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Gender Expectancies: Four Contemporary Gender Identity Topics

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Gender identity, influence, and expectations fit right in with the basic tenets of social psychology, as gender is a key dimension of children's development (Blakemore, Barenbaum, & Liben, 2009; Matlin, 2008). Just as social psychology studies the way that the thoughts, beliefs, attitudes, feelings and behavior of people are influenced by other people, gender influences how individuals view themselves and their relationships with other people. Life and goals are shaped to a great extent by whether one is male or female and how culture defines what is appropriate behavior for males and females (Santrock, 2009). In this context, the social psychologist in contemporary society can play an important role in helping youngsters cope with the issues of gender identity, social influences, and social expectations in both the interpersonal and intrapersonal domains as they develop into young adults.

The following are four contemporary topics all of which deal with kinds of expectancies society has about individuals based on the socially constructed role we call gender identity. Gender identity is such a rich and varied subject, especially in today's society, that we have opted to look at a variety of ideas rather than just choosing a single topic. First, we look at gender and how it is defined in society. Next, we explore the dimensions of gender identity that are making learning difficult for boys. The third topic is a discussion of how the media defines the way that young woman view themselves. Finally, the fourth topic, gender identity disorder looks at what happens when society's ideas about gender identity and individual differences clash. Each topic is discussed in terms of social psychology as well as relevance to educational professionals.

Topic 1: Defining Gender

There are three components that define gender. First, gender refers to the characteristics of people as males and females. Second, gender roles describe the set of expectations that establishes how females and males should think, act, and feel, and third, gender typing, is the process by which children acquire the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that are considered appropriate for their gender and culture (Santrock, 2009). Gender development has various influences but there are three that play a main role in shaping who we are:

- Biological – the chromosome (genetic) structure that determines sex.
- Social – determines the contrasting roles of men and women.
- Cognitive – development through observation and imitation of gender behaviors.

According to Blakemore et al. (2009), it is through biological, social and cognitive processes that children develop their gender attitudes and behaviors.

Shaping Gender Identity and Roles

From the time a parent discovers the sex of their infant the assignment of gender identity and roles begins. Color coded by pink for girls and blue for boys the infant is slotted for its role in society. Once the label girl or boy is assigned, virtually everyone from parents to siblings to strangers begins treating the infant differently (Blakemore, et al., 2009). The cycle of gender influence begins with the parents and the roles they play in their children's development. By both action and examples mothers and fathers begin shaping gender identity through socialization strategies that are consonant with traditional gender norms (Bronstein, 2006). As a part of socialization parents often use rewards and punishments to teach their daughters to be feminine with statements to girls like “you are such a good mommy with your dolls” and with references to masculinity to boys with statements like “big boys don't cry” (Santrock, 2008).

Children also learn about gender from observing the behavior of other adults and from media portrayals. From cartoon characters to storybooks children learn about the roles females and males play in the social structure. As they grow older they also learn about gender roles from their peers. Studies have shown that peers play an important role in a child's development as they reward and punish gender behavior. As an example, when children play in ways that a culture says is sex appropriate, they tend to be rewarded by their peer with inclusion and acceptance. Those who engage in activities that are not considered sex appropriate tend to be criticized or abandoned by their peers (Leaper & Friedman, 2007). The punishment reward system for gender appropriate and inappropriate behavior in the home, culture, with peers, and in social settings play a major role in gender identity.

Researchers Zosuls, et al. (2009) found that it is important to examine children's understanding of gender as a social category because it is typically the first collective social identity that children learn and is associated with a range of stereotypes used by children and adults to make inferences about others. Their study determined that children as young as 19 months of age demonstrated the relations between gender labeling and gender typed play. A similar study by Gelman, Taylor and Nguyen (2004), found that two-year olds spontaneously used gendered language 90% of the time when referring to people depicted in picture books with high rates of accuracy suggesting that by age two children have a certain degree of gender knowledge and some concept of gender stereotypes. The attainment of gender identity requires that children understand that everyone, including themselves is either male or female. (Kolhberg, 1966).

Gender Influences

By age six children have well developed gender stereotypes and research studies indicate that these stereotypes influence their social judgments (Albert & Porter, 1983). Additional findings on peer influence among grade school children indicate that as children enter grade school sex-typed behaviors become more pronounced as they achieve what is called "gender constancy" (Medway & Cafferty, 1992, p. 127). A tendency and preference for being with and liking same-sex peers begins as early as pre-school and becomes stronger during middle and late childhood (Maccoby, 2002). During preadolescence sex is the single most important determinant of friendship. It is not until late adolescence that friendships with opposite sex peers begin to be important.

As adolescents become more independent of their parental influences and spend more time outside of the family, the opinions and advice of others becomes significant to social development. Most studies concerning peer pressures show that conformity to peers is higher during early and middle adolescence than during preadolescence or later adolescence. Adolescents' choice of friends both influences and is influenced by their traits and interests, and even though individual beliefs about gender

roles may become more flexible as they move through adolescence, social pressures may drive teens towards more gender-stereotyped behavior (Steinberg, 2008).

Gender Beliefs and Expectations

Many of the constructs concerning expected social behavior stem from a society's shared beliefs that apply to individuals based on their socially identified sex (Eagly, 2009). These gender role beliefs are both *descriptive*; telling people what is typical of their sex, and *prescriptive*; telling people what is admirable for their sex in their cultural context, in that they indicate what men and women usually do and what they should do. Also according to Eagly (2009), "To varying extents, gender role beliefs are embedded both in others' expectations, thereby acting as social norms, and in individuals' internalized gender identities, thereby acting as personal dispositions." As a result, people may enact gender desirable behaviors to gain social approval or bolster their own esteem (p. 645).

There has been extensive social psychological research documenting the power of others' expectations and culturally shared norms that shape behavior in directions that are consistent with gender roles. Studies have also shown that gender role beliefs influence people's self-concepts and become their gender identities: an individual's sense of themselves as males or females (Eagly, 2009). Gender role beliefs and expectations also impact the classroom. As an example, gender differences in math and verbal achievement have long been associated with sex roles; boys are better in math and girls perform better in English and other verbal tasks. These sex stereotypes have been shown to directly influence math and verbal self-concepts through achievement scores. Researchers argue that differences in socialization patterns may fail to adequately reinforce positive attitudes and expectancies and self-concepts in boys for verbal tasks and promote positive attitudes in girls for mathematics (Skaalvik, 1990). It is therefore important that educators understand their own views of gender roles and beliefs and the power they have in shaping their students' self-concepts in academic achievement.

As children develop into adulthood, gender identity, its influence and expectations provide a rich mosaic for continued study on social and psychological behaviors of males and females and their roles in an ever evolving society.

Topic 2: State of Emergency for Boys: Gender Identity Factors which Influence the Learning Challenges that Boys are Experiencing

The performance of males in the educational arena is declining. Boys are in a state of an emergency.

The following statistics show the current state of this problem:

- 80% of all discipline problems involve boys
- 80% of school age children on Ritalin are boys
- 80% of high school dropouts are young males
- 70% of all learning disabilities involve boys
- 70% of all D's and F's in school are earned by boys
- 20% drop in male enrollment in college since 1960.

(Gurian and Stevens, 2005; U.S. Department of Education, 2006)

This paper explores major factors impacting the current status of boys in education: a) neurological differences between boys and girls; b) changes in schools; and c) environmental stressors. This paper will also offer some solutions during the discussion of each factor to aid in combating the challenges facing boys.

I. Neurological Differences

New brain imaging research confirms that the brains of boys are mapped differently than girls. Compared to a girl's brain, boys use more areas of their brain for spatial mechanical functioning, and half the brain space that girls use for verbal-emotive. Therefore, boys enjoy moving objects and their body more so than the repetitiveness of words. Boys have less serotonin and oxytocin than girls making them less likely to empathize with a friend or control their natural impulses. Also, boy's brains are structured

to compartmentalize learning making them more likely to have attention span problems and less adapt at multi-tasking (Gurian & Stevens, 2004).

Educators should endeavor to understand the neurological makeup of boy's brain and how it operates to better serve the educational development of boys. Teachers must realize that boys require more than just the monotony of words. Boys need pictures, symbols, and the use of objects to maximize their brain usage. Also, boys need to move and operate with more space to combat boredom and prevent becoming easily disengaged. Many boys are labeled as acting out in class, when they are instead truly having difficulties sitting still for very long periods and are genuinely overloaded with too many tasks due to their brain structure.

Minor modifications, such as rearranging a classroom to allow more movement for the boys can provide positive results. Also, providing more hands-on class experiences may help to prevent boys from easily becoming bored. Personally, I have discovered that my son even at the age of 12 needs assistance at managing his workload and staying organized. So engaged parents or a mentor to coach a boy through school would also be beneficial.

II. Changes in Schools

In addition to the neurological difference which impact boy's school performance, certain trends in the current school curriculum itself tends to be biased toward girls. One major trend is the expectation for boys to learn to read and write prior to being developmentally ready. Since the language area of a boy's brain develops later than a girl's brain, it is suggested that "teaching a 5 year old kindergarten boy to read is just as inappropriate as it would be to teach a three year old girl to read" (Sax, 2007). So since some boys may not be developmentally ready to read and write, the rigorous curriculum of many elementary schools is setting the stage early for boys to dislike or disengage from school (Sommers, 2000). Becoming more common is starting boys a year later in school when he is more developmentally

ready. Children in Finland begin formal schooling at the age of seven but outscore the U.S. in large margins on test scores during the teenage years (Sax, 2007).

Another educational trend that has a negative impact on boys is the noncompetitive format where everybody is a winner. Boys respond well to competition where there is a winner and loser, and when the outcome is in doubt (anyone could win). Boys are especially motivated to do school work if a team competition is involved. Boys thrive under the pressure of not wanting to disappoint his teammates. However, many schools discourage true competition in the class room and even in academic arenas in an effort to protect the self esteem of the child who may lose (Sommers, 2000). Schools could cater more to boys by being creative and adding some level of competition within the curriculum in an effort to engage boys.

III. Environmental Stressors

Two key environmental stressors impacting the education of boys are screen time (television, computers, and video games) and nutrition (Gurian & Stevens, 2005). Following are some interesting statistics to highlight the current dilemma with screen time:

- The average American child spends 900 hours a year in school, but 1,023 hours a year watching television.
- In the average American home, the television is on 6.7 hour per day.
- The number of videos and DVDs families rent every day is twice the number of books read.
- One-fourth of children under two years old now have televisions in their bedrooms.
- Two-thirds of preschool boys sit in front of screens for two or more hours per day-more than three times the hours they spend looking at books or being read to.

(Gurian & Stevens, 2005)

The problem with too much screen time is that children's brains are receiving passive stimulation instead of whole- sensory experience. The television or computer is doing half of the brain's work. Brain development requires the senses (hearing, seeing, tasting, touch, and smelling) to interact with external environment. Boys need a lot of physical movement to ideally develop their brain. Exposure to excessive screen time makes boys more prone to attention and hyperactivity disorders since the brain fails to properly develop (Gurian & Stevens, 2005). Also, it is very difficult for textbooks and schools to compete with fast-moving and interactive video games.

Limits need to be set on screen time. A research study that followed twenty-six hundred children from birth to age seven discovered that "for every hour of television watched per day, the incidence of ADD and ADHD increased by 10%." (Gurian & Stevens, 2005). Another author suggests that "a series of studies over the past seven years has demonstrated clearly and unambiguously that the more time your child spends playing video games, the less likely he is to do well in school" (Sax, 2007). I personally know that my two sons, if left on their own, would abuse both television and video games. As a result, we have set strict limits on these devices, especially during the school week. Also, boys need to be encouraged to just play outside and explore.

Leonard Sax in *Boys Adrift* suggests the following guidelines for video games, which can also apply to television and computers:

- Monitor the content – too many video games and television shows are promoting violence and anti-social behavior (such as killing police officers or prostitutions).
- Limit the time – no more than 40 minutes per day on school days and one hour a day on other days.

- Set clear priorities – family comes first, schoolwork second, friends third, video games are last. You know you have a problem with video games if a boy prefers to play video football instead of participating in a real live game with friends outside.

In addition to excessive screen time, boys today also suffer from the impact of poor nutrition. The high amount of carbohydrate and sugar intake by children is problematic. Too many carbohydrates tend to make the brain “groggy” and paying attention difficult. Instead the consumption of proteins (peanut butter, eggs, and cheese), especially in the morning, is a better food to feed the brain to maximize learning. Sugar should also be avoided since it is known to have a negative effect on learning. Sugar also stimulates adrenaline making it harder for a boy to sit still. (Gurian & Stevens, 2005).

Schools need to improve their lunch menus and only provide healthy options to curtail the high carbohydrate, high sugar diets being consumed by many American children. Parents must be vigilant in making sure that their sons are not further disadvantaged in the learning process due to his diet and lack of nutritional choices. In addition, the brain, which is 80% water itself, needs water every day to optimize learning. When my son’s kindergarten teacher shared the positive impact of water on the brain and learning with my wife six years ago, she made a simple change in our sons’ lunch to remove the juice box and instead add water. Simple changes like this can have a lasting impact on boys and can also be cost effective.

The decline in education for boys is impacting every racial group. The factors above are only a portion of the problem. Additional research and studies must be conducted to attain solutions. However, for now, each person can do their part by actively working to be a positive impact in a boy’s life by placing him in an environment where he has a better chance to succeed based on the above discussion.

Topic 3: The Media and its Effect on the Body Image of Young Girls

The media has played a dominant role in how girls perceive themselves. In the field of advertising, companies are geared toward selling products to promote losing weight and looking beautiful. Many times you will notice that a very attractive individual promotes most of these products. This sends the message that if you use that product you will look like that person. Subliminal messages are a key component to the success of sales. It's no accident that youth is increasingly promoted, along with thinness, as essential criteria of beauty (Media Awareness Network).

Researchers report that women's magazines have ten and one-half times more ads and articles promoting weight loss than men's magazines do. However advertising rules the marketplace and thin is "in" (Media Awareness Network). This type of advertising constantly has young girls and women evaluating their bodies. The focus on body image becomes dominant and a key process to get the opposite sex's attention.

Wanting to be "thin" has its fair share of negative side effects. Failed attempts at reducing weight and getting skinnier tend to result in unhealthy eating disorders such as Anorexia, Bulimia, and Compulsive Over-Eating (Buzzle.com). *Anorexia* is characterized by a distorted perception of body image and persistent fear of weight gain. *Bulimia* is marked by binge eating, followed by guilt and intentional purging. *Compulsive Overeating* is marked by frequent episodes of binge eating and the person has no control over food and eat when they are *not* hungry (Buzzle.com).

Statistics have shown that 50% of ads in teen girl magazines and 56% of TV commercials aimed at female viewers used beauty as a product appeal. In a recent survey by Teen Magazine, 27% of girls affirmed that the media pressures them to have a perfect body. 68% of girls in a study of Stanford undergraduates and graduate students felt worse about their own appearance after looking through women's magazines. The number one wish for girls 11-17 is to be thinner. Girls as young as age 5 have expressed fears of getting fat (Empowered Parents, 2009).

Television and movies reinforce the importance of a thin body as a measure of a woman's worth. Canadian researcher Gregory Fouts reports that over three-quarters of the female characters in TV

situation comedies are underweight, and only one in twenty are above average in size. Heavier actresses tend to receive negative comments from male characters about their bodies and 80% of these negative comments are followed by canned audience laughter (Media Awareness Network).

A Kaiser Foundation study by Nancy Signorielli (2010) found that the commercials aimed at female viewers that ran during the television shows most often watched by teen girls also frequently used beauty as a product appeal (56% of commercials). By comparison, this is true of just 3% of television commercials aimed at men. One in every three (37%) articles in leading teen girl magazines also included a focus on appearance, and most of the advertisements (50%) used an appeal to beauty to sell their products (Teen Health and the Media).

The good news and bad news is the most critical messages our youngsters receive about their body image and their self-worth comes not from the media but from what they see and hear at home. When children are raised to value themselves and the importance of making a contribution to the world they live in, they will have no need or incentive to turn to food to do this for them (Empowered Parents, 2009).

In an effort to foster self and body-love, parents should:

- Minimize “diet” and weight talk, an activity that may require parents to take a look at their own eating and exercise rituals, attitudes, and preferences about weight and size.
- Never joke about, tease, or shame anyone because of her weight or size.
- Raise consciousness about the American cultural bias in favor of excessive thinness. Help your child develop immunity to the steady stream of media messages that distort her perspective by countering destructive messages with reality messages.
- Discourage dieting and weight –loss fads. Instead, encourage a wellness lifestyle. If your child wishes to lose weight, encourage her to eat differently, not less.
- Don’t equate thinness with happiness, self-satisfaction or self-actualization.
- Praise your daughter for what she does, not for how she looks. Do some of those things together with her in quality time.

- Give your daughter a vision of greater purpose in the life that extends beyond herself and her appearance, thereby encouraging her to develop healthy interests and passion. Self esteem is drawn from productivity and contribution.
- Teach your child that there is no such thing as an “ideal” body. Beautiful bodies come in all sizes and shapes based on each individual’s unique strands of DNA.
- Pay attention to negative comments your child may make about her shape. Even if they are irrational, be empathic, not dismissive, as she feels her feelings deeply. Engage your daughter in a discussion about how she thinks she might look better and how she thinks a changed appearance might improve her life. How does she plan to accomplish these goals?
- Engage together in activities that promote accurate, realistic and meaningful body awareness at more profound levels, teaching her to recognize the connection between body and mind.
- Encourage your child to become aware of her feelings, to own and express them in the interest of resolving problems rather than harboring them in her body.
- Discourage extreme or excessive behaviors of any sort, be they perfectionism, sleeping too much, sleeping too little, shopping too much, and studying too little (Empowering Parents, 2009).

It is important for parents and educational professionals to realize that in order for children to feel attractive and good about themselves, they need to learn to become effective problem-solvers, good communicators, and compassionate people, as well as healthy eaters. As John Muir once said, “when one tugs at a single thing in nature, he finds it attached to the rest of the world” (Empowered Parents 2009).

Topic 4: Gender Identity Disorder

As mentioned earlier in this paper, gender identity is the socially constructed role that one takes on, this role is typically, but not always consistent with an individual’s biological sex (one may identify as male, female, neither or both). Gender identity is developed through a complex interplay of biological, social, cognitive and environmental factors. Gender Identity Disorder (GID) is the name given to the powerful, distressing and fixed feeling of being born the wrong biological sex or of being in the wrong

body (Manners, 2008). The term transgender is applied when one's gender identity does not match one's biological gender. It is important to point out that GID is not the same thing as homosexuality or intersex conditions, nor is it synonymous with transvestitism.

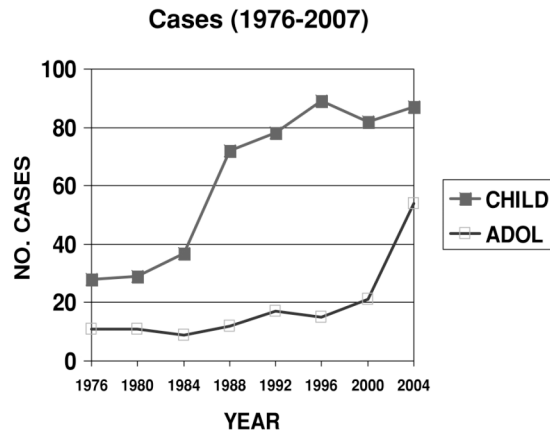


Table 1: Number of children and adolescents with GID 1975-2007 (Zucker, et. al., 2008)

The chart above illustrates that since the mid 1970s, the annual number of cases of children and adolescents with GID being referred to clinicians has increased dramatically. In the last decade and a half, there has been increasingly high profile media attention given to GID, including the film *Boys Don't Cry*, articles in *Time* and *the New York Times*, an episode the *Oprah Winfrey Show* and an segment on ABC's *20/20* (Zucker, Bradley, Owen-Anderson, Kibblewhite, & Kantor, 2008). Some attribute the increased number of cases from 1976 to 1996 to the fact that the media has brought more attention to GID. Another factor that has impacted the increase in youth referral rates has probably been the fact that in 1987, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual moved GID to the "usually diagnosed in infancy, childhood or adolescence" section of the manual (Zucker, et al., 2008). A final important factor facilitating increased awareness about GID is, of course, the internet. There are numerous websites providing information about GID to young people, better enabling them to understand what they are going through and empowering them to seek professional guidance.

Controversy

Because a diagnosis of GID can be sufficient cause for sex reassignment surgery, GID is one of the most frequently challenged entries in the Diagnostic Statistical Manual (DSM-IV) (Manners, 2008). The fact that it is the only diagnosis in the DSM-IV for which surgery is considered an appropriate treatment, for some begs the question of whether or not a disorder that may have a physical cause can legitimately be considered a mental disorder. The big question being debated is whether GID is a biological condition or a psychological disorder and the answer to this question will impact how it is treated in the future (Manners, 2008).

Treatment

GID is not well understood and the cause is still unknown. It appears that there is no single explanation, but rather that the etiology consists of both social/environmental and biological factors. Elements such as family, school and the media all make up the sociocultural aspects, while some of the biological factors are believed to be hormonal, genetic and neurobiological (Manners, 2008 Ujike, et al., 2009). This unspecified etiology makes treating GID challenging but it is important that awareness is fostered among educators and options are made known because this is a disorder that can be so distressing to adolescents that suicide attempts are common. Some other negative consequences of gender ambiguity that impact education are that these students are five times more likely to miss school in an attempt to avoid awkward situations and homophobic bullying, they drop out more frequently and are two times more likely not to pursue higher education (Giordano, 2007). GID in children and adolescents can also lead to homelessness, substance abuse depression and suicide (Giordano, 2007; Manners, 2008).

The impacts GID on the lives of young people are so profound that the condition must be managed, unfortunately research demonstrates that therapeutic interventions (attempts to bring the mind into harmony with the body) are largely unsuccessful in reducing symptoms of GID (Manners, 2008). The efficacy of sexual reassignment surgery as a treatment option for adults still lacks strong empirical support but medical treatments (those attempting to bring the body into harmony with the mind) appear to

be the most successful (Manners, 2008; Giordano, 2007). It is also important to note that the options for treating children and adolescents with GID are not the same as with adults, there are added ethical concerns about the judgment capabilities of young people and therefore sexual reassignment surgery in such cases is not typical. One option that is currently getting a great deal of attention is the use of hormonal puberty suppressants to suspend puberty and the development of secondary sex characteristics in children.

The advantages to suppressing puberty are that children have time to make decisions about whether or not they want to take the eventual step of having sexual reassignment surgery. During the time puberty is suspended, a young person has the time to experience life as the other gender and decide how to proceed (Giordano, 2007). Internationally this is a common treatment and proponents suggest that arresting puberty helps eliminate situations where an adolescent might opt for reassignment surgery too soon and later regret it. Further, it can make the surgery easier later, for example, if a female decided to have surgery to become a male, surgery would be less invasive if breasts had not yet developed. Those who oppose the suspension of puberty argue that it lacks empirical support and that the risks are not yet known, therefore it is not ethical to use it to treat GID in children and adolescents. As more research is done and cases of GID are better understood, it will be clearer which treatments are most appropriate. For the time being, as educators, it is important that we have an awareness of GID as it is important that we are aware of as many the factors that may impact our students as we are able.

Summary

In summary, gender identity is a topic encompassing myriad interesting subjects. Over the last several decades, contemporary culture has begun to look at many of these in greater depth. Gender identity is essentially a social issue and all of the topics herein demonstrate that fact. The goal of this paper has been to illustrate some topics we believe to be highly relevant to educational professionals. From describing how gender influences impact development, to providing insight about how to better serve boys in educational environment, then sharing some ways to help girls combat the influence of the

media and finally, explaining the very rare challenge of Gender Identity Disorder, this paper has attempted to share information on several contemporary gender identity topics.

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