

Social learning theory as applied to gender development. The influence of culture and media on gender roles.

Social Learning Theory

The Social Learning Theory (SLT) states that individuals develop gender by imitating role models. It states that observational learning takes place, and that this learning is reinforced vicariously. Vicarious reinforcement occurs when a person witnesses a model being rewarded for behaving in a gender-appropriate way (e.g. a girl being praised for playing quietly with her dolls). Vicarious reinforcement makes it more likely that the model's behaviour will be imitated in the future. This may affect how gender roles are formed.

Gender roles are societal norms that dictate the types of behaviour that are generally considered appropriate for individuals based on their biological sex. Gender roles are usually based on stereotypes regarding masculine and feminine behaviour. These sex-role stereotypes are the shared expectations within a society or social group regarding what is appropriate behaviour for men and women. Sex-role stereotypes are learned from birth, as children are exposed to the attitudes of their parents and others in society.

Many of our gender stereotypes are strong because we emphasise gender so much in culture (Bigler & Liben, 2007). For example, children learn at a young age that there are distinct expectations for boys and girls.

Cross-cultural studies reveal that children are aware of gender roles by age two or three and can label others' gender and sort objects into gender categories. At four or five, most children are firmly entrenched in culturally appropriate gender roles (Kane, 1996). When children do not conform to the appropriate gender role for their culture, they may face negative sanctions such as being criticised, bullied, marginalised or rejected by their peers.

The Social Learning Theory has less support than Martin and Halverson's Gender Schema Theory, but research shows that parents do reinforce gender-appropriate play and often reinforce cultural gender norms.

Culture

Culture can be defined as the ideas, behaviours, attitudes, and traditions that exist within a large group of people. These are passed down from one generation to the next and are often resistant to change. In relation to gender, the effects of cultural influences can be seen by examining the differences in male/ female from one culture to another. Margaret Mead (1935) conducted a classic study of cultural differences in Papua New Guinea. She examined three different tribes and found the Arapesh men and women to be gentle, responsive and cooperative; the Mundugumor men and women were violent and aggressive, seeking power and position; and the Tchambuli showed the opposite gender-role behaviours to those seen in most cultures, as the women were dominant, impersonal and managerial and the men were more emotionally dependent. Mead originally concluded that these differences highlight the impact of culture on gender.

Freeman (1983) conducted a follow-up study of people from Papua New Guinea, looking at gender roles, following Mead's research. He argued that her findings were flawed as she had been misled by some of her participants and her preconceptions of what she would find influenced her reading of events. Freeman (1983) suggested that Mead's interpretations may not be objective and calls into question the conclusions she drew about cross cultural variation in gender roles.

However, Williams and Best (1982) conducted several cross-cultural explorations of gender stereotypes using data collected from 30 cultures. There was a high degree of agreement on stereotypes across all cultures which led the researchers to conclude that gender stereotypes may be universal.

Hofstede (1981) argues that people carry "mental programs" which are developed in the family in early childhood and are reinforced in schools and organisations, and that these programs contain components of national culture. They are expressed most clearly in the different values that predominate among people from different countries.

Media Influence

Media influences are changes in behaviour that are attributed to exposure to media, such as film, TV, books and magazines. Today many stereotypes are reinforced to young people through social media and online sites. The media tends to portray males and females in stereotypical ways (e.g. males as independent and directive, and females as less ambitious and more emotional) and some research has shown that people who experience higher exposure to these gender representations in the media tend to hold stronger gender stereotypes than those who experience less exposure.

Bussey & Bandura (1999) suggest that the media do provide clear gender stereotypes, as men are often seen as more independent and ambitious, where women are seen as more dependent.

Understanding the role of the media in continuing gender stereotyping has led to efforts to show more balanced gender roles in children's media.

However, modern media increasingly features counter-stereotypical roles, like female action heroes or stay-at-home dads. Hofstede (2001) argues that in industrialised cultures the changing status and expectations of women are a function of their increasingly active role in the workplace and away from the domestic home. This has led to a breakdown of traditional gender stereotypical roles.

