

A Critical Review of the Socialization of Gender Roles

Maria-Laura Fernandez-Pineda

University of Ottawa

SOC1101 G: Principles of Sociology

Joseph Sawan

February 1, 2017

Gender roles are the social conducts which define femininity and masculinity. While “considerable effort has been invested toward[s] understanding the nature of gender differences in society” (P. A. Adler, Kless, & P. Adler, 1992, p. 169). Critical to this endeavour is knowledge about where these differences arise, how these contemporary gender images manifest in children’s behaviour, and how status characterizes gender roles. With these questions in mind, sociologist Patricia Adler, Steven Kless, and Peter Adler develop their study of the “Socialization to Gender Roles: Popularity among Elementary School Boys and Girls” which claims popularity influences the socialization of gender roles, thus molds children’s behaviours. Adler, Kless, and Adler’s qualitative research draw on data gathered from participant observation studies and self-reported stories. These factors effectively communicate the significance of socialization in white upper-middle-class elementary schools, but ineffectively addresses social conditions which alter such processes.

Gender socialization is the process whereby individuals assimilate certain social expectations and attitudes due to their sex. This process most commonly occurs with parental nurturance of hegemonic gender roles. In fact, sociology professor Emily Kane (2006) quotes, “parents begin gendering their children from their very first awareness of those children into ascribed [dominant] masculine or feminine traits” (p. 173). Therefore, parents are the first to teach children about role adoption through gendered wardrobe, toys, and expectations. However, Adler, Kless, and Adler’s (1992) inductive data proves that education, as a social institution, formally exposes children to heteronormative behavioural patterns (p. 169). For instance, girls are taught passivity by playing girly games like ‘family’ or ‘house’ (p. 183). Such activities, therefore, relate females to the traditional belief that espouses girls as nurturers. Similarly, males

are gendered into hegemonic masculine roles, by ensuring that they develop interpersonal skills and athleticism early on (Adler, Kless, & Alder, 1992, p.

173). Such traits, thus, teach males about leadership skills necessary in the workforce. The implicit effect which education has on gender roles hence socializes children to behave in context to the greater society. However, education alone does not socialize students into specific gender roles, but it is an undeniable social hierarchy that idolizes heteronormative behaviours and thus motivates children's conformity of gender roles.

Hierarchy affects all societies as its subjective nature oppresses some and not others. Within the school hierarchy, heteronormative behaviours invoke the socially constructed concept of high status (Anderson, 2016, p. 68). However, the achievement of status differs with gender. For instance, girls derive status from appearance-related characteristics or material possessions. In fact, two fifth-graders judge, "Diane as the most popular [because] she is the richest and prettiest girl" (P. A. Adler, Kless, & P. Adler, 1992, p. 179-180). In effect, because status invokes abundant friendship ties, females spend excessive money on "proper beauty supplies... that [are] socially accepted by the popular clique" (P. A. Adler, Kless, & P. Adler, 1992, p. 180), so they can gain social approval thus employ invitations to fun events. From thereon, beauty becomes the ultimate goal, which affects female self-esteem, but nevertheless manifests itself into feminine gender roles.

Similar to girls, males develop masculine traits as a byproduct of the social hierarchy. However, these traits invoke success. For instance, a third-grader narrates, "Josh and Allen [the popular boys] told the teacher the homework sucked and got more pink slips" (P. A. Adler, Kless, & P. Adler, 1992, p. 173). Despite getting in trouble, boys who display toughness, leadership and

domination in social situations assert status not simply in school but moreover in the workforce. Whereas boys who exhibit “effeminate behaviour are referred to... as ‘fag,’ ‘sissy,’ and ‘homo,’ and consequently lose status” (P. A. Adler, Kless, & P. Adler, 1992, p. 174). Social hierarchy is thus the structure which molds children's behaviours, teaching males to act as providers, and females to be nurtures.

Although, generally speaking, the research offers an in-depth analysis of popularity and its impact on gender roles, it does not appraise social reforms which affect status. For instance, it does not quantify the impact of gender-fluid children who adopt both masculine and feminine traits to gain status (Kane, 2006, p. 174). Failure to rationalize the influence of gender-fluidity is, therefore, an inability to conceptualize its impact on cross-gender relationships and social hierarchies. Moreover, the research does not examine “divergences and affinities in the gender roles of... children across racial and class lines” (P. A. Adler, Kless, & P. Adler, 1992, p. 185). Consequently, the applied non-intersectional method biasedly establishes a taken-for-granted assumption about social hierarchy as uninfluenced by racism or classism. Finally, the research does not account for social movements which change the social construction of gender roles. For instance, LGBTQ feminism encourages non-conforming gender roles and inclusivism (Kane, 2006, p. 176); this, not only reshapes people's attitudes towards uniqueness, but also changes the socialization of heteronormative gender roles.

On the notion of validity, the used narratives suitably expose the socialization to gender roles. However, the researchers value-relevance is questionable because their standpoint is consistent with a taken-for-granted assumption that assures male power and rationality, and proclaims female passivity and nurturance (Anderson, 2016, p. 74). However, historically,

gender roles have shifted such that both sexes provide and care for their families. As per conduct, the research only reviews white-upper-middle -class students who assimilate gender roles, therefore, although the research is insightful, it is limited in its scope of subjects. Adopting a more intersectional approach to the data analysis might therefore make it more sociological.

In conclusion, the research establishes how individuals adopt certain norms and values due to their sex, and how popularity impacts this assimilation process. Through narratives and historical comparisons of the greater society, Adler, Kless, and Adler reiterate how low-status candidates reproduce behavioural patterns performed by those in power, with the aim of earning social approval. This repetition of gender-specific behaviours, thus begs the question of other factors, not simply gender roles, which status influences to become the norm. As seen, gender roles become the norm once a whole society has adopted a common behavioural pattern. With this theory in mind, authors can investigate the process of reversing of gender socialization as it may invoke predominantly equal societies.

## References

Adler, P. A., Kless, S. J., & Adler, P. (1992). Socialization to Gender Roles: Popularity among Elementary School Boys and Girls. *Sociology of Education*, 65(3), 169–187. doi:

10.2307/2112807

Anderson, K. L. (2016). *Thinking about sociology: A critical introduction* (2nd ed.). Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press.

Kane, E. W. (2006). "No Way My Boys Are Going to be like That!" Parents' Responses to Children's Gender Nonconformity. *Gender and Society*, 20(2), 149–176. doi:

10.1177/0891243205284276