

## **The Process of Sexual Development and Gender Identity**

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**ABSTRACT:** *While the term gender identity is defined as being aware of one's gender and the ability to demonstrate their feelings, thoughts and behaviors in line with their gender, the term sexual development is defined as the ability to develop a healthy attitude towards sexual growth. The processes of sexual development have been addressed by many theoreticians, which resulted in a variety of sexual development theories, each differing from one another in various respects. Such theories have taken into account the influences of the environment one finds themselves in along with the biological aspects of sexuality. The present study addresses and analyzes the issues of sexual development, sexual development theories and the process of gender identity development as well as various different factors that have a bearing on gender identity through various different aspects. This study is important in that it aims to improve individuals' awareness of this particular issue.*

**KEYWORDS :** *Sexual development, Gender identity,*

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### **I. Introduction**

Sexual development is defined as maturing sexually, embracing and behaving in accordance with one's gender identity; controlling one's sexual desires or satisfying them through appropriate means and taking pleasure from sexuality, and as possessing the knowledge and skills to overcome any problems encountered with respect to sexuality. Sexuality and sexual development is biologically, psychologically and socially important for human beings. Biologically it ensures reproduction, having children and thus the continuation of posterity. Psychologically it ensures taking pleasure from sexuality itself and the satisfaction of some of the most fundamental needs of humans such as being in love and being loved. Socially it involves a myriad of processes and dimensions of human life such as being a man or woman, various social roles attached based on gender in a given society, gender identity, positive and negative expectations, emotions, sexual confidence and social status of an individual in a society [1]. In order comprehend the process of sexual development in its entirety, a number of concepts should be explained. The first among those concepts is the concept of gender. Gender describes an individual as either male or female both perceptually and physically [2]. Gender identity, on the other hand, involves acceptance of one's gender and behaving accordingly [3]. The concept of sex typing emphasizes the nature of the traditionally designated roles of males and females. For instance, while fighting is more associated with the male sex type, crying is considered to be more suitable to the female sex type [4]. Topics such as sex, sexuality, sexual development, gender identity, social gender have been hotly debated for centuries and various different theories put forward by various theoreticians. When taken individually, none of the theories put forward so far is fully capable of accounting for sexual development on its own [5]. For this reason, the evaluation of theories in tandem with each other is highly important for better analyzing the concept of sexual development.

### **II. Sexual Developmental Theories**

#### **2.1. Psychoanalytical Theory**

Freud suggests that there are various phases in human life and each phase has its own uniquely critical processes. According to the psychoanalytical theory, unless the needs associated with a specific phase in human life are met the person becomes virtually stranded in that phase and thus is unable to move on to the next phase. Freud believes that an energy in the form of a primordial sexual drive that is called "libido" focuses on various different parts of the body throughout the process of personality development, and thus paving the way for the

emergence of various psychosexual stages during the process [2]. According to Freud, infants aged 0-1 are introduced to pleasure by suckling on their mothers' breasts during the oral stage [6]. The mouth is the focal point of sexual stimulation during that stage and thus it is very difficult to discontinue the practice of breastfeeding during that time [7]. The infant gets pleasure by sucking, biting and chewing. [8]. Firmly established in the characteristic behaviors of infants, the practice of taking things into mouth and biting them will develop in later stages into a number of personality traits. The pleasure gained from getting a mouthful of breast may later be replaced by the pleasure gained by the acquisition of knowledge or commodity. (Such as chain smokers, consumers of alcohol and those consuming a lot of food etc.) [7].

According to Freud, the libido focuses on the anal region and anal pleasures during the anal stage, which corresponds to the age group of 1-3. Anus is the focal point of stimulation during that stage. The toilet training is the main focus of attention during that stage [7]. The toddlers are trained in relieving themselves. The parental attitude is of great importance during that stage. Because the adoption of intolerant and strict attitudes may result in urinary incontinence. Whereas punitive attitudes may damage the child's self confidence. Problems encountered during that stage may cause children to develop a conservative personality or a number of different behavioral issues such as obsessive tidiness or untidiness [7].

According to Freud, the children aged 3-6 develop a sexual attraction towards their parent of opposite sex during the phallic stage, which derives its name from the sexual male organ named "phallus" [9]. The children aged 5-6 reject this attraction due to their concerns. In later stages, they identify themselves with their parent of same sex and consciously adopt the characteristic traits of their parent of same sex. These stages are called as Oedipus and Electra complexes [4]. Freud defines Oedipus complex as an attraction towards the parent of opposite sex and a concomitant sense of rivalry with and jealousy of the same sex. At this stage, a boy observes his physical nature and compares it to that of his father. The belief on the part of the boy that his parents could read his thoughts regarding them leads to a fear that his father would punish him by cutting off his penis (fear of castration) [10]. Electra complex, on the other hand, is observed in girls. The girls that notice that they lack the male sexual organ, which lends its name to this particular stage, may develop a jealousy towards the penis. This, in turn, leads to the development of jealousy and envy towards the opposite sex. At this stage, the girls believe that they once had a penis, but it was cut off by their mother and thus they feel animosity towards their mother and turn to their father instead [5]. During the latency stage, being the psychosexual development stage for children aged 6 to 12, libidinal energy has no particular focus on any part of the body. The sexual drive appears to be stagnant and on the wane, but it is not eliminated altogether. During this stage, the child acquires skills to adopt his/her sexual identity [7].

The ages between 11 and 18 see a rapid physical development and an increase in sexual drive. The libidinal energy once again focuses on the genital region. But the difference in this stage is that the genital organs now have the reproductive function. On the other hand, facing now with the expectations of their parents and social environment, the adolescent starts developing ideas for selecting their future job and spouse. He/she may dress in keeping with the prevailing youth fashion and behave in ways consistent with the times [11].

## **2.2. Kohlberg's Cognitive Development Theory**

Lawrence Kohlberg has based his theory on cognitive development theory [5]. In his theory, Kohlberg underscores the fact that the cognitive aspect should be taken into account in understanding the child's perception of his/her own gender [1,2]. Kohlberg suggests that the children first determine a stable gender identity for themselves and then start actively searching the same gender models and eventually learn other things with respect to how they should behave as a girl or a boy in time. This theory assigns an active role to the child and assumes that the child shapes his/her gender perception through his/her active daily life and by using his/her own perceptions [2,12]. This theory suggests the cognitive processes take precedence over the feelings of guilt and fear in acquiring gender roles [12].

Kohlberg suggests that the children go through 3 main stages in acquiring their gender identity.

- *Basic Gender Identity/Gender Labeling*: This is the stage where the child observes the physical differences between the male and female and, after having perceived that there are certain physical differences, he/she figures out that he/she is either a boy or a girl [1]. At this stage, the children are expected to say that "I am a boy" or "I am a girl" [5].

- *Gender Consistency/ Gender Stability*: This is the stage in which the child understands that his/her gender will not change over time but will remain the same forever. The child understands that he/she will grow up to be a man or a woman and labels himself/herself as a boy or a girl [1,5]. Children get to this stage when they are 3 or 4 years old [5].
- *Gender Preservation/Gender Constancy*: This is the stage where children understand that people's gender will remain the same even if they change their hairstyle, clothing and the way they behave [1,5]. Children get to this stage when they are 4 or 5 years old [5].

According to Kohlberg, gender role identity continues to shape children's thoughts and behaviors even after they have completed the gender constancy stage [5].

### **2.3. Operant Conditioning Theory (Social Learning Theory)**

According to Skinner, learning is achieved through acquisitions. Performance means the behaviors that an organism develops virtually spontaneously independent of any environmental stimuli. [13]. The initial cause of the operant behavior stems from the organism itself. For this reason, such behaviors develop spontaneously and are controlled by their consequences. This means that the behavior is performed first, and then followed by the stimulus (punishment or reward) caused by the reaction and finally the reaction is controlled by the said stimuli. Operant conditioning, on the other hand, is about increasing the constancy of reaction (behavior), which is born spontaneously out of the organism, through suitable stimuli (such as rewards and reinforcements). According to this theory, each learning curve is achieved as a result of the trial and error tests designed for attaining a specific goal. Some of the trial and error tests help facilitate the achievement of goals. While the right performances reinforced through repetition over time become permanent, those that fail to achieve the set goal are eliminated [13]. According to this theory, gender identity development, too, is accounted for through rewards and reinforcements as is the case with normal behaviors. Thus a child, whose behaviors are consistent with their gender identity, reinforces such behaviors over time, while the behaviors that are inconsistent with their gender identity tend to wither away in time [1].

### **2.4. Social Cognitive Learning Theory**

Bandura's theory focuses on how an individual goes about their learning process by observing, imitating or taking another individual as a role model [1]. In other words, this theory studies the process in which an individual learns things by observing others and gradually manage to control their own behaviors [14]. According to the social cognitive learning theory, people are guided neither by their instincts nor by the environmental stimuli. The psychological state of an individual is affected both by personal and environmental stimuli. While it is acknowledged that the environment has a bearing on people's behaviors, people are also acknowledged as learners that constitute the social environment -owing to the fact that the social environment consists of people- and are affected by it [15].

The ability to imitate others in the process of gender identity development is acquired at the end of year 2 when a child becomes aware of his/her own gender as well as of those around him/her. Imitation and observation is important in guiding the child's role-modeling behavior. The child observes that the behaviors of men and women are different from each other, and thus develops hypotheses that he/she believes are directly or indirectly related to the behaviors associated with men and women [1,5]. According to this theory, the behaviors of the imitator (observer) are reinforced by both the model (person being observed, imitated) and other third persons [1]. Social learning theory basically employs the principals of learning. It suggests that the role-modeling and identification processes are also at play in the acquisition of gender identity along with the rewards, punishments and other principals mentioned in the operant conditioning.

### **2.5. Gender Schema/Gender Schema Theory**

In her gender schema theory, Sandra Bem argues that the characteristics of both the social learning and cognitive development theories should be taken into consideration [1,5]. A child's gender schema starts to develop when he/she starts telling apart the differences between men and women and getting to know his/her own gender. This happens in the 2nd or 3rd year of one's life [1]. Once they have identified their own gender, children start to choose the gender schemas as well. Children process the knowledge through their gender

schematic perceptions and guide their sexual behaviors in this way [16]. The child reviews, inquires and questions everything in terms of whether it is relevant to his/her own gender and this way he/she gets to know what is suitable for a man or a woman and what is not. The schema thus created by the child helps him/her behave in accordance with his/her gender [1,2,17].

The gender schemas also help children classify the pertinent and characteristic details associated with males and females [1,2]. Moreover, the gender schemas are also influential in terms of what to take notice of and remember and how to behave. The rules learned from the schemas become more flexible later in life [1,2,17].

### **2.6. Biological Sexual Theory**

Biological theories basically focus on the physiological and biochemical processes that may affect the sexual development. The most studied biological factors in this respect are that of hormones. This theory argues that the skills, behaviors and personalities of children may be affected by their hormone levels [5].

### **2.7. Sociobiological Theory**

Being one of the advocates of this theory, Wilson takes evolutionary process and genetic modification as the basis for accounting for gender differences. Many studies have found out that gender hormones affect people's behaviors. For instance, the testosterone hormone is found to be associated with aggressiveness in many species. According to sociobiologists, the males of most species are more aggressive than the females, and this male aggressiveness has been instrumental in the survival of those species to this day. Sociobiologists believe that there has been a double standard applied in the assignment of roles to males and females. They account for this argument by the view they call reproduction or parental investment. According to this view, males can reproduce a lot longer than females. The theory assumes that the evolutionary process and genetic modification have been influential in determining males' aggressiveness, hastinesses and nonselective character while making females more selective, fastidious and patient enough to wait for the male with the best genes [5,18].

Based on the theories summarized so far, the issues such as gender, sexuality, sexual development, acquisition of social gender have been addressed by each theory from various different aspects. When taken individually, it is seen that none of the theories above is capable of accounting for the issues of sexual development on their own as they lack some aspects of the subject matter that are important for explaining sexual development. For instance, the biological theory addresses the issue only from the biological point of view. If sexuality and sexual development was totally at the mercy of such biological characteristics as hormones, then there would no way of changing the behaviors of girls and boys. Again, if we totally relied on sociobiological theory to account for sexual development, we would expect people coming from similar familial, educational and social backgrounds and having the same opportunities to behave the same way [19]. Psychoanalytical theory believes that the sexual behaviors are acquired during the Oedipal stage. If the sexual behaviors were acquired only during the Oedipal stage then they could not be learned or altered in the later stages of life. Social learning theories take the child as a passive receiver. If the child is merely a passive receiver then the active life experiences that he/she develops for creating gender perceptions should be disregarded completely [5]. While the operant conditioning theory advocates direct learning, it rejects indirect learning and maintains that the behavior should be observed as soon as learning has taken place. This runs contrary to the argument that the effects of learning may take some time to manifest themselves [20].

## **III. Gender Identity Development**

Having been first introduced by Hooker and Stoller during the 1960s, the concept of gender identity has been defined as being associated with either one gender [21]. One's awareness of their gender, associating their body and personality with a certain gender, acceptance and behaving in accordance with the same all contribute to the gender identity. The opinions as to "I am a girl/I am a boy", which take root during childhood, are reinforced later in life based on gender identity, which in turn shapes a person's feelings and behaviors [22]. Since gender identity involves the acceptance of one's body and personality based on a certain gender perception, an individual with a positive gender identity is expected to be aware of his/her own gender and act accordingly with his/her gender. The process of acquisition of gender identity starts out as a highly rigid and unalterable structure that is determined by the chromosomes possessed by the individuals. Later on, gender

identity takes a more psychological and outer worldly character. This suggests that people are born with their gender, not with their gender identity, and they go on to build their gender identity based on environmental influences [23]. Gender identity is regarded as a concept that can develop independently of the gender itself. However, being born as a boy or a girl is a precondition to the acquisition of gender identity. The child will adopt the identity of a girl or a boy for as long as the inclinations of their own gender are supported. The assumption of gender roles is more important than being biologically categorized as men or women. Gender identity and identification are considered as interrelated concepts. Since boys and girls wish to act like their mother or father during childhood, they adopt their parents' behaviors and thus imitate they way the parent of their sex dresses, talks and behaves and incorporate these patterns into their personality [24].

Children are able to tell apart genders at around 2 to 2.5 years of age. They are also involved in gender typing aligned with their own cultural characteristics during that stage. (Such as being aware of the items that are suitable for their gender). The questions regarding gender differences are raised at around 2 years of age, and children start asking questions about birth and coming into the world when they are 3-4 years old, when they are old enough to identify another person's gender. Giving evasive or erroneous answers to such questions may result in misinformation and potential distrust on the part of the children against their parents. Parents' expectations of their children's gender and experiences with other adults affect children's gender identity development during that stage. [7]. Some symbolic games, such playing house, played by children at the age of 3-6 years, where boys play their fathers and girls play their mothers and their overall curiosity towards their parents' clothing, items and attitudes can be considered as part of gender identity acquisition process [25].

### **3.1. The Factors Influencing the Acquisition of Gender Identity**

The acquisition of gender identity is determined by a variety of factors. The concept of social gender is introduced during this particular process. Social gender represents the roles and responsibilities assigned to men and women in a given social setting, and more importantly it represents the roles that are ascribed to that particular gender by the society. This is considered to be the process that may directly affect the development of gender identity [22]. On the other hand, the parental attitudes towards their child also have a bearing on the development of gender identity. The traditional-cultural distinctions starting at the infancy become all the more evident during the preschool period. The parents that buy toys that are in keeping with their children's gender and reinforce the behaviors consistent with their gender contribute to the process during that stage [26]. Growing up with one's parents and whether or not the parents fulfill their gender roles accordingly also have a bearing on the acquisition of gender identity. The relationship between the parents and their child has a huge significance on the development of gender identity during the first three years of a child's life. The initial learning experiences and identifications acquired during childhood, the manner of parentage, the prevailing customs and traditions at the time all contribute to the development of gender identity [26].

## **IV. Conclusion**

In conclusion, when we observe all the theories put forward in relation to sexual development, we clearly see that all these theories attempt to identify the issue of sexual development from different perspectives while acknowledging the highly complex nature of the subject matter. A better understanding of the processes of sexual development is highly important in that it ensures a thorough evaluation of the individuals' gender development and helps identify the factors that may influence the process of sexual development in a negative or positive way. A healthy sexual development process has a direct bearing on a healthy gender identity acquisition process, which is considered to be directly affected from the former process. Considering the fact that going through a healthy sexual development process will affect one's whole life ahead of them, the issues of being aware of one's gender, acceptance of and identification with a certain gender should be taken very seriously.

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