The Social Role Theory: An Explanation of Children’s Gender Stereotypes

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Stereotypical roles and behaviors have been assigned and upheld to both genders through societal norms, which children observe and inherit while growing into adulthood. The social role theory helps to explain the limiting effects these stereotypes impose upon an individual’s character and how they generate social inequality worldwide. This report focuses on the social role theory and how it pertains to gender stereotypes, what traits are commonly associated with each gender, how these characteristics are reinforced within society, and the implications and consequences of those associations. Furthermore, this report provides examples of individuals who overcame stereotypical obstacles and how their efforts led to changes and advances within the human race. An in-depth examination and compilation of the informative works of well renowned researchers including Deborah Tannen, Talcott Parsons, Robert Bales, Alice Eagly, Thomas Eckes, Hanns Martin Trautner and many others proved valuable in determining the effects of such gender stereotypes as they are applied specifically to children.

The social role theory states that the stereotypes people hold about the sexes are the results from observations and role performances of men and women; and therefore, reflect the gender hierarchy of society. It implies that societies’ division of labor, in which the male usually takes a paid occupation and the female takes the domesticated and caretaker position, contributes to the gender identification roles that people choose to relate to. In their abstract and general form, these beliefs constitute gender roles, which, through a variety of mediating processes, foster real differences in behavior (Eckes and Trautner, 2000, p 124).

Social roles are the activities and habits people perform in their daily lives. These roles range from childcare and domestic chores to workplace responsibilities. Fulfillment of these roles can instill individual’s with predispositions toward communal or agnetic qualities. According to Lauzen, Dozier, and Horan (2008), agnetic qualities are noticeable through self-assertion, self-expression, and the urge to master. Whereas, communal qualities are apparent by selflessness, concern with others, and a desire to be at one with others. An experimental study found that only differences in social roles (homemaker vs. employee) accounted for the subjects’ beliefs that women are particularly concerned with the well-being of others, or communal, and men are more assertive, or agnetic (Lauzen, Dozier, & Horan, 2008). Even vague or general information about a person’s type of employment caused subjects to reconsider their views of men’s and women’s communal and agnetic qualities. Therefore, information about an individual’s social role can greatly influence gender stereotypes concerning that individual. The research also revealed that watching women in lower ranking positions than men, in workplace and domestic situations, reinforce gender stereotypes. The social role perspective claims that the distribution of women and men into social roles underlies and provides significant substance to gender stereotypes.

As children, boys watch other men in the household, like brothers or a father figure, go to work, fix things around the house, or demonstrate intense competitiveness in sports. Meanwhile, they observe their lack of emotion in comparison to females in the same household. These observations make a serious impression upon the child and often develop to become habits as the child grows into adulthood. The behavioral patterns acquired by the child are then reinforced by siblings, parents, teachers, and peers in different environments as they are told to go outside and play, or to be a tough little boy. As such, girls become the perpetual other, valued primarily in their relations to others; men in particular (Lauzen, Dozier, & Horan, 2008). Young girls watch feminine figures in the household, classroom, and television shows that generally depict underweight and gentle mannered, housewife characteristics. Because the content of gender stereotypes arises from perceiver’s observations of people’s activities, and these activities are determined primarily by social roles, gender stereotypes arise when women and men are observed typically to carry out different social roles (Lauzen, Dozier, & Horan, 1984).

According to a recent review, children acquire descriptive stereotypes in slow, incremental stages (Eckes and Trautner, 2000, p. 209). As children grow into the stage of adolescence they accumulate a large reference of gender related experiences and convert them into gender expectations. According to the Faculty of Science and Arts at Atilim University, these roles are so popular that they can be easily seen in every part of life, even in some poems like:

Sugar and spice and all things nice,

That’s what little girls are made of.

Slugs and snails and puppydog tails,

That’s what little boys are made of.

Indeed for many, if not most children, gender identification is perhaps the most fundamental and salient of all the frames of self reference available (Harte, 1996). It is understood that gender will remain a constant throughout an individual’s life to become a crucial element in self concept. While common expressions and poems like the one above may seem to be in fun and games, they reinforce and establish gender boundaries and expectations that children regularly feel compelled to fulfill.

Adults use stereotyping as a method of organizing social information based on characteristics broadly applied by members of that particular group. Such categorization permits people to make quick, adequate conclusions about others. Likewise, children utilize gender categories, and continue employing them, because they help to establish clarity in a complicated world. From the beginning, children are surrounded by people of both genders, regardless of the household situation, creating a basis for comparison. Gender stereotypes are an easy way for a child to categorize, because the behaviors of the two groups do not overlap. It is also easy for a child to separate differences based on gender because they are visually apparent and children organize stimuli by their concrete, perceptual characteristics (Eckes & Trautner, 2000, p. 214). Gender stereotypes simplify our life and reduce the number of apprehension processes, but on the other hand gender stereotypes limit the development of a human personality and lead to social inequality (Atilim University, 2005).

There are several reasons that men and women acquire and strive for certain behavioral patterns. The explanation of gender differences could not only be looked for in hormones and chromosomes, but also should be looked for in social norms which require men and women to behave in different ways (Atilim University, 2005).

Of specific importance regarding gender stereotypes is the functional and characteristic differentiation within a family. Parson and Bales (1998) observed a traditional division of labor between husbands and wives that they described in terms of male instrumental specialization and female expressive specialization. Their observation blatantly points out the common stereotype that men are more independent, less emotional, and more competitive than their dependent, emotional, more cooperative female counterparts. Children witnessing these behaviors tend to adapt them to their own gender and adopt them into their frame of reference and concept of self.

A child’s gender identification behaviors and tendencies are then strongly reinforced by parenting styles as reflected in the results of Leaper, Anderson, and Sanders in a 1998 series of studies observing the gender effects of parents’ talk to their children. Across the studies they discovered that mothers tended to talk more, use more supportive and negative speech, and use less directive and informing speech than did fathers. Also, mothers tended to talk more and use more supportive speech with daughters than with sons.

Parson and Bales (1998) claim that the intimate life of personalities, as in the mother’s care of her children and in the marriage relationship, suggests an important aspect of the developing American feminine role which should not be overlooked. Although the tendency for women seems to be specialization in the expressive channels, the American woman does not forfeit the ability to think rationally. The mother not only “loves” her children, but she attempts to understand rationally the nature, conditions and limitations of that love, and the ways in which its deviant forms can injure rather than benefit her child (Parson and Bales, 1998).

 In this light the crucial role that mothers play in their children’s lives, whether it is expressive or instrumental in specialization becomes more than just the development of a single child’s view, but rather the fundamental shaping of the American society.

From these examples we can deduce that language, both verbal and nonverbal communication, is a major influence on what and how children learn about gender and that gender is a prevalent influence on the way children view and live their lives. Language functions not only to initiate novices but also to perpetuate and enforce asymmetrical gendered behavior by means of reconstructing social relations between and among females and males in countless ordinary daily conversations over a lifetime (Tannen, 1993, p. 84). Adults influence children by providing models of women and men talking to each other, as well as to children, that children can identify with and learn from (Tannen, 1993, p. 84).

According to Canary and Dindia (1998), scientific reports show that boys are more likely to emerge as leaders, interrupt someone else, and focus on solving problems. Meanwhile, girls are commonly found to be cooperative, supportive, and more relationship oriented than boys. Statistically, the differences in communication research data are significant, but that it is difficult to claim that boys are one way while girls are another. Canary and Dindia’s research recognizes the importance of not polarizing the sexes and their communication differences, but realizing that the differences are just degrees of separation.

Their research continues on to state that class, race, ethnicity, age, the situational context, and sexual orientation are also important factors regarding communication differences. It claims that such differences change the stereotypical roles, thus changing the communication style of an individual from a very young age (Canary & Dindia, 1998).

Research on gender categorization from Ruble & Ruble’s studies in 1982, reveals that children apply gender distinctions liberally; to a broad range of stimuli, which may include toys, activities, and occupations (Eckes and Trautner, 2008, p. 214). The research revealed that boys tend to choose toys, colors, and games, along with many other decisions, that are perceived to be masculine. For example, they generally choose toy monster trucks, the color blue, and a game of tag instead of Barbie dolls, the color pink, or playing tea party. This nonselective application suggests that gender categories function as ventral pegs for organizing and assimilating a diverse range of important information about the world (Eckes and Trautner, 2000, p. 214). As a child grows into adulthood, they frequently continue making personal choices that are affiliated and in congruence with their femininity or masculinity.

The patterns and behaviors children learn and adopt from watching other people in their lives may not only influence the decisions they make, but may also play a crucial role in the child’s concept of self. Gender stereotypes contain status beliefs that associate greater status worthiness and competence with men than women. These gender status beliefs then shape men’s and women’s assertiveness, the attention and evaluation their performances receive, ability attributed to them on the basis of performance, the influence they achieve, and the likelihood that they emerge as leaders (Carli and Eagley, 1998). Research, conducted by Chatard, Guimond, and Selimbegovic (2007), about the behavioral effects gender stereotypes have on people, demonstrated that being reminded of gender stereotypes distorted students’ memories of their prior performances. The study showed that students who more strongly endorsed gender stereotypes in relation to math and arts, subsequently showed more biased recall of their past exam performance. That is, girls who endorsed the stereotypes underestimated their past math performance, while boys who endorsed the stereotypes tended to underestimate their past arts performance. These findings could have real world implications. It is possible that women are less likely to embrace scientific careers than men because gender stereotypes lead them to underestimate their past achievement. (Chatard, Guimond, & Selimbegovic, 2007).

It becomes crucial to understand that men and women can reach similar conclusions and make similar decisions; although, the processes they use can be quite different and in some cases can lead to entirely different outcomes. While there are differences in the ways that men and women think, it must be emphasized that they can and do solve problems in a similar manner. There are no absolutes, only tendencies (Conner, 1999).

Furthermore, these results demonstrate the importance of demonstrating gender equality. According to Shah (2009), gender equality will not only empower women to live full and productive lives, but will better the lives of children, families and countries as well. It becomes crucial to understand that gender equality and the well-being of children go hand in hand.

According to Shah in 2009, promoting gender equality and empowering women will also contribute to achieving all the other goals, from reducing poverty and hunger, to saving children’s lives, improving maternal health, ensuring universal education, combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases, and ensuring environmental sustainability. It happens with men, women, and children, in all the different nations in the world, from the wealthiest to the poorest. Gender stereotypes can have positive aspects, such as providing guidance and alleviating confusion for small children, but it can also have a negative effect of continuing inherent prejudices.

There are people in American history who have managed to escape and defy the stereotypical gender norm; those who denied carrying on such prejudices. Take Bessie Coleman for example. Bessie was the tenth of thirteen children, born to a mother who worked as a cook and housekeeper. Because her father was not in the picture, Bessie was forced to take care of her siblings and the housekeeping. In 1920, Bessie brother, a World War I veteran, teased her about French women being better than American women; claiming that they could even fly airplanes. It may have been her brother's taunting that inspired Bessie to become a pilot. To her dismay, it was very difficult for a white woman to get flying lessons and for a colored woman it appeared impossible. She found help from her friend, Robert Abbott, who encouraged her to attend an aviation school in France, where neither racism nor gender was an issue. Bessie left for France in November of 1920. On June 15, 1921, she received her pilot's license from the notorious Federation Aeronautique Internationale. Bessie was not the first colored woman, or even the only woman in her class, to receive a license from the FAI, but she was the first licensed colored pilot in the U.S.

Although she became famous, Bessie endured various obstacles, from both white and colored men and women, because she broke the racial and gender stereotypes of the time. Many colored men resented her doing what they could not, while many colored women could not handle Bessie's animated personality. Bessie subsequently began working to create an aviation school that would provide flight opportunities for both sexes regardless of race. She made her last flight on the evening of April 30, when she lost her life in a tragic plane crash resulting from a plane malfunction.

Another example of breaking the gender stereotypes is St. Blandina. Blandina belonged to a band of Christian [martyrs](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/09736b.htm) from Lyons. An account, sent by the [Church](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/03744a.htm) of [Lyons](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/09472a.htm) to the Churches of [Asia Minor](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/01782a.htm), depicted the hatred and public persecution the people of Lyons forced upon Christians. Citizens who confessed [faith](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/05752c.htm) in Christ were thrown into [prison](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/12430a.htm): those who held to their [belief](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/02408b.htm) were to be executed while those who denied their [faith](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/05752c.htm) were to be released. In the midst of these [Christians](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/03712a.htm) was Blandina, a young slave child, who had been taken into custody alongside her Christian master. Her companions feared that her bodily frailty might cause her to renounce her faith under torture, but she remained faithful and answered every question, “I am a [Christian](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/03712a.htm) and we commit no wrongdoing” (Kirsch, 1907). Therefore, Blandina was bound to a stake and placed among wild beasts in the public arena, but they did not harm her. She watched her former companions’ demise before she, as the last of the [martyrs](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/09736b.htm), was scourged, placed on a red-hot grate, enclosed in a net and thrown before a wild steer who tossed her into the air with his horns, and at last was killed with a dagger (Kirsch, 1907).

As it pertains to gender stereotyping, regardless of religious preference, St. Blandina helped to gain respect for women around the world through her unrelenting faith. She helped to prove that female minds can withstand and overcome both physical and psychological tortures contrary to the frail stereotype women are categorized under.

It is the determination and courage of individuals like Bessie Coleman, a young woman expected to be submissive, who did not let social norms or childhood role models influence or control her ambitions, or St. Blandina, the woman martyr refusing to be beaten into acquiescence for a faith she did not claim, that helps to make advancements toward human equality regardless of gender, race, or religious preference. The role model they set forth for young children, especially girls, has contributed to the advancement and equality of women in nations like the United States and Great Britain.

In conclusion, children tend to form gender stereotypes and concepts of self from observations of role performances of other men and women. The gender examination and experiences generate habits and expectations that are reinforced by the people in the child’s life. Social norms also require different behaviors from the sexes, usually resulting in male instrumental specialization and female expressive specialization. While gender stereotypes help to provide clarity and make sufficient deductions about others, they lead to social inequality and prejudice, and can lead individuals to second-guess their ability to perform, comprehend information, accomplish goals, or emerge as leaders. However, there have been individuals throughout history who have overcame society’s gender norms, blazing a path of human equality while simultaneously creating a better world for the rest of the civilization.

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