

# Theorizing Gender and Cultural Expectations

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**Abstract**— Due to the importance of gender in our lives and how it affects most if not all the tiny details in our daily experiences, many scholars have been trying to put under the scope this important variable, and tried to figure out the root origins of it, each one of them from his/her point of view starting from the biological differences till socialization, and its power in affecting our behaviors and inciting people to behave and follow a certain set of rules. this article tries to expose nearly most of the existing approaches dealing with gender. Starting from the biological, psychological, Psychological, Social, the cognitive, the Behaviorist, and the Social Cognitive theories.

**Keywords**— Biology, Culture, Society, behavior, recognition.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

There exist at least five theories that explain gender; firstly, biological that considers the roots of gender roles as justified by biological differences. Secondly, psychological theory that emphasized the cognitive construction of gender conceptions and styles of behavior transmitted within the family model. Thirdly, social theory that considers the social process through which the individual comes to construct one's social identity as belonging to one gender or another. Fourthly, cognitive theory that cares much about the process through which the individual comes to recognize him/herself as belonging to one gender category or another and behave as such. And finally, Behaviorist theory, and social cognitive theory that perceives the individual behavior as an outcome of one's cognitive capacities, in addition to social pressure around.

## 2. BIOLOGICAL APPROACH TO GENDER

Biological theory claims that sex differences are the core of our gender differences, relying on some biological differences, such as, hormones, and chromosomes to justify gender roles. In fact, biological theory, states that men and women are biologically different, in terms of chromosomes (men XY/ women XX), those chromosomes lead to the discharge of different hormones, which are responsible for women and men differences concerning gender roles.

Therefore, this theory claims that everything that is psychological is first biological. Biology controls all our thoughts, feelings and behaviors. Nobody can neglect the importance of the study of some biological aspects on human behavior, for this reason that scientists use many relevant biological perspectives in the study of psychology, such as:

### 1.1 Hormones

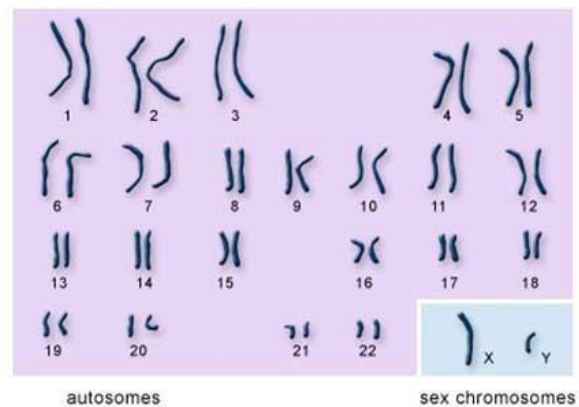
Hormones are chemical substances secreted by glands throughout the body and secreted in the bloodstream. Both men and women have the same sex hormone, but differ in the amounts, and in the effect, they have of different parts of the body. For example, testosterone is a sex hormone more present on males than females. It has an important effect in the development of behavior before and after birth. This hormone is released in the womb, causes the creation of male sex organs, and affects the hypothalamus causing the masculinization of the brain. Testosterone causes typically male behaviors such as aggression, competitiveness, Visio-spatial abilities, higher sexual drive... etc.

### 1.2 Chromosomes

The normal human body contains 23 pairs of chromosomes, a long thin structure that contains thousands of genes, they are biochemical units of heredity, and govern every human's development. Each pair of chromosomes controls different aspects of development, and biological sex is determined by the 23rd pair, which resemble physically the letters X and Y

Males: XY

Females: XX



U.S. National Library of Medicine

Figure 1: Human Chromosomes

There are many people with atypical chromosomes, these individuals are socially, physically and cognitively different than the others with typical chromosomes. In order to defend the biological theory, many people argue that studying people suffering from Turner's and Klinefelter's syndrome, helps us to understand the importance of our biology on our behavior, especially while comparing these special cases with normal individuals.

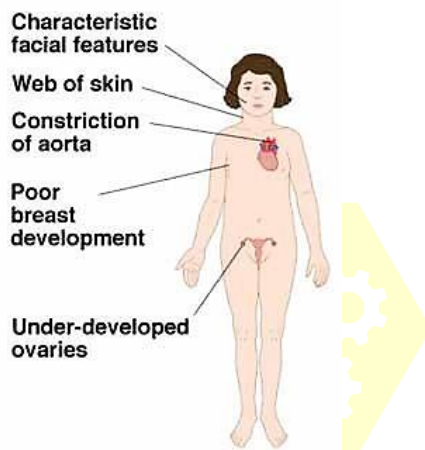


Figure 2: Turner's syndrome

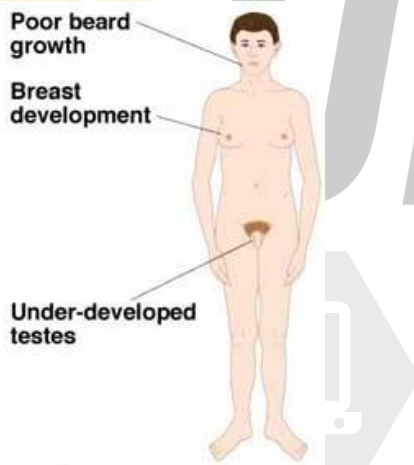


Figure 3: Klinefelter's syndrome

Though this theory, by using natural facts and science, claims universality and truthfulness; one can easily detect biases. In the sense that it is true that men and women are not biologically identical, concerning physical appearance and strength, but there are no scientific arguments that can prove intellectual capacity's differences, and most of the existing arguments, are constructed by the patriarchal minds, who distort reality to make it fit within the men's superiority theory.

### 3. Psychodynamic Approach to Gender

Psychodynamic approach is mainly based on Freud's theory of psychosexual development. Family dynamics

has a great subconscious influence on the individual, which leads to the development of the internal gender identity.

According to Freud's perspective, many conflicts occur during the development of different psychosexual stages. Gender roles are a result of resolution process of a conflict, at the phallic stage. At this stage, feelings of rivalry and hatred, against the father, develop; the father is perceived as a strong and unconquerable individual, which leads to a conflict; identification is then used to resolve this conflict, which on its turn leads to gender identification, and leads to sex-typed behavior and gender roles. For this reason, that same sex parent has a great impact on the process of gender development type, and they are more likely than other males to be overweight and be taller than their fathers and brothers. Klinefelter boys tend to have learning and/or behavioral problems.

Karen Horney reexamined some Freudian concepts; she differed from Freud on Gender differences in personality development. For instance, she disagreed with Freud's penis envy concept, leading to females' sense of inferiority, and masculinity complex. Horney argues that the envy, females have, is symbolic, in fact they envy the social position men have. Also she added that men develop a womb envy, because of their non-capacity to reproduce, and this lack of womb, and desire to have it leads at its turn to demonizing the women, in order to keep their supremacy at the top.

Thus Horney believed, unlike Freud, that the origin of females' inferiority, generated by men, society with masculine bias, is men's insecurity, and feelings of inferiority.

Oedipus complex which is according to Freud, a universal phenomenon is perceived as responsible in the development of gender identity and the super ego of children. Another concept developed by Freud is the castration anxiety; when the small boy sees the female genital; he will assume that the girl had her penis removed, probably as a punishment of misbehavior. Hence, he will become anxious that the same thing will happen to him.

Critics, activists and feminists, have been highly critical to penis envy as a concept of psychoanalysis, saying that this approach to psychoanalysis is mainly patriarchal, antifeminist and misogynist, since it presents women as inferior to men. In Freudian psychoanalysis, gender development is due to issues related to castration, and Oedipus complex, which is controversial in feminism. Because Freud says that women's lack of the visible

genitals make them feel inferior so they develop a sense of gender inferiority and penis envy. However, this theory focused only on one aspect of human beings, which is “nature” what about the other aspects? are there any external factors that can lead to gender construction?

**4. Behaviorist Approach to Gender**

The behaviorist approach appears as a reaction to the prevailing existing introspective –inner experience– approach. The behaviorists emphasize on ‘nurture’ rather than ‘nature’ for the biological approach. For this theory defenders’ human behavior is the result of a learning process. Early behaviorist like Skinner, emphasized upon the importance of reinforcement. It was only later on that other variables were introduced to this theory such as: reward and punishment, social context, observation, modeling, and imitation. All these variables are the key to social learning. Behaviorists approach to gender is explained through:

**Classical conditioning**

Operant conditioning or the uses of: Positive, negative, punishment, or no reinforcement

**Learning through observation**

The behaviorists believe that Gender roles are, just like the other cultural patterns, learnt and not innate, they are shaped by reinforcement. Human behavior is designed from childhood through their upbringing, by steering them toward learning specific socially desired gender roles. Already from their birth kids are treated differently based on their sex. This treatment differentiation may increase while they grow up, and they even can be constantly exposed to it, at home, in childcare settings, in the street... the fact that there are different variations of gender roles, across cultures, is an indication of different treatments.

**Classical conditioning** is the daily exposure to models of behaviors, leads to the adoption of gender roles. For instance, when a kid sees his parent of the same –his/her– own sex, wearing a particular type of clothes, using some specific gestures and style of communication, he/she will automatically adopt the same sex behavior.

**Operant conditioning**, is a type of learning affected by positive or negative consequence, leading to either stronger or weaker voluntary response. This learning is based on the type of reinforcement that may encourage or discourage the individual to repeat the same behavior.



Figure 4: The process of gender development

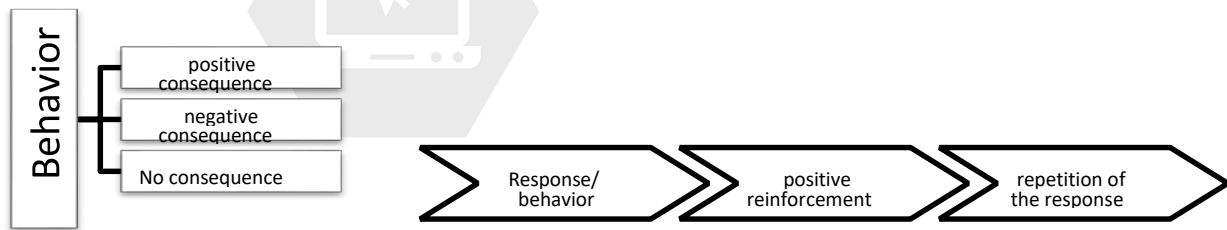


Figure 5: Consequences of Behavior

Figure 6: Reinforcement and behavior

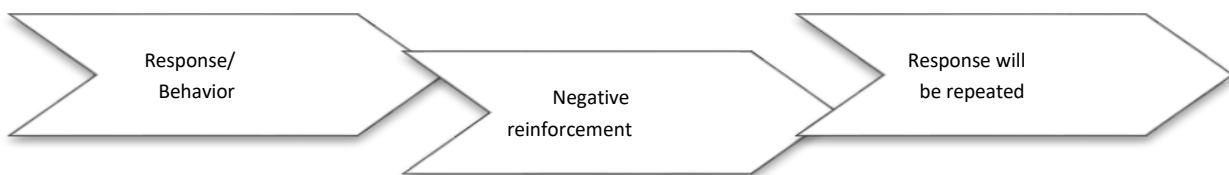


Figure 7: Negative reinforcement and behavior

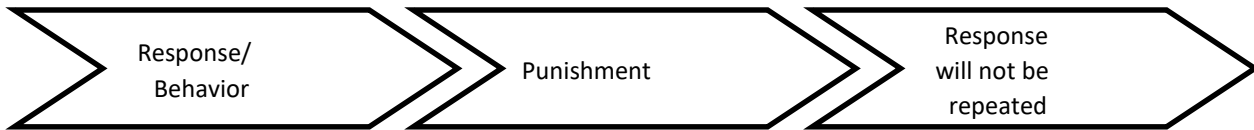


Figure 8: Punishment and behavior

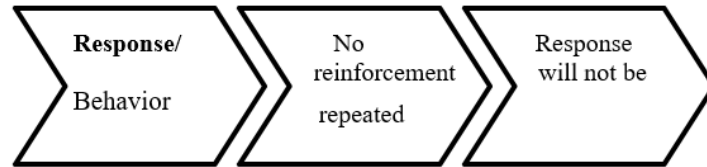


Figure 9: No reinforcement and behavior

Applying gender rules on reinforcement and social learning is the same; for instance, a son copying his father, makes his father proud and happy (positive reinforcement) and makes the son repeat his doing again and again. At the same time for a boy cleaning his clothes (a girls' task for many cultures), leading to no attention (no reinforcement), the boy then will not repeat his action again. Whereas for a girl cleaning the clothes, to avoid harsh treatment (negative reinforcement), leads to repeating the action again. Also, when a son is ridiculed for playing with dolls (punishment), will make him not repeat his action again. Thus, gender rules and roles are then learned during the socialization process, through punishment, and reward.

### 5. Social Approach to Gender

Social theory, tries to explain gender roles from another perspective, and sees gender roles as the outcome of the socialization process. In fact, this theory considers that family, peers and school are whom the children follow as a model of behavior, and make them create gender awareness. This socialization process is the outlet through which individuals, especially in childhood, start to perceive themselves, and perceive the others. One can compare this socialization process to a kind of lenses through which one can see gender roles, in order to live, conform, and behave accordingly.

The social theory in fact tries to examine the influence of society on our own perception of our inner self, how society makes us believe in some social construct norms, known as Masculinity (the appropriate behavior of a man) and Femininity (the socially correct behavior of woman). It also studies the impact of such understanding on the individual's identity and social practices. This theory also pays special focus on the gender power relationships, emanating from the established gender order in a given society. It also argues that gender order is not fix and universal, since it changes from one society to another, and across the time; consequently,

gender roles and expectations change from one culture to another, then, what is socially accepted in a special lap of time may become unacceptable in another.

From the already cited biological gender theory one can deduce that many individuals, who suffer from some biological disorders, can never fit within this sexual dichotomy of gender. For this reason, that advocates of the social theory argue that sex and gender do not always align. This non alignment is due to the fact that society has only two genders either man or woman, and the gender roles attributed to each one of them can never be interchanged, or not attributed.

Gender roles are the social laws of behaviors of each gender, it describes the tasks and functions ideally prescribed for masculinity and femininity. These roles have been affected across the time by many factors from the beginning of human life till now. All this leads us to question the way society succeed in the construction of gender identity.

Many scholars believe that social constructionism is one of the key theories used by sociologists to put gender into historical and cultural focus. In fact, social constructionism is a social theory that detect how meaning is constructed through social interaction (words and acts we do with other people). This theory explains that gender is neither a fixed nor an innate fact, it varies across time and place.

Gender norms are acquired starting from birth through the socialization process. Since the first day of our lives, society uses many devices to teach us what it is expected from us, according to our biological sex. In fact, society dictates the minute details of our behavior; starting from general appearance, clothing, colors (pink for girls, and blue for boys) to the expression of our feelings (boys don't cry, girls can cry), leaving no free room for one's personality. All the social institutions (parents, school, religious and cultural teachings, media among others)

work hand in hand in order to make socialization successful.

**6. Cognitive Approach to Gender**

The cognitive theory focuses upon the thought processes leading to learning, giving importance recognition in understanding and explaining behaviors. In fact, this theory stressed upon both the internal state of a person, as well as the environmental events; although it focuses on the perception and thinking as key factors of learning. Cognition refers to “knowledge” and “the process of knowing”, five main variables are at the heart of this approach: (thoughts, feelings, thinking, values, and expectations), and considers that people’s perception of the world is determined by their thinking.

The Cognitive theory focuses on the inner mental structure. In other words, opening the black box of the human mind to understand how people learn their gender roles. This theory came as a reaction to the behaviorist theory, which claims that people learn via imitation. The cognitive theory, on the other hand, argues that people are rational beings and that the learning process requires active participation in order to learn .

These actions are consequences of thinking so people, especially children, are not perceived as passive consumers and imitators but rather they use their minds and create novel words that were never heard before in their environment. Social theory and cognitive theory pretend to be universal, but, both of them give mere descriptions and fail to provide justifications; the reason why, if we join them together, we may come up with a new theory, social cognitive theory (SCT), which may provide a fertile ground for explaining gender roles in society.

Lawrence Kohlberg’s cognitive development theory come up with the concept of Gender constancy, meaning that gender is understood by children as anything else, they have experiences with people from both sexes, from which they take notes of what is socially expected and acceptable from a male and a female, and select what they have to do following their same sex model. They themselves classify and organize their behaviors towards their own sex and the other. Behaviors consistent with their own gender are adopted, and reflected in their use of language, clothes, toys etc. for Kohlberg gender roles acquisition emanates from gender constancy, meaning that the kid’s understanding and awareness that his/her sex is constant, permanent, and will never change. Gender constancy emerges at

nearly 7 years old, but it doesn’t occur at one point in time, it occurs in three stage:

**Gender identity:** knowing one’s and the other’s sex.

**Gender stability:** the understanding that girls become women, and boys become men; and that gender is fixed, permanent, and part of one’s personality; although their understanding is done on the basis of superficial, external appearances, and stereotypical behaviors.

**Gender consistency:** the complete awareness that sex will never change no matter the changes that one can do (hairstyle, clothes, and all the superficial external appearances)

Many scholars do not agree with the gender constancy hypothesis and argue that before the age of gender constancy (7 years old as affirmed by Kohlberg) children start to develop gender typed preferences (preference to play with the same sex peers, girls prefer to play with dolls, and boys with cars) . From the age 2 ½ years old children tend categories activities and objects by gender, and even acquire gender appropriate behaviors.

Other scholar come up with gender schema theory; which considers that children develop a gender schema, a mental framework used to organize and guide the child’s understanding of gender. The following table describes the gradual process of gender schema development:

*Table 1: The process of gender schema development*

Stage	Age	Description
<b>Gender Identification</b>	2-3.5 years	Children believe that they can change sex, by interchanging the appearance (wearing the opposite sex’s clothes. They can distinguish between household gender stereotypes. Gender labeling is learned.
<b>Gender stability</b>	3.5-4.5 years	The understanding that sex is stable and permanent, their older siblings are models for social learning of gender roles. They can play with toys that are socially labeled to the opposite sex, but rarely own them. Labeling is applied to self and other inconsistently.

<b>Gender consistency</b>	4.5-7 years	Sex is stable, children value and imitate same sex behaviors, which leads to the development of gender appropriate attributes
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Piaget comes up with the stages of cognitive development and gender roles development, he argues that they take place at different ages starting from 2 to 4 years, the preoperational stage, at this stage children's thinking is concrete, but not logical, they judge based on the appearances, they think that sex can change if appearance is changed. They are also able to categories sex/gender, and make use of gender labeling, by identify what it is socially considered as male's or females' objects and actions, they consider gender stereotypes as rules.

Another stage is identified, concrete operational stage, which takes place, according to Piaget, between the age of 7 and 12 years, during this period, thinking becomes logical but limited to concrete, they also start understanding that sex is permanent and fixed. The last stage, Formal operating stage, takes place from 12 years till adulthood, during which thinking becomes scientifically logical, with the development of the understanding of the abstract concept, and sex typing becomes more rigid.

This approach was criticized for ignoring the role of biological factors, which are believed to be as important factors in the cognitive schema development, also for not addressing the cultural differences in forming gender roles.

### 7. Social Cognitive Approach to Gender

Social cognitive theory is a subcategory of cognitive theory, which focuses on the effects that others have on our behavior, it is based on the ways in which we learn models of behaviors of others. According to the principle of social cognitive theory, we learn not only through our own experiences but also by watching how the others behave. Social cognitive theory is elaborated by its founder the Canadian Albert Bandura in his famous work Social Foundation of Thought and Action (1986). This theory focuses on the coming points, in order to explain, how people come to see themselves as belonging to one gender or another.

People do not only learn through their direct experiences but also via observing others, it is in fact a process known as 'vicarious learning', this latter refers to a learning that comes about through watching how others behave. Social cognitive theory is based on the

individual's learning ability. Normally, behavior that is reinforced continues, while behavior that is punished stops. Today, reinforcement is seen as more effective than punishment in changing behavior. People are more likely to follow the behaviors modelled by someone with whom they can identify. The more emotional attachments perceived between the observer and the model, the more likely the observer will learn from the model.

The degree of self-efficacy that a learner possesses directly affects his or her ability to learn. Self-efficacy is a fundamental belief in one's ability to achieve a goal. Only when you believe that you can learn new behaviors, then you will be much more successful in doing so. Hence, from the above we can notice that gender is a very complex issue.

Although each of these theories deals with gender from its own perspective, I believe that there is an area of overlapping between them. For instance, the biological approach admits the importance of the social factor whereas the social approach recognizes the biological factor as playing an important role in the gender recognition, and the cognitive approach sees social and biological variables as important to the gender construction.

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