Gender Messages

Write a 500 or more word paper about the three main institutions in gender socialization, family, school, and the media. In your paper also:

         Describe how these institutions affect gender socialization.

         Be sure to include contemporary issues and terminology from our textbook to support your descriptions.

References

Benokraitis, N.V. (2019). SOC: Introduction to Sociology, (6th ed.). Boston, MA: Cengage Learning ISBN: 9780357687826

**Introduction**

Women pay more than men, and sometimes twice as much, for many things, including cars, mortgages, health care, high-end jeans from the same designer, and similar grooming products like moisturizers, deodorants, and even razors (Hill, 2015; Ngabirano, 2017). Why? This chapter examines how gender and sexuality affect our lives. First, however, take the True or False quiz to see how much you know about these topics.

**What Do You Think?**

Today, women have more employment advantages than men.

**9-1. Sex, Gender, and Culture**

Some differences between women and men are biological; others are social creations. Both biology and social factors shape a person’s identity, but sex and gender aren’t synonymous.

**9-1a. How Sex and Gender Differ**

Many people use *sex* and *gender* interchangeably, but they’re not the same. **Sex** refers to the biological characteristics with which we are born—chromosomes, anatomy, hormones, and other physical and physiological attributes. These attributes influence our behavior (e.g., shaving beards, wearing bras), but *don’t determine* how we think or feel. Whether we see ourselves and others as feminine or masculine depends on gender, a more complex concept than sex.

**Gender** refers to learned attitudes and behaviors that characterize women and men. Gender is based on social and cultural expectations rather than on physical traits. Thus, most people are *born* either male or female, but we *learn* to be women or men because we internalize behavior patterns expected of each sex. In many societies, for example, women are expected to look young, thin, and attractive, and men are expected to amass as much wealth as possible.

**9-1b. Sex: Our Biological Component**

Physical characteristics like breasts and beards indicate whether someone is a male or female, but sex isn’t always clear-cut. Our cultural expectations dictate that we are female or male, but a number of people are “living on the boundaries of both sexes” (Lorber and Moore, 2007: 141). For example, **intersexual** individuals are people whose sex at birth isn’t clearly either male or female. About 1 in 2,000 to 4,000 children born each year are classified as intersex because they’re born with both male and female external genitals or an incomplete development of internal reproductive organs. Some parents seek surgery; others wait until a child is old enough to decide what to do (Bendavid, 2013).

**Sexual Identity and Sexual Orientation**

Our **sexual identity** is an awareness of ourselves as male or female and how we express our sexual values, attitudes, and feelings. Our sexual identity incorporates a **sexual orientation**—an emotional or sexual attraction to sexual partners of the same sex, of the opposite sex, of both sexes, or neither sex:

* **Gay** Gay is a term referring to a person who is emotionally and sexually attracted to people of the same sex. While gay may be used to identify both men and women, gay men prefer to be called gay and gay women prefer to be called *lesbian(s)*. *Coming out* is a person’s public announcement of a gay or lesbian sexual orientation
* **Heterosexuals** , often called *straight*, are attracted to people of the opposite sex.
* **Bisexuals** , sometimes called *bis*, are attracted to more than one gender.
* **Asexuals** lack any interest in or desire for sex.

Sexual orientation, like biological sex, isn’t as clear-cut as many people believe. Alfred Kinsey (1948) and his associates’ classic study found that most people weren’t exclusively heterosexual or gay. Instead, they fell somewhere along a continuum in terms of sexual desire, attractions, feelings, fantasies, and experiences. Researchers have recently added *asexual* to Kinsey’s classification (Figure 9.1).

**9-1c. Gender: Our Cultural Component**

Gender doesn’t occur naturally, but is socially constructed. This means that gender aspects may differ across time, cultures, and even groups within a society. Let’s begin with gender identity.

**Gender Identity**

People develop a **gender identity** , a perception of themselves as either masculine or feminine, early in life. Many Mexican baby girls but not boys have pierced ears, for example, and hairstyles and clothing for American toddlers differ by sex. Gender identity, which typically corresponds to a person’s biological sex, is part of our self-concept and usually remains relatively fixed throughout life.

**Transgender** is an umbrella term for people whose gender identity and behavior don’t correspond with their birth sex. They comprise about 0.6 percent (1.4 million) of U.S. adults (Flores et al., 2016).

Because transgender is independent of sexual orientation, people may identify as heterosexual, gay, bisexual, or asexual. Facebook users can now choose their gender identity from more than 50 possibilities, but here are some of the most common transgender categories (American Psychological Association, 2014):

* *Transsexual* individuals are people who have permanently changed, or plan to change, their physical sex through medical intervention. Unlike transgender, transsexual is not an umbrella term to describe a person whose gender identity differs from their assigned sex. Transsexual is largely considered an outdated term and should only be used to describe someone who openly identifies as such.
* *Cross-dressers* wear clothing that’s traditionally or stereotypically worn by another gender in their culture. People who cross-dress are usually comfortable with their assigned sex and don’t wish to change it.
* *Genderqueer* are people who identify their gender as falling somewhere on a continuum between female and male, or a combination of gender identities and sexual orientations.

**Gender expression** is how a person communicates gender identity to others and includes behavior, clothing, hairstyles, voice, or body characteristics. Cross-dressing, girls’ frilly dresses, and men’s business suits are all examples of gender expression. Even if a person’s gender identity is constant, gender expression can vary from situation to situation and change over time. For example, between 2010 and 2014, the number of men’s eyelid, facelift, and breast reduction cosmetic surgeries increased by 33 to 44 percent; half of American men now routinely use moisturizers, facial creams, or self-tanning lotions and sprays; and some of the National Basketball Association’s “toughest players” have promoted products for Dove, La Mer, and other skin-care companies (Boyle, 2013; Holmes, 2013; American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery, 2015).

**9-1d. Societal Reactions to LGBTs**

People’s attitudes toward LGBTs are mixed. There’s been greater acceptance in some countries, but considerable repression in others.

**Greater Acceptance, But …**

Australian passports and birth certificates designate male, female, and transgender. In India, the 2011 national census for the first time offered three options: male, female, or a “third sex” that includes LGBTs. In Thailand, which has the world’s biggest transgender population, an airline recruits “third sex” flight attendants. In the United States, in 2017 Oregon was the first state to allow residents to mark their sex as “not specified” on a driver’s license.

In the United States, many jurisdictions, corporations, and small companies now extend more health care and other benefits to gay employees and their partners than to unmarried heterosexuals who live together. The U.S. Supreme Court and a growing number of states have legalized same-sex marriages, and large numbers of Americans support equal rights for LGBTs in the workplace and elsewhere (Von Drehle, 2014).

In 2012, the Army promoted the first openly gay female officer to brigadier general. In 2013, the Pentagon added benefits for same-sex partners, including services on U.S. military bases. Federal workers and Medicare recipients are now eligible for Sex Reassignment Surgery (Mach and Cornell, 2013; “Transgender Rights,” 2015). And, since the mid-1990s, many LGBT characters have appeared in leading and supporting roles in popular TV programs (e.g., *Transparent, Modern Family, Gotham, This Is Us, Empire*, and *Game of Thrones*).

There’s greater LGBT acceptance. However, Americans are about evenly divided on two issues: whether wedding-related businesses (like caterers and florists) should be required to serve same-sex couples and whether transgender people should be able to use public restrooms that correspond to their current gender identity rather than their birth sex (Masci, 2016; McCarthy, 2017).

**9-2. Contemporary Gender Inequality**

A recent study concluded that “it will take until 2085 for women to reach parity with men in leadership roles in government/politics, business, entrepreneurship, and nonprofit organizations” (Klos, 2013). You saw in Chapter 8 that there’s still widespread gender stratification because of sex. *Gendered institutions* are social structures that enable and reinforce gender stratification. Let’s begin with the family, remembering that institutions are interrelated (see Chapter 6).

**9-2a. Gender and Family Life**

About 56 percent of married adults—with and without children—say that sharing household chores is “very important” to a successful marriage (Geiger, 2016). Men do more at home than they used to, but not as much as they say. Fathers spend more hours each week in paid work than do mothers, do less child care and housework, and have more leisure time (Figure 9.2), and many household chores are still gendered. On average, men are three times more likely to do home maintenance (e.g., repairing cars, lawn care); women are three times more likely to do the cooking, cleaning, and laundry (“American Time Use Survey …,” 2016).

**9-2b. Gender and Education**

Despite substantial progress, there are gender differences at all educational levels. In public K–12 schools, as rank and pay increase, the number of women decreases. Among all full-time teachers, 76 percent at the elementary level are women; the number falls to 58 percent in high school. Among principals, the number of women drops from 64 percent at elementary schools to 30 percent in high schools (Bitterman et al., 2013; Snyder et al., 2016).

Because women across all racial and ethnic groups are more likely than men to finish college, some observers have described this phenomenon as “the feminization of higher education.” Even when women earn doctoral degrees in male-dominated STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) fields, they’re less likely than men to be hired (see Chapter 13). Once hired, women are less likely to be promoted. Since 2000, 45 percent of all Ph.D. degree recipients have been women (Snyder and Dillow, 2013), but as the academic rank increases, the number of female faculty decreases (Table 9.2). Such data contradict the description of higher education as feminized.

**9-2c. Gender and the Workplace**

There has been progress toward greater workplace equality, but we still have a long way to go. In the United States (as around the world), many jobs are segregated by sex, there are ongoing gender pay gaps, and numerous women experience sexual harassment.

**Occupational Sex Segregation**

**Occupational sex segregation** (sometimes called *occupational gender segregation*) is the process of channeling women and men into different types of jobs. As a result, a number of U.S. occupations are filled almost entirely by either women or men. Between 95 and 98 percent of all child care workers, secretaries, dental hygienists, and preschool and kindergarten teachers are women. Between 96 and 99 percent of all pilots, mechanics, plumbers, and firefighters are men. Women have made progress in a number of the higher-paying occupations, but 74 percent of chief executives, 80 percent of software developers, and 90 percent of engineers are men (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017).

**9-2d. Gender and Politics**

Unlike dozens of other countries, the United States has never had a woman serving as president or even vice president. In the U.S. Congress, 81 percent of the members are men. In other important elective offices (governor, mayor, state legislator), only a handful of the decision-makers are women (Table 9.3). These numbers haven’t changed much since the early 1990s.

**9-3. Sexuality**

In the movie *Annie Hall*, a therapist asks two lovers how often they have sex. The man rolls his eyes, and complains, “Hardly ever, maybe three times a week!” The woman exclaims, “Constantly, three times a week!” *Sexuality* is considerably more complex than just having sex, however, because it’s a product of our sexual identity, sexual orientation and sexual scripts, and includes desire, expression, and behavior.

**9-3a. Contemporary Sexual Attitudes and Practices**

Sex doesn’t “just happen.” It typically progresses through a series of stages such as approaching, flirting, touching, or asking directly for sex. Sexual attitudes and behavior can vary from situation to situation and change over time, including why we have sex.

**Why We Have Sex**

People have sex to reproduce and to experience physical pleasure, but there are other reasons. For example, almost a third of Americans aged 15 to 24 believe it’s all right for unmarried 16-year-olds to have sexual intercourse “if they have strong affection for each other.” Although the message is contradictory, parents reinforce the association between attraction and sex by telling teenagers “Don’t have sex, but use condoms” (Mollborn, 2015; Daugherty and Copen, 2016).

Nationwide, 3 percent of male and 10 percent of female high school students have been physically forced to have unwanted sexual intercourse. Teenagers are also more likely to engage in sex at any early age if they use alcohol or other drugs or experience domestic violence (Kann, McManus et al., 2016). A study of nearly 2,000 college students identified 237 reasons for having sex that ranged from the physical (stress reduction) to the spiritual (to get closer to God) and from the altruistic (to make the other person feel good) to the spiteful (to retaliate against a partner who had cheated) (Meston and Buss, 2007).

**Sexuality Throughout the Life Course**

Contrary to some stereotypes, adolescents aren’t sexually promiscuous and older people aren’t asexual. On average, Americans have sexual intercourse for the first time at about age 17, but don’t marry until their mid-20s. Just 16 percent have had sexual intercourse by age 15, 30 percent by 16, 44 percent by 17, and almost 60 percent by age 18 (Guttmacher Institute, 2016).

Among teenagers aged 15 to 19, the percentage who ever had sexual intercourse declined from 51 percent in 1988 to 45 percent in 2013. By 2008, however, almost half of teens in this age group had had oral but not vaginal sex (Chandra et al., 2011; Martinez the Abma, 2015).

Adolescents who have oral sex prior to vaginal intercourse do so because it’s “not really sex.” Instead, they see it as a way to delay vaginal intercourse, to maintain one’s virginity (especially among those who are religious), and to avoid the risk of pregnancy and STDs (Regnerus and Uecker, 2011; Copen et al., 2012).

By age 44, 93 percent of Americans have had vaginal intercourse, 87 percent have had oral sex, and 39 percent have had anal sex with an opposite-sex partner. Fewer than 4 percent of Americans identify as LGBT, but among people aged 18 to 44, 17 percent of women and 6 percent of men have had same-sex contact (Copen et al., 2016). Thus, as noted earlier, sexual identity, attraction, and behavior overlap.

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**9-4. Some Current Social Issues about Sexuality**

Most Americans see sex as a private act, but others believe that the government should control some sexual behavior and decisions. People disagree about social policies on sex-related topics such as teenagers’ birth control, prostitution, reproductive technologies (see Chapter 16), and teen pregnancy (see Chapter 12). Two of the most controversial and politically contested issues continue to be abortion and same-sex marriage.

**9-4a. Abortion**

**Abortion** is the expulsion of an embryo or fetus from the uterus. It can occur naturally—in *spontaneous abortion* (miscarriage)—or be induced medically. Abortion was outlawed in the nineteenth century, but has been legal since the U.S. Supreme Court’s *Roe v. Wade* ruling in 1973.

**Trends**

Every year, 40 percent of unintended pregnancies end in abortion. Over a lifetime, 33 percent of women have an abortion by age 45 (Guttmacher Institute, 2014). The *abortion rate*, or the number of abortions per 1,000 women ages 15 to 44, increased during the 1970s, then decreased, and has dropped to its lowest point since 1973 (Figure 9.4).

**9-4b. Same-Sex Marriage**

**Same-sex marriage** (also called *gay marriage*) is a legally recognized marriage between two people of the same biological sex and/or gender identity. Although still controversial, same-sex marriage is becoming more acceptable in the United States and some other countries.

**Trends**

In 2015, the U.S. Supreme Court issued a landmark ruling (*Obergefell v. Hodges*) granting same-sex couples a constitutional right to marry. The 5-4 decision gave gay couples nationwide the same legal rights and benefits as heterosexual couples. With the Supreme Court’s decision, the United States joined 21 other countries (so far) that allow same-sex marriage.

Prior to the ruling, gay marriage was illegal in 13 states. Some of these states’ lawmakers urged their constituents to accept the new law. Others pressed their residents to “stand and fight by seeking a constitutional amendment banning gay marriage” (de Vogue and Diamond, 2015).

Opponents often invoke religion to defy gay marriage laws. For example, Roy Moore, chief justice of the Alabama Supreme Court, ordered the state’s 68 probate judges to refuse to issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples. He defended his decision as “standing up for God” because “God ordained marriage as the union of one man and one woman.” Alabama’s judiciary suspended Judge Moore. The following year, a Democrat narrowly defeated Moore in an election for a U.S. Senate seat (Robertson, 2016; Cason, 2017). We’ll examine same-sex marriages and families in Chapter 12, but why is gay marriage such a contentious issue?

**Why is Same-Sex Marriage Controversial?**

A large majority (64 percent) of Americans support same-sex marriage (up from 37 percent in 2006). Most of the opposition comes from people who are Republican, White, male, regularly attend religious services, live in the South, are 55 and older, and have conservative views on family issues (McCarthy, 2017; Masci et al., 2017).

Those who favor same-sex marriage argue that people should have the same rights regardless of sexual orientation. Those who oppose same-sex marriage contend that such unions are immoral, weaken traditional notions of marriage, and are contrary to religious beliefs. Table 9.4 summarizes some of the major pro and con arguments in this ongoing debate.

**9-5. Gender and Sexuality Across Cultures**

There’s considerable variation worldwide regarding gender inequality and sexual oppression. Such variations show that our behavior is learned, not innate.

**9-5a. Gender Inequality**

A recent United Nations (2015) report concluded that women continue to face discrimination in access to work, economic assets, and participation in private and public decision making. They’re also more likely than men to live in poverty, to be illiterate, and to experience violence.

In many countries, women’s progress toward equality has been mixed. For example, Saudi Arabia, one of the wealthiest countries in the world, and which has some of the most educated women in the world (including STEM college and advanced degrees), ranks near the bottom in women’s economic and political participation. In *all countries and regions*, the greatest gender gaps are in economic participation and political leadership (World Economic Forum, 2016).

**Economic Participation**

Worldwide, 150 countries have at least one law that treats women and men differently, and 63 countries have five or more. The laws make it difficult for women to own property, open bank accounts, start businesses, and enter certain professions (World Bank, 2017).

Globally, about 75 percent of working-age men participate in the labor force, compared with 50 percent of working-age women, and women earn 24 percent less than men. In 85 percent of countries, women with advanced degrees have higher unemployment rates than men with similar levels of education (United Nations, 2015).

Countries that have closed education gaps and have high levels of women’s economic participation—the Scandinavian countries, United States, Canada, New Zealand, and Australia—have strong economic growth (Worley, 2014). However, gender gaps still persist in senior positions, wages, and leadership. For example, Germany is Europe’s No. 1 economy, but also has one of the largest pay gaps in the European Union. Of 191 executives on the management boards of Germany’s 30 biggest companies, only 12 are women, a 20 percent decrease from a year before (de Pommereau, 2013; Webb, 2013).

**Political Leadership**

Worldwide, only 23 percent of national legislators are women. Rwanda has 64 percent, followed by nine countries where women hold 40 to 46 percent of the high-level political positions. The power is usually short-lived, however. Of 146 nations, only 56 (38 percent) have had a female head of government or state for at least one year in the past half-century. In 31 of these countries, women typically led for five years or less (Geiger and Kent, 2017; World Bank, 2017).

Of the 197 world leaders who are presidents or prime ministers, only 13 percent are women. Worldwide, women occupy only 22 percent of the positions in decision-making bodies. Of 193 countries, the United States ranks 101st in women’s political leadership, well below many African, European, and Asian countries, and even below most of the Arab countries that many Westerners view as repressing women (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2017).

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**9-6. Sociological Explanations of Gender and Sexuality**

Gender and sexuality affect all people’s lives, but why is there so much variation over time and across cultural groups? The four sociological perspectives answer this and other questions somewhat differently (Table 9.5 summarizes these theories).

**Table 9.5.**Sociological Explanations of Gender and Sexuality

| **THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE** | **LEVEL OF ANALYSIS** | **KEY POINTS** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Functionalist** | Macro | * Gender roles are complementary, equally important for a society’s survival, and affect human capital.
* Agreed-on sexual norms contribute to a society’s order and stability.
 |
| **Conflict** | Macro | * Gender roles give men power to control women’s lives.
* Most societies regulate women’s, but not men’s, sexual behavior.
 |
| **Feminist** | Macro and micro | * Women’s inequality reflects their historical and current domination by men, especially in the workplace.
* Many men use violence—including sexual harassment, rape, and global sex trafficking—to control women’s sexuality.
 |
| **Symbolic Interactionist** | Micro | * Gender is a social construction that emerges and is reinforced through everyday interactions.
* The social construction of sexuality varies across cultures because of societal norms and val
 |

**9-6a. Functionalism**

Functionalists view women and men as having distinct roles that ensure a family’s and society’s survival. These roles help society operate smoothly, and have an impact on the types of work that people do.

**Division of Gender Roles and Human Capital**

Some of the most influential functionalist theories, developed during the 1950s, proposed that gender roles differ because women and men have distinct roles and responsibilities. A man (typically a husband and father) plays an *instrumental role* of economic provider; he’s competitive and works hard. A woman (typically a wife and mother) plays an *expressive role*; she provides the emotional nurturance that sustains the family unit and supports the father/husband (Parsons and Bales, 1955; Betcher and Pollack, 1993).

Instrumental and expressive roles are complementary, and each person knows what’s expected: If the house is clean, she’s a “good wife”; if the bills are paid, he’s a “good husband.” The duties are specialized, but both roles are equally important in meeting a family’s needs and ensuring a society’s survival.

Such traditional gender roles help explain occupational sex segregation because people differ in the amount of human capital that they bring to the labor market. *Human capital* is the array of competencies—including education, job training, skills, and experience—that have economic value and increase productivity.

From a functionalist perspective, what individuals earn is the result of the choices they make and, consequently, the human capital that they accumulate to meet labor market demands. Women diminish their human capital because they choose lower paying occupations (social work rather than computer science), as well as postpone or leave the workforce for childbearing and child care. When they return to work, women have lower earnings than men because, even in higher paying occupations, their human capital has deteriorated or become obsolete (Kemp, 1994).

**Why is Sexuality Important?**

For functionalists, sexuality is critical for reproduction, but people should limit sex to marriage and forming families. Functionalists view sex outside of marriage as dysfunctional because most unmarried fathers don’t support their children. The offspring often experience poverty and a variety of emotional, behavioral, and academic problems (Avellar and Smock, 2005).

You might be tempted to dismiss the functionalist view of limiting sex to marriage as outdated. Worldwide, however, sex outside of marriage is prohibited and *arranged marriages*—in which parents or relatives choose their children’s future mates—are the norm. Most children agree to arranged marriages because of social custom and out of respect for their parents’ wishes. The matches solidify relationships with other families and ensure that the woman’s sexual behavior will be confined to her husband, avoiding any doubt about the offspring’s parentage (see Benokraitis, 2015).

Some functionalists encourage marrying during one’s mid-to-late twenties instead of delaying marriage. The benefits include enjoying more frequent sex, having an easier time getting pregnant, and being able to have more than one child than people who marry in their thirties or later (Wilcox, 2015).

**Critical Evaluation**

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**9-6a. Functionalism**

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**Division of Gender Roles and Human Capital**

Some of the most influential functionalist theories, developed during the 1950s, proposed that gender roles differ because women and men have distinct roles and responsibilities. A man (typically a husband and father) plays an *instrumental role* of economic provider; he’s competitive and works hard. A woman (typically a wife and mother) plays an *expressive role*; she provides the emotional nurturance that sustains the family unit and supports the father/husband (Parsons and Bales, 1955; Betcher and Pollack, 1993).

Instrumental and expressive roles are complementary, and each person knows what’s expected: If the house is clean, she’s a “good wife”; if the bills are paid, he’s a “good husband.” The duties are specialized, but both roles are equally important in meeting a family’s needs and ensuring a society’s survival.

Such traditional gender roles help explain occupational sex segregation because people differ in the amount of human capital that they bring to the labor market. *Human capital* is the array of competencies—including education, job training, skills, and experience—that have economic value and increase productivity.

From a functionalist perspective, what individuals earn is the result of the choices they make and, consequently, the human capital that they accumulate to meet labor market demands. Women diminish their human capital because they choose lower paying occupations (social work rather than computer science), as well as postpone or leave the workforce for childbearing and child care. When they return to work, women have lower earnings than men because, even in higher paying occupations, their human capital has deteriorated or become obsolete (Kemp, 1994).

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You might be tempted to dismiss the functionalist view of limiting sex to marriage as outdated. Worldwide, however, sex outside of marriage is prohibited and *arranged marriages*—in which parents or relatives choose their children’s future mates—are the norm. Most children agree to arranged marriages because of social custom and out of respect for their parents’ wishes. The matches solidify relationships with other families and ensure that the woman’s sexual behavior will be confined to her husband, avoiding any doubt about the offspring’s parentage (see Benokraitis, 2015).

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