UNIT 3 : GENDER SOCIALISATION

UNIT STRUCTURE

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3.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to-

- know the meaning of gender socialisation
- understand different theories of gender socialisation
- know about the different agents of gender socialisation

3.2 INTRODUCTION

In the previous units we have discussed that gender is a social construct. We are socialised to become individuals belonging to different gender. In this unit we will discuss the process of gender socialisation in detail.

3.3 MEANING OF GENDER SOCIALISATION

Socialisation is the process, through which a child learns the values, laws, norms and customs of a society. Gender socialisation is a more focused form of socialisation. It is the process through which children of different sexes are socialised into their gender roles (Giddens, 1993) and taught what it means to be male or female (Morris, 1998; Condry, 1976).Gender socialisation begins the moment we are born, from the simple

question "is it a boy or a girl?" (Glietman, 2000). We learn our gender roles by different agencies of socialisation. The main agencies are the family, peer groups, schools and the media. With regards to gender socialisation, each of these agencies could reinforce the gender stereotypes. Gender differences result from the socialization process, especially during our childhood and adolescence (Beal, 1997).

3.4 THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO GENDER SOCIALISATION

Several theories have attempted to explain gender socialisation. Some of these are social learning theory, and gender schema theory. These theories explain the processes by which children learn gender appropriate behavior. Other theories that focus on gender and sexuality exclusively is Psychoanalytic theory. It emphasizes the unconscious processes involved in developing gender identity. In the next section we will discuss about these theories in detail.

- **Social Learning theory**: Social learning theory is most closely associated with the work of psychologist Albert Bandura. His work is influenced by behaviorist tradition, which defines learning in terms of stimulus and response. According to this perspective, children are reinforced – both positively and negatively– for gender appropriate and inappropriate behavior (Burn, 1996; Wharton, 2005). A young boy playing with dolls, for example, might be ignored by his father; the lack of attention serves as negative reinforcement, so that the boy eventually stops playing with dolls altogether. Or, parents might hug a young girl who cries – the hug serving as a positive reinforcement – thereby increasing the likelihood the girl will cry again in the future. In this way, the theory suggests, boys and girls learn behaviors that are expected of them. Boys learn that playing with dolls is 'inappropriate'; girls learn that expressing emotion is consistent with being female. Social learning theory also suggests that children learn by observing and imitating the behavior of same-sex adults. A young girl learns what it means to be female by

observing her mother, whereas a boy learns what it means to be male by observing his father. First proposed in the 1950s and 1960s, social learning theory has not withstood the test of time. Research has shown, for example, boys display gender appropriate behaviors even in the absence of reinforcement (Wharton, 2005). Finally, evidence is mixed with regard to the extent to which parents reinforce male and female children differently. All of which suggests that children are more actively engaged in their socialisation than the theory acknowledges. Wharton (2005) writes, "To simplify somewhat, we can say that social learning theory tends to view children (and other targets of socialisation) as lumps of clay that are modelled by their environment".

- **Cognitive Development Theory:** Cognitive theories of gender socialisation offer a different perspective, emphasizing the developmental nature of the socialisation process, as well as the active role the child plays in the construction of his or her gender identity (Stockard, 1999). Lawrence Kohlberg, best known for his theory of moral development, was one of the first to apply theories of cognitive development to gender identity. Specifically, he argued that "children's views of appropriate gender roles ...change as they grow older, reflecting their changing cognitive development" (Stockard, 1999).Younger children between the ages of five and eight tend to have the most rigid definitions of gender, and apply the most severe sanctions for violations of gender norms. As they become older children are able to develop more complex and flexible definitions of gender (Martin & Ruble, 2004). In general, however, Kohlberg believed that once children develop gender constancy – the recognition of themselves as male or female and the stable, unchanging nature of their gender become more motivated to demonstrate gender appropriate behavior (Wharton, 2005). But critics of Kohlberg's theory pointed to contradictory evidence and it is the fact that children demonstrate gender-typed behavior as young as two or three years of age, long before they develop gender

constancy – to discredit his theory (Martin & Ruble, 2004). They also argued that Kohlberg's theory failed to explain why children use gender, rather than some other construct, to organize their view of the world (Wharton, 2005).

- **Gender Schema Theory:** In response to the critics Sandra Bem introduced a second cognitive theory of gender socialization known as gender schema theory. According to Bem, in cultures where distinctions between men and women are emphasized, children learn to use gender as a way to process information about the world. The cognitive structures, or gender schemas, help children organize information, and maintain a sense of consistency and predictability (Stockard, 1999). For Bem, two characteristics of gender schemas are particularly noteworthy. She argues that gender schemas tend to be polarized, so that children believe "what is acceptable and appropriate for females is not acceptable or appropriate for males (and vice versa)" (Wharton, 2005). And secondly, gender schemas tend to be andocentric; that is, children internalize the message from parents who themselves exhibit sex stereotypical behaviors, that males and masculinity are the standard or norm, and are more highly valued than females and femininity (Wharton, 2005).
- **Psychoanalytic Theory:** Psychoanalytic theory differs from both social learning and cognitive developmental theories in two important respects. It isn't a learning theory, and it suggests that some aspects of gender identity result from unconscious psychological processes, rather than more conscious processes such as modelling or actively seeking information consistent with schemas (Wharton, 2005). The psychoanalytic approach was founded by Sigmund Freud, but its application to gender socialisation was more fully outlined in the late 1970s by Nancy Chodorow. For Chodorow, the key factor in the development of gender identity is the role of the mother as the primary caregiver (Stockard, 1999). Because children spend more time with mothers than fathers, Chodorow argues, their first identification is with the feminine. Eventually, however, children need

to develop a sense of themselves as separate, as individual identities. For girls, the process is easier because by identifying with the mother she has already learned how to be female. Boys however, in developing a male gender identity, must first reject their identification with the feminine. “Because the boy knows most intimately what is feminine,” Stockard (1999) writes, “he comes to define masculine as being ‘not feminine”. In the process of separation, boys often learn to devalue femininity as well. The psychoanalytic theory, like other socialization theories, has not escaped criticism. Gender scholars argue that it’s difficult to verify empirically, that it reinforces gender stereotypes – that women seek connection, whereas men prefer separation, for example – and that it places too much emphasis on the unconscious (Wharton, 2005). Further Insight Theory has been used to conduct gender socialisation research in many ways. Various themes introduced above like the reinforcement, the child as active participant in the socialisation process, and developmental changes has be discussed in relation to research findings. Some findings are more conclusive than others. The gender-segregated nature of childhood play, for example, is demonstrated repeatedly in different studies. The belief that parents treat male and female children differently, however, has been met with mixed results. As a relatively new field of study, gender socialization research continues to evolve.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

QA) Fill in the blanks

i) Psychologist Albert Bandura’s work is influenced by …….

ii) Gender socialisation begins the moment we are …….

3.5 AGENTS OF SOCIALISATION

- **Parents as Socialising Agents :** According to many scholars parents are believed to be the most significant source of gender socialisation. In one of the first studies on the differential treatment of male and female infants, researchers asked parents to indicate the extent to which a list of adjectives described their babies (Rubin et al., 1974, as cited in Wharton, 2005). Parents of female infants selected adjectives such as 'soft,' 'fine-featured,' 'little,' and 'inattentive' more often than parents of male infants. The researchers concluded that "because the infants were physically very similar… parents were not reacting to real differences between children as much as they were applying gender stereotypes that could possibly result in differential treatment of their male and female children" (Wharton, 2005). More recent research continues to document differences. Clearfield and Nelson (2006)showed that mothers engage in more conversation with female infants and also interact more with female infants. Even first-hand observations of new parents often reveal differential treatment. As Coltrane (1998) writes, "male and female infants are similar to one another, but most adults go to great lengths to make them appear dissimilar" (Wharton, 2005).On the other hand, a significant amount of evidence suggests that parents do not treat male and female children differently. Lytton and Romney (1991, as cited in Wharton, 2005) conducted a meta-analysis of over 150 published studies and concluded that parental treatment of boys and girls has become significantly less differentiated over the last sixty years. Their research suggests that in areas such as "encouragement of achievement or dependency, warmth of interactions, restrictiveness, and disciplinary practices, parents tend to treat boys and girls similarly" (Stockard, 1999, p. 217). Although much of the research on parent socialization is ambiguous, it is more conclusive in one respect – with regard to

parental attitudes toward toys, games, and activities. Research demonstrates that when given a choice, parents tend to offer different toys to boys and girls (Stockard, 1999, Wharton, 2005). They are more likely to choose a football for a boy, for example, and a doll for a girl. In addition, the choice of toy influences the types of activities parents engage in with their children. Parents' play with boys – and especially the play of fathers – tends to be more physical, rough-house play (Wharton, 2005). Research also shows that parents have different attitudes toward cross-gender play for boys and girls. According to Freeman… responses to cross-gender play consistently report that boys who engage in 'girls' games' are more likely to be criticized by parents and teachers than are girls who enjoy activities and materials labelled as 'for boys". Additionally, it appears that fathers react most negatively to cross-gender play, especially when engaged in by their sons. Such evidence supports the notion that gender roles for girls and women are expanding, while those for boys and men are narrowing (Freeman, 2007).

- **Peer Group Socialisation:** Gender scholars who study peer group interaction bring a different perspective to our understanding of socialization. They prefer a dialogical model instead of studying the ways in which children socialize one another. Those who study peer groups view gender through a different lens – focusing on interactions between children, rather than on characteristics of the individual children themselves (Tholander, 2002).One of the most consistent findings in peer group socialisation research is the sex-segregated nature of childhood play. Both boys and girls, beginning by age three, prefer same-sex play mates (Wharton, 2005). This preference is found across various cultures, is not influenced by adults, and generally lasts until adolescence. Although the preference first appears in girls, boys become more rigid about gender segregation than girls, and are less likely to interact with adults as well.

According to Stockard a result of this self-segregation, boys and girls learn about what it means to be male and female from same-gender

peers. He refers to this as a 'cult of childhood'. It includes pattern of games, activities, norms, and roles passed down from one generation to the next. It is not easily influenced by adults, and is highly gendered, with distinct roles for males and females, and severe sanctions against those who violate them. Research provides one possible explanation for gender-segregated play; boys and girls play very differently. Therefore may actively seek others whose play style is most similar specifically, girls tend to form close, intimate friendships with one or two other girls. They are more likely to take turns speaking, and express agreement. Boys, on the other hand, play in larger groups; engage in rougher activities that take up more space, and use interruptions, threats, and boasts . As Stockard (1999) explains, "both boys and girls successfully influence others in their interactions. They simply tend to do so through different styles" . While girls successfully influence other girls, they find it more difficult to influence boys; as a result. Maccoby suggests that girls intentionally avoid boys, thereby reinforcing gender segregation (as cited in Stockard, 1999). The theory is less successful, however, in explaining why boys avoid girls. On a final note, it is important to acknowledge that peers, like parents, significantly influence cross-gender behavior. Just as parents have more negative attitudes toward cross-gender behavior for boys; peers also seem to 'punish' boys for engaging in girl behaviors and activities more than they punish girls for behaving like boys. The term tomboy, for example, was found to be a label rarely used to describe girls who act like boys, even though it was widely understood. On the other hand, the use of the term 'sissy' was widespread for boys acting like girls, and was used consistently as a negative label (Thorne, 1993, as cited in Wharton, 2005). As Wharton concludes, "Girls seem to face less pressure than boys to conform to gender stereotype, are more likely than boys to cross gender boundaries, and girls receive less negative attention than boys when they do participate in activities or games with the other gender".

- **Media Socialisation:** In addition to parents and peers, the media – television, computer games, and literature – also communicate ideas about what is gender appropriate behavior for boys and girls. Research has shown that children's books, for example, are

beginning to portray girls and boys in non-stereotypical ways; however, many of the books that predate this change are still available in libraries and book stores everywhere. These classic books tend to portray girls in traditionally gender-appropriate ways like doing household chores. For example – while showing boys engaging in a wider variety of activities. They also show girls cooking and cleaning objects, while they are more likely to show boys using outdoor tools or building things (Burn, 1996).Content analyses of television shows also reveal a significant male bias in programming. Male characters typically outnumber female characters, female characters are significantly younger than male characters, and female characters are less likely to be portrayed as working women. Atkins reviewed over 500 television characters and concluded that "the vast majority of female characters conformed to male fantasies of scantily clad half-wits who need to be rescued" (as cited in Burns, 1996, p. 15). In commercials too, the voice of authority is typically a male voice, and men and women are portrayed stereotypically. Researchers estimate that by the time children graduate from high school they spent more time watching television than being in the classroom(Davis, 1991, as cited in Burns, 1996). Correlation studies also show that children who watch more TV tend to have more sex-stereotypical views of men and women. Other studies show that watching sex-stereotypical models on TV influences choice of toys, career aspirations, and self-esteem (Burns, 1996).



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

QB) Fill in the blanks

i) Correlation studies also show that children who watch more TV tend to have more …….. views of men and women

ii) Fathers react most negatively to cross-gender play, especially when engaged in by their ……..



3.6 LET US SUM UP

- Socialisation is the process, through which a child learns the values, laws, norms and customs of a society.
- Gender socialisation is a more focused form of socialization.
- It is the process through which children of different sexes are socialized into their gender roles and taught what it means to be male or female.
- Several theories have attempted to explain gender socialisation.
- Some of these are social learning theory, and gender schema theory.
- These theories explain the processes by which children learn gender appropriate behavior.
- Other theories that focus on gender and sexuality exclusively is Psychoanalytic theory.
- In response to thecritics Sandra Bem introduced a second cognitive theory of gender socialisation known as gender schema theory.
- According to Bem, in cultures where distinctions between men and women are emphasized, children learn to use gender as a way to process information about the world.
- The cognitive structures, or gender schemas, help children organize information, and maintain a sense of consistency and predictability.
- Psychoanalytic theory differs from both social learning and cognitive developmental theories in two important respects.
- It isn't a learning theory, and it suggests that some aspects of gender identity result from unconscious psychological processes, rather than more conscious processes such as modelling or actively seeking information consistent with schemas.
- According to many scholars parents are believed to be the most significant source of gender socialisation.
- In one of the first studies on the differential treatment of male and female infants, researchers asked parents to indicate the extent to which a list of adjectives described their babies.



3.7 FURTHER READING

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3.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answer to Q Ai) Born

Answer to Q A ii) behaviorist tradition

Answer to Q B i) Sons

Answer to Q B ii) Sex-stereotypical



3.9 MODEL QUESTIONS

QA) Short Questions (Answer within 150 words)

Q1) What is meant by gender socialisation ?

Q2) Describe the psychoanalytic theory of gender socialisation

B) Long Question (Answer within 300-500 words)

i) Discuss the role of different agents in gender socialisation.

ii) Compare the social learning theory and cognitive development theory