these findings, some research studies conducted did not show any significant differences between the self esteem of males and females. Study by **Patton, Bartrum and Creed (2004)** found that there was no significant difference between males females on self esteem. **Major et al. (1999)** revealed in their study that difference between male female is lesser among those belonging to professional classes and is more among the middle and lower classes.

Meta analysis conducted by **Pinquart and Sörensen (1999)** explored the gender differences in the area of life satisfaction, happiness, self esteem, loneliness subjective health and subjective age in late adulthood. Older women reported lower subjective well being and less positive self concept than males on all measures except for subjective age. Smaller gender differences in subjective well being were found in younger than in older groups.

Many of the researches have explored the importance of reflected appraisals self perceived competence and social comparison as a source of self esteem. The gender based socialization process leads to females and males to extend their abilities for exploring diverse sources of self esteem.

The congruence model emphasized that females who are high on femininity should have the highest self esteem (**Whitely, 1983**), conversely, under the androgen and masculinity model it was hypothesized that females who are high on masculinity should have the highest self esteem (**Bem, 1974**,

Massad, 1981, Lamke 1982, Spence, 1983 & Whitely, 1983).

James (1980) had proposed that individuals base their self esteem on domains that are important and significant to them. This theory lays emphasis on the relationship between gender role identity and self esteem of individual. Additionally it also highlighted that if the self perception of an individual is not conforming to the societal gender role norms then it would lead to lowered self esteem.

Researchers (Schwalbe & Staples, 1991) have found that females attach more importance to reflected appraisal than do males while males attach more importance to social comparison than do females. It recognized reflected appraisal as the most important source of self esteem for both the genders.

Researchers have shown social, environmental, cognitive and biological factors contribute towards self esteem and personal development. Studies have further concluded that girls have lower self esteem and evaluate themselves negatively on physical traits and intellectual ability. This could be one of the possible reasons why suicide attempts depression and eating

disorder are more prevalent among girls. Thus focus should be drawn towards searching for methods that can promote self esteem and may help in reducing negative feelings among adolescent girls.

Further in this direction, it may be concluded that gender has significant effect on self concept and self esteem. Social identity has a profound role in helping us conceptualize ourselves. Individuals acquire their self concept on the basis of interaction with others. This self concept changes with age and in response to situational changes. People with more of positive experiences undergo high self esteem as compared to the ones who remain dissatisfied and experience negative life experiences. Gender roles also play an imperative role in determining the self concept and self esteem of an individual. Gender characteristics can involve stereotypic masculine or feminine traits or both. Gender roles that we adopt affect what we do and the way that other people respond to us. Gender biasness shall be reduced as it may have an adverse effect on the self concept and self esteem of the individual.

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