

Peers' Influence and the Social Construction of Gender: A Sociological Analysis of Stereotyping and Role Development in the Pakhtun Society of Pakistan

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70670/sra.v3i4.1170>

Abstract

Peer groups largely influence the social construction of gender and gender role stereotyping. This paper aims to investigate the role and influence of peers in the development of gender and gender role stereotypes. The study was qualitative, with data collected from three universities in Malakand Division, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, Pakistan. The University of Swat, University of Malakand, and Shaheed Benazir Bhutto University, Sharningal, were purposefully selected for data collection. A sample of 24 respondents was selected, with 8 participants from each university interviewed to collect relevant information. The collected information was then thematically analyzed and discussed. The study findings reveal that gender stereotypes and gender roles are socially constructed and influenced by different socio-cultural structures, relational networks, and patterns of interaction, including family, peers, and education. The study's findings show that, in the company of peers, individuals learn to recognize their gender and attempt to fulfill their assigned role accordingly. The study recommends that companies and associations with gender-balanced leadership, peer groups, gender mainstreaming, and an impartial media role can help mitigate the development of gender stereotyping and its influence on gender role formation.

Keywords: Appreciation, gender stereotyping, gender role development, encouragement, peer group interactions, and ridicule.

Introduction

Gender is a pattern of what men and women are expected to do in a given society or culture (Kruger, 1997). Every society and culture in the world allocates its members specific social status and gender roles, which enable them to behave in a structured and predictable manner and thus engage in everyday interaction (Lindsey, 2010). This role enactment by people of different genders inhibits their liberation, thereby binding them to the rights and responsibilities predestined in their respective cultures. Regarding the same issues, such role-plays by individuals are socially constructed and culturally determined realities, typically guided by existing stereotypes and fixed notions. Stereotyping is the tendency to judge an individual based on perceptions of a specific group. To be

more specific, it is the unconscious or conscious application of a group's (true or false) knowledge to judge a member of the group (Agars, 2004). A stereotype is an image of one or more individuals in a group that leads to the generalization of the group's characteristics (Bell, 2007). In stereotyping, people are categorized under similarities, such as gender, age, race, ethnicity, language, religion, and so on. Stereotyping, in a sociological sense, has been closely associated with prejudicial judgment, in which one makes rigid, irrational generalizations about large population groups. To be more exact, gender stereotypes refer to deeply rooted images of what males and females are, and these images contribute to maintaining the existence of some gender roles (Suter, 2006).

As per the gendered division of labor as well as the social division, it is stereotyped that men and women are represented in this way due to the traits that they supposedly possess, which is brought about by the virtue of their biological makeup (Lindsey, 2010). Some of these studies refer to stereotyping due to their sex-related qualities (Sanders & Peterson, 1999). It has been argued that gender stereotypes are formed during learning and communication, and that socialization occurs through the influence of sociocultural and interactional elements (Leaper & Friedman, 2007). Another important agent of gender socialization is the family, in which social roles are distributed along gender lines (Eccles, 1983; J. Jacobs, 2000). One of the greatest socializing agencies is the family that conveys simplistic labels and messages based on the psyche, which are supposed to be peculiar to a feminine woman and a masculine man. This is because women and men have different role models in a family, based on traditional attributes of each sex. Similarly, a group of bodily characteristics and psychological qualities as prescribed by the family and society is labeled a gender stereotype. Masculinity is often associated with competitiveness, aggressiveness, and independence in most societies. Feminine stereotypes, conversely, are founded on a system of thoughts that categorize women as caring, altruistic, affectionate in interpersonal relationships, child-friendly, emotional and empathetic, not mentioning the fact that they are submissive and passive (Ridgeway & Balkwell, 1997). This research paper is based on the premise that the institution of family creates gender stereotypes among the Pakhtuns. Much of the current research also examines the role of family in the maintenance, fortification, and, by extension, perpetuation of gender differentiation, gender socialization, the gendered division of labor, and unequal parental treatment that inculcates gender stereotypes and, by extension, gender role development.

The Argument

Pakhtuns are a male-dominated patriarchal society that segregates gender roles according to the social structure. Besides differences in qualities between men and women, there exists a socially constructed, culturally dictated perception of gendered expectations, whereby people are supposed to behave in a certain manner (Javaid, Omer, and Jabeen, 2012). Pictures of dichotomous, stereotypical gender roles are exchanged, and role formation is not natural but a socio-cultural process grounded in prior notions. Male roles are important in linking the family to the external environment, and female roles are committed to household chores. The traditional and patriarchal family structure of Pakhtuns, which is sexist, plays a major role in creating a positive atmosphere of dichotomous stereotyping. The history of gender stereotyping does not develop and evolve spontaneously, but instead, it is facilitated by a series of socio-cultural and relationship variables. The strongest of them is the family that contributes to the development of gender stereotypes the most, and socialization, upbringing, and nurturing make the role of women to be stereotyped (Lindsey, 2010). Pakhtun culture is governed by the stress of patriarchy and customs and traditions, which manifest themselves in the fact that men have more space. For example, the birth of a male child will be perceived as a symbol of greater power and therefore celebrated within the family, whereas the birth of a female child will not be celebrated (Naz & Rehman, 2012). Similarly, men make key decisions regarding marriage,

mate selection, and other family matters. The society is also inclined to support men more than women as guardians and rulers socially. Patriarchy protects the male ideology and creates negative gender ideals. This paper thus attempts to analyze the family relations that give rise to stereotyping and to concentrate on the institutional processes that perpetuate and sustain gendered stereotypes among Pakhtuns. It also attempts to establish the impact of stereotyping on the development of gender roles.

Methodology

The research is qualitative, both in its references and its sources of information. As a secondary source, the literature on gender stereotyping within a thematic context has been extensively reviewed. The primary data were collected from students and teachers at public-sector universities in the Malakand Division. Primary data were also collected through in-depth interviews, using an interview guide to enhance the study's findings. The interviews were conducted at three universities in total: 8 interviews at each university —The University of Malakand, the University of Swat, and Shaheed Benazir Bhutto University, Sharningal. The sample was selected using purposive sampling: within each university, two male students, two male teachers, two female students, and two female teachers were selected, resulting in a gender-balanced sample. Moreover, the collected information on the study's topic has been discussed qualitatively, and primary information has been matched with secondary information to explain further and attain grounded facts.

Results and Discussions

The other area of child interaction after the family setting is the external social world, where peer groups offer another valuable context of gender identification and gender role development. As active learning agents, peers form models based on their observations of the environment and help enforce gender-appropriate and inappropriate behavior (Schunk, 1987; Bandura, 1997). By doing so, children have been allowed to mingle with one another and shape their gender identities as a result (Thorne, 1993). Friendship tendencies that individuals exhibit or pressure of peer groups also lead to the development of gender stereotyping, particularly among boys who tend to keep track of the activities of their peers and focus on those who portray feminine traits and qualities (Morrow, 2006). In the same way, another issue that can affect children's behavior and role is their preferences for gender-typed toys and games, especially when their peers accept these choices (Hughes, 2003). By organizing various social activities, children go with other children who engage in the same activities and have similar interests (Huston, 1983). Here, the dominant gender segregation contributes to the strength of the peers as they are highly differentiated and discriminating towards both boys and girls. Some research studies indicate that some form of such type of segregation takes place earlier in girls than in boys (LaFreniere, Strayer, and Gauthier, 1984; Yee & Brown, 1994; Moller & Serbin, 1996) but other research studies indicate that there is no gender difference in this aspect (Fagot & Patterson, 1969; Jacklin & Maccoby, 1978; Maccoby & Jacklin, 1987). It is also noted that the said segregation is not only experienced in playgroups among school-going children, but also as they choose and select their friends (Hayden-Thompson, Rubin, and Hymel, 1987). Keeping in mind the facts and findings mentioned above that have been arrived at following different research studies, the views of the respondents interviewed have been captured in the lines as follows;

Our company has enabled us to obtain the majority of things and activities, as the company of our peers and friends has been a role model for us and for the young children. In our traditional setup, males and females join same-gender peer groups, which the family and the peer groups appreciate. This discouragement, even a

criticism against the Pakhtun society children who find themselves in the company of the opposite sex, is a result of having gone through different situations and having experienced a lot. Interpretation of the interviewer: The appraised nature of the group members is seen as a group response, unlike in individual groups. Based on the above facts and findings, the views of the interviewed respondents have been recorded as shown below, based on numerous research studies (Perception of interviewees No. 02, 06, 12, 13, 14, and 17, respectively).

Most of the people interviewed said that an individual must behave in ways expected and accepted by society, and accept the role associated with a perceived gender. The field information has pointed out that there is stigmatization on both the individual and the family, where one has adapted to the opposite gender role (response of interviewees in the majority). By doing so, boys are strictly forbidden to enter the stream of girls in all aspects, including games, work (according to culture), profession, and others. Also, during the peer interactional process, children patronize each other by doing the gender-appropriate activities and by mocking those who do the gender-inappropriate behavior (Lamb, Easterbrooks, and Holden, 1980). These research works have also extended this statement to negative sanctions of peers towards individuals who play with peers of the opposite gender (Thorne, 1986). As with parental differences in behavior, when peers use negative sanctions against opposite-gender behavior, the effects are stronger in males than in females. Girls also respond relatively positively to other girls rather than to boys, irrespective of the gender-associated behavior they engage in.

Along the same line, boys also give affirmative responses to same sex counterparts. They are, however, very strict and not as approving of the activities of boys who demonstrate female-related behavior. In addition to this, boys are discouraged, or rather condemned in most cases, whenever they perform feminine chores or develop feminine traits (Fagot, 1985). In this case, boys answer negatively and dismissively to the activities that are associated with girls, e.g. you are stupid, that is not a girl game, now you are a girl, that is stupid, boys do not play with dolls etc. Much admonition against the boys playing with girls or engaging in feminine pursuits. The same is also present within the Pakhtun society, where males and females have dissimilar peer and friend relations. In this respect, boys will be chastised and even stigmatized in the company of girls or when they are caught playing with girls. They are known as *Jenotai* or *Khazonak* (she-male) (what most of the respondents thought). Similarly, the girls are also criticized and termed as *Alakanai* (a girl with masculine features). The friends and peers laugh at boys and girls who do opposite sex acts or even meet them during play (Transcribed views of the interviewed respondents, with most of the answers being similar). Similarly, concerning the field data on the gender stereotyping amongst peers, the respondents reported that majority of them believed that the Pakhtun culture highly discourages the use of both sexes as a consequence of gender sensitivity that was so high. In this relation, one respondent (female gender) narrates her childhood experience that;

As a child, there were numerous occasions when I played cricket and parpatoney (hide-and-peek) with my male cousins and brothers outside the house, and my parents used to tease and even embarrass me so that we could not do so. Despite being very close to my parents, they were not supportive of my (as a girl) involvement with boys outside the home, and they did not encourage me to play with boys. As a result, my mother's reaction was lax. However, in most cases, my father, as well as my social humiliation, also performed physical torture upon me, claiming that I was doing something wrong. In the same way, my parents never discouraged me when I

played with the girls in my local neighborhood, games like Chindro (one of the traditional female folk games), Mirgate (another traditional female folk game), and Gudyane (a game with dolls), which were games that the girls played. As a University student now, I have realized that gender socialization and gender role construction, both family and peers, are executed under the stipulated and internalized gender stereotyping and gender segregation in Pakhtun society.

On the same note, peers' influence is vital in socializing individuals and in establishing gender-appropriate fields and environments for both genders (extracts from interviews; most comments are similar). By so doing, boys are believed to play instrumental roles, whereas females are expected to play expressive roles. Moreover, it is the instrumentality that is internalized when boys engage with their equally-sex peers (boys). Conversely, girls internalize the quality of being expressive (this answer was the majority) when they are associating with same sex (girls) when a boy is going to play the girls local games such as chindro, mergate, gudyane (girls traditional games) or when he is cooking, washing, pitching etc. where his indulgence on such activities is the negative labeling to and stereotyping and most likely referred to the so-called names such as Genotai and Khazonak (she-male or boy having female traits).

In addition to that, on the issue of how the socialization of both boys and girls and the furthering of gender stereotyping is mediated by peers, some of the theories focus on the significance and centrality of peer groups as agents of gender socialization and gender role development (Leaper, 1994; Maccoby, 1998). A peer group is considered a dictating power influenced by parents' ideas and projections about their children; peers would adopt the same perceptions when approaching boys and girls in their respective peer groups (Lytton & Romney, 1991). The peer group, in this relationship, is never an autonomous and independent agency since the family and other social agents have always influenced it and thus directed it to follow gendered patterns when handling boys and girls. The results of the research, based on primary and secondary data, can be simplified to state the impactful role of social institutions and the corresponding systems, in particular parents and peers, in the formation of gender stereotyping and gender differentiation through the unequal treatment of boys and girls. Clearly, it has been noted that peers are not the initiators but the encouragers of propagating gender stereotypes and promoting gender role development in tandem with this.

Moreover, peer groups do not separate children within the family, since they are interrelated. Likewise, parents facilitate identification with friends who sustain parental norms and reinforce the patterns of behavior that are appreciated in different contexts, and this occurs mostly in the absence of parents (Elkin & Westley, 1955; Bandura & Walters, 1959). In such cases, children mostly form relationships with peers and control their influences. Then they share their experiences with their parents and also seek to understand what their parents experienced in the presence of other children (Caprara et al., 1998). In like manner, parents help and advise their children on how to cope with issues they encounter in peer groups. The results showed that family and peers have a transactional impact, or a two-way process, that directs gendering influences in either direction. Gender stereotyping was also constructed among the peer groups; people gather with their colleagues of the same sex to adhere to the standardized and normative pattern of Pakhtun society. To this extent, field information describes (proclaimed by a large sample of respondents) that the popularity of such practices leads to forming gender stereotyping, where most of the boys and girls identify with their gender and gender differences among peers they play with, meet, and interact with in the company. With peers, people are treated differently, mainly stronger to boys than girls, and this is reinforced primarily by the family and further enforced by the peers.

As regards gender differentiation and stereotyping, the majority of the respondents believed that people follow the ways and the methods of their peers, which are, directly or indirectly, projected by the family. By doing so, they gain exposure to a variety of, and even unique, experiences, with parents encouraging and discouraging them, whether they are of the same or opposite sex. These experiences are also shared with their parents and other family members, and they advise them on how to handle their peers and issues that arise in their company (Most of the interviewees agreed with this).

Conclusion

The research study under consideration finds that the peer group is an independent and strong subsystem that collaborates with other social institutions, like the family, in the perpetuation of gender stereotyping, gender differentiation, and role formation. This means that peers are the commodity as they are closely maintained in relation to the family and other social groups and producing classes, which makes gender differentiation and, thus, brings people to their alleged gender role. In this manner, children are influenced by their peers at an early age and learn and accept the socially acceptable ways and values within the conditioning environments provided by their peers, which, in most instances, adhere to gender and gender roles. Similarly, the socially and culturally constructed orientations are also used to make the peers instill the most dominant gender differentiation, based on which they favor same-gender playmates and also strive to make their peers act in ways corresponding to the activities of their gender. Such a stereotypical intercourse is observed to prevail in the relationship of the peer, which justifies the assumption that the company of peers (when they regard gender befitting practices and disapprove gender unbecoming practices) is a ground of gender stereotyping and gender role formation.

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