Gender Identity Development: Phenomenon And Researches

Gender Identity development has been a phenomenon that has been widely researched over the last 35 years, having extensive access to research in gender identity development will help to better understand individuals, breaking down social barriers and bridging the gap to offer new ideas and opportunities, inclusive of all.

The purpose of this essay will be to focus and critically evaluate the key findings of the biological & Social theories of gender identity development, while also drawing on cross-cultural perspectives to increase the understanding of the relative contributions of both biological, social and cognitive.

Gender itself is the understanding of the male and female gender groups; attributes and stereotypes associated with a certain membership. The Gender domain has different levels and aspects which develop gradually in stages. Gender stability; the idea that gender is normally stable over time (permanent group membership) & Gender constancy: identifying that group membership cannot be altered by superficial transformation were heavy topics of research.

From as early as the 70's we were able to conclude that gender labelling: recognition of two sexes: correct identification of oneself and others as M/F, was being carried out by conscious awareness from as young as 9-12 months, children were able to respond differently to pictures of female/male faces (Lewis and Brooks-Gunn, 1979; Martin & Halverston , 1983) researchers came to the realisation that children were able to differentiate people by gender from very early.

Biological accounts of Gender identity development focus on the clear differences in genetic make-up and physiology between men and women. Testosterone acts upon the hypothalamus which results in the masculinization of the brain (cite), this enhances typical male behaviours such as aggression, competitiveness and visuospatial abilities. Some biological accounts argue that through evolution and adaptation to one's environment, the gender difference in social roles have made it so that men and women are specialised with given physical attributes for different functions. For instance men better at mental rotation tasks; while women are better at verbal tasks (Hausman et al., 2009). The effects of testosterone have been confirmed in some animal studies (Quadango et al., 1970). Furthering this idea, the parental investment theory (Wilson, 1972) argued that reproduction has different implications for men and women and is less ‘costly' biologically to the male species. Because of this men and women look for desirable traits in each other (buss, 1987) which has evolved and adapted to modern-day status and gender role differences.

Money & Ehrhardt (1972) had the idea that nature and nurture both play a significant role in gender development, they examined girls with Congenital Adrenal Hyperplasia- a condition where female is exposed to excessive levels of androgen (male sex hormone) before birth to mothers at high risk of experiencing miscarriages. This helped to shed light upon the ‘nature vs nurture debate as the girls were born with male genitalia and after the surgical correction was raised as girls, follow-ups helped to understand that these girls saw themselves as being more tomboyish as development grew, they also reported playing with counterparts of the opposite

sex. Similarly, the well-documented case in the media of the identical twin boys who at 7 months old, one ‘Bruce' had his genital area ruined during circumcision and at 17 months old was given hormone therapy and treated like a girl ‘Brenda' ,this was one of the first gender reassignments that had been performed on a normally developing child and was seen as a ground-breaking case for the idea that nurture was the true determinant of gender identity. However, the reality of the case took a drastic turn in events as the child felt awkward around same-sex peers and was not interested in gender-appropriate play and was teased for being masculine. Although the case had a tragic end; with David reverting to his biological identity and later then committing suicide after battling depression, it gave a lot of insight into the severity of biology and how this can affect even a child through to adulthood.

The biological accounts that we have identified were great starting foundations for the phenomenon of gender but as society, itself is growing and becoming more diverse, gender identity consists of more than one domain, these accounts are only limited to aggressive instincts and sex, there are complex cognitive processes that are involved in conscious decision making about how we identify ourselves with our peers, reiterating stereotypes and expectations based on these memberships, all of which varies across societies and can change over time. For instance, the Parental investment theory focuses heavily on the idea of dominance and sexual behaviour, these are heavily westernised ideas (cite). However, Mead (1935,1949) studied female and male behaviour of 3 different tribes in Papa New Guinea she found that the women of the Tchambuli/ Chambri tribe were seen to be more dominant, objective and supervisory as they were the ones to do the fishing for the community and also travelled to trade ; whereas, the men were seen to be less responsible and more emotionally dependent and engaged in flirtatious behaviour. The Mundugumor tribe showed both sexes behaved in a macho way & the Arapesh tribe showed that both men and women showed behaviours that fitted western ideologies. Mead was able to conclude (even after much criticism) that there were cultural resemblances in which gender roles were being organised but the extent to which these behaviours are expressed will be to that culture.

Also, the true story of the twins (Money and Ehrhardt, 1972) makes a convincing case that only biology plays a part in developing gender identity but these are very rare and ambiguous cases. These cases that have been discussed still do not account for gender identity disorders (Gillibrand et al,2016), for instance, the Hijra's (Mal,2018) in India, recognised as a separate gendered human being beyond society male-female dichotomy. Many play a double-life; they wear female clothes and adopt female names while visiting general society, but they wear male clothes and adopt male tendencies while living with or visiting family. The unconventionality of their gender identity has a big impact on the Hindu society as their existence disrupts traditional norms and ideas about sex and gender.

Other theories of gender focus on the environment in which a child is brought up, focusing on the idea that gender is acquired through social information as a product of amassing learning experiences. Contrary to the biological view of gender, other psychologists and sociologists have argued that there are not just behaviours and characteristic's of being masculine and feminine that is unlocked at birth but rather gender identity is developed within society and its culture, and these ideas and norms are preserved by reinforcement and modelling of social agents ; Parents, teachers ,peers & the media, (Bandura 1969) . The reinforcement of gender-appropriate ways will vary according to different cultures, encouragement or the lack of equates to the idea of reinforcing rewards or punishment, for instance, parents offering child gender-appropriate toys; engaging in play with these toys but more so less when the child is seen with

toys more appropriate for the opposite gender.

Adults and Teachers act as social agents as they model gender-appropriate behaviour; this allows for gender stereotypes to be made shaping the insight, evaluation and treatment of males and females in selective ways. For instance, from as early as the 1970's collective baby X case studies by Will et al (1976) identified sex-typing by adults. These experiments identified that there were clear differences in the reaction towards and expectations of the same baby by adults due to dress code and labelling by gender. Results indicated that ‘Beth' was given the doll more and received more smiles from the adults compared to ‘Adam'. Further studies (Siegal, 1987; Fagot Et al.1992) found that fathers were more likely than mothers to react negatively to their children, especially sons when they carried out feminine play and also that children of more gender-traditional mothers learn gender labels more quickly than those of mothers with more gender-egalitarian views. Whiting and Edwards (1975) contested this idea and suggested that gender roles were organised in similar ways across a range of traditional cultures, they studied 11 non-western societies and found that girls were encouraged to spend time with their mothers and given domestic and childcare roles while boys were given tasks such as feeding and herding cattle outside of the home. They were able to conclude that gender roles do vary across cultures but children's gender socialisation was influenced by how much work they were expected to do and what it consisted of. For instance in North America children did 2% of work compared to children in Kenya=41% (Whitings & Edwards,1975), this was accounted for by the complexity in their lives; children have to take on roles at a much younger age and sharp distinctions are made between males and females compared to North American children who did little work so gender roles were less defined.

Furthering the idea of observational learning, through this process children can also learn from peers' what behaviours are characteristic of each gender and the consequences (rewards or punishments) that are likely to be associated with these behaviours. It has been argued that children are prone to have more extremist views as they are still learning about their own gender identity (Gillibrand et al.,2016). Archer and Lloyd (1982) found that children as young as three criticized peers who engaged in cross-sex play and were less likely to play with them. Similarly, Langlois and downs (1980) found that peers had the strongest responses when they studied the direct response from mothers, fathers and peers towards 3-5-year olds' gender-appropriate and inappropriate play, they concluded that when boys played with girls' toys, they were likely to be ridiculed and teased by their male peers.

A recent longitudinal study by martinet al.,2013 was able to discern that children who shared similar levels of gender-typed activities were more likely to develop strong ties over time, they found that children were more likely to interact with peers because they had similar interests regarding gender-typed activities, once these social ties are formed children are inevitable to reinforce each other to exhibit similar levels of engagement in gender-typed activities hence why children tend to segregate by sex.

However, one of the most influential influences are not limited to toys and peers, the engagement with the media and television has become available nationwide since post-war years. Despite the diverse changes made with political views thus enhancing society to become more aware of different cultures and ethnicities, this has not stopped commercials and even children's' daytime programmes to be strongly stereotypical and many themes and roles are still heavily ‘gendered'; some being more action-packed or fantasy-based, which can influence the viewing patterns of different children. A Study by Houston et al., 1999, reported that although

there were no gender differences in the average time spent watching tv, the topic of what boys and girls watched differed highly, boys' interest was more uninformed and ‘action-oriented' and girls' were more diverse and ‘people-oriented'. Recently, Steiner-Adair & Barker (2013) reported that internet usage among children tends to reinforce and reflect gender norms and amplifies gender stereotypes, this is due to recent focus towards children's and young people's use of technology, especially the internet for online or virtual social networking.

The social Learning theories of gender identity has proposed much to think about, but the modelling effects are not very clear, Mothers are the first to point of contact for children in the home and are one of the primary caregivers for children for the first few years of their upbringing and when in school most educators are women, if observation and imitation was so clear cut then most children will have feminine traits. This theory implies that children are passive and just beings of their social environment, not taking cognitive roles and functions into account, furthering this idea (Bussey & Bandura, 1999,2004) argued that cognition was a vital factor required for modelling and imitating behaviour.

In saying this culture has profound effects on behaviour, from what children are taught, to how they are socialized and how they later carry themselves through life, both biological and social accounts of gender identity development give astounding evidence that each factor is vital in the development of gender identity and gender roles. Most of the studies that we have looked at in this paper were largely collected by western researchers, in saying this most cross-cultural studies are still driven by the interests of western influence (Berry et al.2002) so in saying that biology is the only and most important factor would be alarming as society and social learning has been internalised nationwide.

References:

1. Lewis, M., & Brooks-Gunn, J. (1979). Social cognition and the acquisition of self. New York: Plenum Press
2. Mead, M. (1963). Sex and temperament in three primitive societies (Vol. 370). New York: Morrow.
3. Mal S. The hijras of India: A marginal community with paradox sexual identity. Indian J Soc Psychiatry 2018;34:79-85
4. Martin, C. L., & Halverson Jr, C. F. (1983). The effects of sex-typing schemas on young children's memory. Child Development, 563-574.