

Outline

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Historical Background: Gender Is an Often Culturally-Prescribed Role, Rather Than a Biological Sex.

The debates concerning the notions of “sex” and “gender” have been going on over the years. The recent point of view is that gender roles are not universal for everyone, whereas some individuals regard them as fundamental and build their lives according to the rules and standards prescribed by the society. The historical background of gender development theories shows that major theories discussed gender roles from social, cultural, biological, anthropological and psychological points of view. The biological theory was a leading one and it influenced many researches who discussed the development of gender roles. However, the findings of the previous studies have revealed that gender roles are the results of social and cultural influences, rather than being a biological sex. The findings of the studies prepared the ground for modern differentiation between the concepts of gender and sex.

In the past, the majority of psychological theories suggested that development of gender occurs in early childhood (the idea provided by Freud). Psychoanalysis theory had a significant impact on the study of gender roles, however, there was lack of empirical research that led to various reformulations of the notion “gender” and approaches to its analysis. According to Kohlberg's theory (1966), the formation of gender identity starts in early childhood. Thus, children “develop the stereotypic conceptions of gender from what they see and hear around them” (Bussey & Bandura 1999, p. 4) and they adapt their habits and behavioral patterns to these stereotypes. Thus, their understanding of gender is based on biological differences between men and women and defined their behaviors and habits. In addition, gender

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identity was considered to be stable and unchangeable for the whole period of life. However, the findings did not support this theory.

There was no convincing evidence that men and women are biologically different, but there have always been cultural and social factors that shaped the gender roles that men and women had to follow and perform in the society. The study by Gilligan reports that “anthropological research published in that decade uncovered a set of oppositions between maleness and femaleness primarily derived from studies of non-class-based societies” (Stack 1986, p. 321). Over decades, women tended to be more involved with private concerns and relationships and the welfare of their own families. As opposed to them, men have always been more universalistic and concerned with the welfare as a whole (Stack, 1986).

The distribution of gender roles based on biological differences contributed to confusions in terminology. Unger and Crawford (1993) worked attempted to define the concepts of sex and gender and stated that

There was a great confusion among social scientists about the appropriate use of the terms *sex* and *gender* and the researchers who had been conducting studies in this area for many years can easily document examples of such confusion (p. 122).

Gender was generally used as a linguistic term, but “in the mid-1970s feminist scholars began to use the term to refer to the social organization of the relationships between the sexes” (Unger & Crawford 1993, p. 123). Feminist researchers also provided the idea that sex-related differences are the products of social expectations (Unger & Crawford 1993, p. 123). Further findings showed that “gender is problematic and sex-related effects are consistent” (Unger & Crawford, 1993, p. 124). Later it was proved that gender identity develops in the social context and can

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be seen differently in different periods of individual's life. Thus, the biological approach lost its leading position, and scientists began focusing on social factors that influence the development of gender roles.

The study by Bussey & Bandura (1999) conducted the analysis of the gender role development from the perspective of social cognitive theory. In the past, gender was addressed from the perspective of three major theories based on different dimensions: psychological, biological and sociocultural. Psychological theories focused on the role of intrapsychic processes controlling gender development (Bussey & Bandura, 1999, p. 3) that discussed gender from the point of view of psychological studies. Gender identity was viewed as the result of psychological development and thus it was viewed as a psychological issue. Sociocultural theory emphasized the role of social and cultural factors that influenced gender roles distribution, and biological theories were based on biological roles of men and women in reproduction (Bussey & Bandura, 1999), it put emphasis on the biological differences between men and women. Social cognitive theory provided by Bandura was based on psychological and socio-structural determinants (Bussey & Bandura, 1999). Thus, it suggested that gender self-perceptions and role behaviors result from the interaction between a wide range of social aspects (Bussey & Bandura, 1999, p. 7). An individual defines his/her gender identity in the process of cultural development and socialization. The hypothesis that gender self-perception is stable and remains unchangeable during the whole period of life was disproved. This theory was a major contribution to the understanding of gender as a culturally-prescribed role and not a biological sex and could be used as a basis for further research.

Consequently, a number of studies conducted in the last decades explore the historical development of the concept of gender. The historical background of the

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issue provides evidence that gender is the result of social development and reflects culturally prescribed roles rather than being a biological sex.

Reference List

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