Exploring Gender Norms and Identity Formation Through the Lens of Cultural Psychology

      Culture is objective because our environment is factual, including the products of human creation. Anything created, once displayed to the public, is now part of the factual culture. Every cultural aspect adheres to certain norms and regulations that dictate its usage and function, making them objective realities.[1] Such a notion implies that gender is also an objective fact as it is a social construct that we have defined and established norms for. This also makes gender part of our intentional world[2] because we have attached function and meaning to it, and because we allow it to have influence in our lives. Subjective meaning is shaped by personal history and experiences. In the case of gender, it is unique to each individual and influenced by their experiences and perceived compatibility with the gender norms of their culture.[3] By adopting a cultural psychological perspective, we can gain insight into how social practices and cultural traditions impact the human mind, and how gender roles shape the development of identity and self-perception.

      From birth, we seek meaning in the uncertain human existence, and gender plays a significant role in shaping our identity formation. No environment exists independently of the way people find meaning in it and our society puts great meaning in gender. A "sociocultural environment" only exists and is real as long as there are people whose mental representations are influenced by it.[2] As we grow up, gender norms become deeply ingrained, and feelings of incompatibility with–and nonconformity of–these norms influences how we perceive ourselves and the way we fit into our sociocultural environment.

According to Sherif, the set of norms that become part of us are not something we are born into; the cultural norms that so greatly influence us develop and change as we do in the social environment we grow up in. Norms are first external and then as life goes on one naturally incorporates them as part of themself.[3] But is the adoption of norms so natural when one doesn't feel as though they fit into the socially constructed roles that they're expected to adhere to? Much of modern society (and many feminist and sociological theories) view sex as biological and gender as a social construct. The World Health Organization defines gender roles as "socially constructed roles, behaviors, activities and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for men and women." According to this view, gender roles are social constructs, and these roles are prescribed as ideal or appropriate behavior for a person of that specific sex. There is no environment that is context-free so you can never remove gender from the equation because the meaning we have attached to it makes it an ever-present factor that influences behavior and our relationship to our environment and culture.

"The psychological basis of the established social norms… is the formation of common frames of reference as a product of the contact of individuals. Once such frames of reference are established and incorporated in the individual, they enter as important factors to determine or modify his reactions to the situations that he will face later" (pg. 106)[3]. In this context the frames of reference are the established societal gender norms. Since these norms are familiar and acknowledged, they become extremely influential in determining how we perceive and behave in different situations. However, norms change, which we are seeing now in the shift of gender and gender norms. This fluidity and ambiguity of gender will be further discussed later in this paper.

Our environments and cultures are arranged for us to "seize meanings" and make sense of our world, a world where person and gender are interdependent, so it's no wonder why someone

who feels incompatible with their gender experiences dissonance. Finding the balance between needs for relatedness and independence within close relationships is a challenge but something that most in early adolescents meet; failing at this is correlated with negative outcomes for their psychosocial well-being.[5] Early adolescents perceiving themselves as having unusual friendship styles (regarding gender) contributes toward negative self-evaluations and feelings of sadness. These gender-atypical friendship styles hinder them from feeling relatedness in their relationships and therefore as nonconforming with gender norms which leads to low self-esteem and depression during this age.[5]

If one feels that they aren't compatible with their gender, this could not only cause internalized distress and low self-esteem, but this fear of facing negative social reactions (peer rejection, victimization, etc)[5] due to committing a gender "transgression" could also cause them to have many conflicting inner voices which would cause even further distress. A new dialogical view of self is continuing to develop, that emphasizes "historical situatedness, cultural construction, and social interaction."[4] It is proposed that some voices are privileged over others, depending on the sociocultural setting, because of how appropriate and effective they are considered in that context. And while one could consider that just because some voices are privileged over others doesn't mean that any of the competing voices are any less accurate in representing different sides of oneself, I would argue that not every voice in your inner dialogue represents your current true self, (supposing that a true self exists even though we are constantly changing). If there are parts of you that are never able to be expressed because they are overshadowed by other voices that are always privileged because they have been deemed most appropriate for that social interaction, then it is impossible to have high self-esteem and feel confident in yourself, since your words and behavior only match what is "most appropriate" and

aligning with the established norms. If you feel forced to behave in a way that is unnatural to you but that conforms to gender norms, you still won't feel gender compatibility because your behavior doesn't really match your desires.

Feelings of incompatibility and nonconformity within gender wouldn't be possible without the attached meaning and social norms that have been assigned to each gender. And these objective meanings would not exist if not for the boundary that exists between genders. This boundary or separation between genders is what makes it possible to have the notion of gender at all. "There would be no gender—nor need to study it—if the boundary between genders were to be eliminated."[6] On the most basic and fundamental level, gender boundaries are based on bodily differences in form and functions. But when you dig a little deeper, the two genders are profoundly segregated from each other by cultural norms. This is evident in the evolution of gender in modern history. While our society used to view gender as binary (being either male or female, as determined by one's anatomy), and though these are still the genders that are most recognized, many would argue that gender isn't about someone's anatomy, it is about who they feel they are and identify as. There are now many different recognized gender identities, including male, female, transgender, gender neutral, non-binary, agender, pangender, genderqueer, two-spirit, third gender, and all, none or a combination of these. These boundaries between genders aren't just something used to separate opposing entities; as Valsiner would suggest, boundaries exist as structures that connect separated parts "by providing the arena for their relationships."[6]

Structuring gender is a problem because gender is fluid and changing; on the other hand, by creating boundaries we are allowed to understand gender using the terms we have created and to explore the relationship between genders. By separating gender we can see how gender

interacts and in what ways they are connected. This is extremely evident with the emergence of new genders, as some now have expanded the relationships between the gender binary and now identify as genders that combine some and leave out other aspects of the two. This creation of new genders and change in gender norms challenges and destabilizes what was previously thought of gender (gender binary and the norms attached with it) and proves that gender is fluid and therefore ambiguous, further emphasizing Sherif's belief about intentional worlds and the subjective meaning of gender. By including this I only mean to stress the complexity of gender because of its ambiguity and subjectivity and subsequently, the complexity of identity and what it really is.

It must also be acknowledged that perceived gender conformity is not the only factor that influences the formation of identity. Since the rise of Gestalt psychology, we have come to recognize that when the organism is stimulated by different parts of a stimulus field, "the parts fall into a functional relationship *and each part influences the other parts*."[6] While it may be challenging to grasp the complex interplay between the numerous variables that contribute to identity formation, it is evident that our self-perception of gender nonconformity can impact our sense of gender compatibility, which in turn can significantly shape our psychosocial well-being and the development of our sense of self and identity.

Comprehensively understanding the intricate relationship between all variables that contribute to identity formation, whether a single true identity or multiple interacting identities, is a challenge. Despite gender being just one variable that is influenced by its relationship to other variables, it is evident that our self-perception of gender nonconformity can impact our sense of gender compatibility, which in turn plays an important and influential role in shaping our psychosocial well-being and the development of our sense of self and identity.

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