4.19: Gender

Another important dimension of the self is the sense of self as male or female. Preschool aged children become increasingly interested in finding out the differences between boys and girls both physically and in terms of what activities are acceptable for each. While two year olds can identify some differences and learn whether they are boys or girls, preschoolers become more interested in what it means to be male or female. This self-identification based on a continuum from male to female is known as Gender Identity. The development of gender and gender identity appears to be due to an interaction among biological, social and representational influences (Ruble, Martin, & Berenbaum, 2006).

Gender Roles, or the expectations associated with being male or female, are learned in one’s culture throughout childhood and into adulthood. Learning theorists suggest that gender role socialization is a result of the ways in which parents, teachers, friends, schools, religious institutions, media and others send messages about what is acceptable or desirable behavior as males or females. This socialization begins early-in fact, it may even begin the moment a parent learns that a child is on the way. Knowing the sex of the child can conjure up images of the child’s behavior, appearance, and potential on the part of a parent, and this stereotyping continues to guide perception through life.

Consider parents of newborns, shown a 7 pound, 20 inch baby, wrapped in blue (a color designating males) describe the child as tough, strong, and angry when crying. Shown the same infant in pink (a color used in the United States for baby girls), these parents are likely to describe the baby as pretty, delicate, and frustrated when crying (Maccoby & Jacklin, 1987). Female infants are held more, talked to more frequently and given direct eye contact, while male infants play is often mediated through a toy or activity. In addition to being recipients of these cultural expectations, we are individuals who also modify these roles (Kimmel, 2008).
Sons are given tasks that take them outside the house and that have to be performed only on occasion, while girls are more likely to be given chores inside the home such as cleaning or cooking that is performed daily. Sons are encouraged to think for themselves when they encounter problems and daughters are more likely to be given assistance, even when they are working on an answer. This impatience is reflected in teachers waiting less time when asking a female student for an answer than when asking for a reply from a male student (Sadker & Sadker, 1994). Girls are given the message from teachers that they must try harder and endure in order to succeed while boys’ successes are attributed to their intelligence. Of course, the stereotypes of advisors can also influence which kinds of courses or vocational choices girls and boys are encouraged to make.

Based on what young children learn about gender from parents, peers, and those who they observe in society, children develop their own conceptions of the attributes associated with maleness or femaleness which is referred to as Gender Schemas. Friends discuss what is acceptable for boys and girls and popularity may be based on modeling what is considered ideal behavior or looks for the sexes. Girls tend to tell one another secrets to validate others as best friends while boys compete for position by emphasizing their knowledge, strength or accomplishments. This focus on accomplishments can even give rise to exaggerating accomplishments in boys, but girls are discouraged from showing off and may learn to minimize their accomplishments as a result.

Gender Dysphoria: A growing body of research is now focused on Gender Dysphoria, or the distress accompanying a mismatch between one’s gender identity and biological sex (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Although prevalence rates are low, at approximately 0.3 percent of the United States population (Russo, 2016), children who later identified as transgender, often stated that they were the opposite gender as soon as they began talking. Comments such as stating they prefer the toys, clothing and anatomy of the opposite sex, while rejecting the toys, clothing, and anatomy of their assigned sex are criteria for a diagnosis of Gender Dysphoria in children. Certainly many young children do not conform to the gender roles modeled by the culture and even push back against assigned roles. However, they do not experience discomfort regarding their gender identity and would not be identified with Gender Dysphoria. A more comprehensive description of Gender Dysphoria, including current treatments, will be discussed in the chapter on adolescence.
How much does gender matter? In the United States, gender differences are found in social interactions, media messages, and in school experiences. Even into college and professional school, females are less vocal in the classrooms and much more at risk for sexual harassment from teachers, coaches, classmates, and professors. The stereotypes that males should be strong, forceful, active, dominant, and rational and that females should be pretty, subordinate, unintelligent, emotional, and gabby are portrayed in children’s toys, books, commercials, video games, movies, television shows and music. In adulthood, these differences are reflected in income gaps between men and women. Women working full-time earn only about 74 percent the income of men. Additionally, women experience higher rates of rape, domestic violence, and eating disorders, while higher rates of violent death occur for men in young adulthood.