

## CHAPTER 11

# Gender Socialization

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As children grow up they form a general sense of self and the ability to relate to others and play a part in society. In this process they also develop beliefs about the roles and expectations that are associated with each sex group (gender roles) and a self-identity as a member of one sex group or the other (gender identity). This chapter describes theories and research that are related to this general process of gender socialization.

The notion of socialization is very broad. For instance, scholars may discuss occupational socialization, religious socialization, political socialization, or socialization to school. Yet, gender socialization appears to be one of the most basic aspects of this large and complex process. In part this reflects the fact that children's realization that they are male or female tends to come at a fairly young age. Long before children understand the nature of religious groups, occupations, or schooling, they realize that there are two sex groups and that they belong to one of these groups. The centrality of gender socialization also reflects the fact that our society, and all societies known to social scientists, are gendered. People throughout the world recognize that there are different sex groups and they assign different roles and responsibilities to members of these groups, as well as different rewards and values.

The theories used to analyze gender socialization were primarily developed to deal with socialization in general. That is, theories that can explain how we develop a general sense of self or how we learn roles and expectations associated with school or work are also used to account for the development of gender identity and gender role expectations. Theory and research regarding socialization is also multidisciplinary, reflecting work in academic psychology and psychoanalysis, as well as sociology. Because gender identity and views of gender roles first begin to appear at very young ages, much of this work has focused on children.

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As in all areas of research, analyses of socialization have developed and changed over the years. As empirical findings have accumulated some theories have tended to fall by the wayside and new theories have appeared (Maccoby, 1992). My discussion of gender socialization will follow a rough chronological order, describing the early tradition of social learning theory, the rise of cognitive developmental theory, and the more recent appearance of gender schema theory. I will then describe work that focuses on childhood cultures and the role of peer groups and, finally, examine psychoanalytic explanations of the role of parents in gender socialization. Before reviewing each of these approaches, I briefly discuss the influence of biological factors on gender development.

## 1. BIOLOGY AND GENDER SOCIALIZATION

In recent years sociologists and other scientists have become increasingly cognizant of the complex relationships between biological, psychological, environmental, and social factors in individuals' lives and development. This work suggests that infants are not a *tabula rasa* on which "society" simply writes a message. Instead, children appear to enter the world genetically prepared to interact with others and predisposed to exhibit certain behavioral tendencies. For instance, a growing body of literature reports data on identical twins, some of whom have been raised together and some apart. These studies document the very large role of genetic background in explaining individuals' personality traits, health, history of mental illness, and even social and political attitudes (Rowe, 1994, pp. 57–93; Udry, 1995). Humans also appear to be biologically "programmed" to respond to others in a social manner—to learn language and to interact with others in their environment (Schore, 1994).

At the same time, research increasingly documents the ways in which social experiences influence biological characteristics and capabilities. For instance, without proper stimulation children's intellectual and social development can be sharply curtailed (Schore, 1994). Similarly, excessive exposure to danger or stress can alter neural pathways in the brain and the ways that we respond to social situations (Massey, 1996, p. 408). Socialization, the way that individuals come to develop an idea of their roles within a society, necessarily involves an interplay between biological and social factors.

It is logical to expect that biological factors are involved, to at least some extent, in gender socialization. Males and females experience different exposure to hormones prenatally, again at adolescence, and during adulthood. Although evidence is far from complete, data from studies based on both animal and human populations indicate that variations in brain structure resulting from these different hormonal dosages can account for some behavioral differences between males and females, such as average levels of aggressiveness and nurturance (Rowe, 1994, pp. 174–179; Stockard & Johnson, 1992, pp. 126–130). One explanation for these differences comes from the developing field of evolutionary psychology. This perspective takes a very long view of human history and suggests that human behaviors and traits reflect adaptations that allowed us to survive in the often dangerous and unsure environments in which humans evolved. To the extent that there are innate differences between the sex groups, these reflect the different adaptive problems that faced men and women (Buss, 1994, 1995a, b; Buss & Malamuth, 1996; Kenrick & Trost, 1993; Rowe, 1994, pp. 179–188).

Even with such biological influences, many, if not most, aspects of gendered behav-

ior probably result from social influences. This can be seen most clearly in the ways in which gender roles vary from one society to another. Although gender differences in a few social roles and behavioral tendencies (most notably those related to child rearing and aggression) tend to be found in all societies that have been studied (Whiting & Edwards, 1988), there appears to be a great deal of variation in the gendered nature of other social roles and behaviors from one society to another (e.g., Best & Williams, 1993; Stockard & Johnson, 1992, pp. 74–95). In addition, individuals vary in the extent to which they adhere to gender roles and exhibit gender typed behaviors, and the nature of these roles and behaviors have changed over time and can vary from one setting to another.

The extent to which physiological factors influence differences between the sex groups is an active and contentious issue and will probably not be resolved any time soon (e.g., Eagly, 1995a, b; Hyde & Plant, 1995; Jacklin, 1989; Maracek, 1995; Sternberg, 1993). While acknowledging the possibility that gender identity and gender roles may be influenced by biological factors, I focus in this chapter on theory and research that have addressed the social influences on gender-related behaviors and self-image. This work examines not just differences between average characteristics of males and females, but also variations within sex groups—why some males and some females are more likely than others to adhere strongly to traditional gender norms.

## 2. SOCIAL LEARNING THEORY

The broad area of social learning theory developed from the tradition of stimulus–response theory or behaviorism. For many years work in this area focused on reinforcements, suggesting that children develop sex-typed behaviors because other people reinforce activities that conform to expectations for their sex group and do not reinforce those that do not conform. Because children spend so much of their early years within the family, much of the research in this area focused on parent–child interactions. This work has produced relatively little support for the notion that differential reinforcement can account for children’s gender-typed behavior (Fagot, 1985; Huston, 1983, pp. 441–442; Serbin, Tonick, & Sternglanz, 1977; Serbin, Connor, & Citron, 1978). Studies of parental behaviors show that parents tend to reinforce some gender differences in the toys children play with (Block, 1984; Fagot & Hagan, 1985; Fagot & Leinbach, 1987; Fagot, Hagan, Leinbach, & Kronsberg, 1985; Huston, 1983). However, in other areas, such as encouragement of achievement or dependency, warmth of interactions, restrictiveness, and disciplinary practices, parents tend to treat boys and girls similarly (Lytton & Romney, 1991).

By the 1960s, the social learning tradition had broadened to include the notion of modeling, suggesting that children develop sex-typed behaviors because they choose to model or copy behaviors of other males or females (Maccoby, 1992, pp. 1007–1011; Stockard & Johnson, 1992, pp. 165–167). Note that while the notion of reinforcement focuses on how agents of socialization, such as parents, influence children’s behaviors, the idea of modeling tends to focus on the active role of the targets of socialization and their ability to imitate the actions of specific agents. Tests of this theory have generally involved settings where a series of models have been presented to young children. As with the idea of reinforcement, relatively little support has been found for the importance of modeling in the development of gender identity or adherence to gender roles. For

instance, parents who exhibit traits that are highly stereotypically associated with one sex group or the other are not more likely than other parents to have children who exhibit such strongly stereotyped behavior (Angrilli, 1960; Hetherington, 1965; Maccoby and Jacklin, 1974; Mussen & Rutherford, 1963). In addition, when researchers have tried to specifically alter gender-related models (or reinforcements) that children receive, changes in behavior have been only temporary (Maccoby, 1992, pp. 1008, 1011; Stockard & Johnson, 1992, pp. 163–167).

### 3. COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENTAL THEORY

As empirical research failed to provide strong support for social learning theory, scholars began to develop other explanations of socialization in general and gender socialization in particular. The most important approach has no doubt been cognitive developmental theory, which builds on the research of Jean Piaget and his finding that children gradually develop more complex ways of interacting with others and understanding the world around them. Lawrence Kohlberg extended Piaget's notions by applying them to gender socialization, suggesting that children's views of appropriate gender roles also change as they grow older, reflecting their changing cognitive development. Kohlberg and others working within this paradigm have documented an increasing flexibility and complexity of children's views of gender roles with age (Kohlberg, 1966; Ullian, 1976). According to this perspective, the fact that very young children have much more rigid, stereotyped views of appropriate behaviors for males and females than do older children or adults can be explained by the greater cognitive flexibility and capability for complex thought that develops with age.

Cognitive developmental theory can be seen as providing two important theoretical advances over social learning theory. First, it seriously incorporates an understanding of the active role of the child and the importance of cognitive processing and understanding in the socialization process. Second, it includes an understanding of developmental changes in the process of gender socialization and specifically describes how children's interpretations and understandings of gender alter and change as their cognitive capabilities become more developed and complex.

Certain technical elements of cognitive developmental theory, however, have not withstood empirical test. Specifically, Kohlberg hypothesized that the child's active involvement in and desire to develop gender-typed behaviors becomes most important once a child has developed a strong notion of gender constancy, the understanding that one is either a boy or a girl and that this categorization will not change. Research indicates that children acquire this gender constancy by about 6 years of age (e.g., Slaby & Frey, 1975, cited by Luecke-Aleksa, Anderson, Collins, & Schmitt, 1995). Interestingly enough, however, a number of gender differences—specifically differences in choices of toys and playmates—appear long before the age at which cognitive developmental theory would expect. Fairly consistently, by the age of 2 or 3, boys and girls choose to play with different toys and in different activities, prefer to play with like-sex playmates, and exhibit differences in aggressive behaviors (Huston, 1985, 1985, p. 11; Leinbach & Fagot, 1986, p. 665; Lobel & Menashri, 1993; Martin, 1993; Stockard & Johnson, 1992, p. 169). In recent years some scholars have turned to trying to understand these very early aspects of gender socialization.

#### 4. GENDER SCHEMAS AND COGNITIVE LEARNING THEORIES

Recent approaches to understanding gender socialization have often incorporated the notion of schemas, cognitive structures or frameworks that people use to organize and process information to which they are exposed. Schemas provide an efficient way to organize new knowledge and information and help individuals maintain consistency and predictability in new situations. Gender schemas are cognitive schemas that are used to organize information on the basis of gender categories. Theorists who use this approach suggest that children develop increasingly more elaborate gender schemas as they develop their gender identity and their understanding of gender roles. As children come across information or new situations that pertain to gender they tend to use their gender schemas as a guide for interpreting this information, a way to simplify information and decisions.

Carol Lynn Martin and Charles Halvorsen (1981, 1987) have suggested that there are two types of gender schemas based on an “in-group/out-group” model. Children categorize information based on whether it involves their own sex group (the in-group) or the other (the out-group) and then use this categorization to help choose toys and behaviors and decide whether to attend to new information. For instance, when faced with new toys or potential playmates, children use this gender schema to determine their actions (Bem, 1981; Markus, Crane, Bernstein, & Saladi, 1982; Martin, 1993; Martin & Halvorsen, 1981, 1987). Research indicates that rudimentary gender schema—the ability to discriminate males and females and link characteristics such as hair and clothing styles to these differences—can appear by one year of age (Fagot & Leinbach, 1993; Leinbach & Fagot, 1993).

It is important to realize that gender schemas are both complex and multidimensional. This has been demonstrated both through an older body of research in the tradition of “masculinity–femininity” tests (Constaninople, 1973; Lewis, 1968, pp. 69–71; Stockard & Johnson, 1992, p. 153) and in newer studies of children’s gender-typed behavior and personalities and developing gender schemas (Hort, Leinbach, & Fagot, 1991; Sears, Rau, & Alpert, 1965; Turner & Gervai, 1995). One carefully designed study used longitudinal data collected on children beginning at the age of 18 months and continuing until the age of 4. At various times over this period different aspects of children’s cognitive understandings of gender (all of which are believed to be part of a gender schema) were assessed, including their ability to label correctly pictures of people as male or female, their knowledge of gender-typed activities and objects, their memory of gender-typed stimuli, and the salience of gender in their assessments of stimuli. The researchers found that there was very little association between each of these cognitive aspects of gender and suggested that “children fit together the puzzle pieces of gender acquisition in a variety of loosely organized, idiosyncratic ways” (Hort et al., 1991, p. 206).

In short, studies of both children and adults suggest that gender schemas are very complex and multidimensional and that children acquire gender schemas in a variety of ways (see also Huston, 1983; Levy & Fivush, 1993; Signorella, Bigler, & Liben, 1993). Data are beginning to suggest that these various components of gender schema may involve not just cognitive knowledge and stereotypes, but also affective and evaluative components, and even metaphoric qualities, such as strength, danger, or gentleness (Fagot & Leinbach, 1993, p. 220; see also Martin, 1993; Martin, Wood, & Little, 1990).

The notion of gender schemas does not refute other theories of gender socialization,

but can potentially help us understand more about the influence of reinforcement, modeling, and cognitive development. For instance, there is some evidence that children who learn to correctly apply gender labels earlier than other children have parents who endorse more traditional attitudes toward women and also more often reinforce sex-typed play (Fagot & Leinbach, 1989, 1993, p. 218; Fagot, Leinbach, & O'Boyle, 1992). In addition, reinforcement may or may not change children's behavior depending upon their cognitive understandings and ways of processing information related to gender (Jacklin, 1989, p. 130). The notion of gender schemas can also explain why children may or may not choose to model certain behaviors. When children (or adults) encounter models that are contrary to their gender schema, they may either not attend to those behaviors or try to interpret them in a way that corresponds to their existing gender schemas. Similarly, when children encounter models that they believe conform to their gender schema they may be especially likely to model those behaviors. Similarly, in support of ideas from the cognitive developmental view, children's choices of who and what gender roles to model appear to be related to their cognitive understandings of gender and what they believe is relevant to their own self definitions (Maccoby, 1992, p. 1011).

As noted previously, one of the earliest manifestations of gender typed behavior is the tendency for boys and girls to prefer different toys and playmates of the same sex. By the age of three, and in some situations even earlier, boys choose to play with other boys and girls choose to play with other girls. Both psychologists and sociologists have studied the culture of peer groups to understand more about why boys and girls prefer to associate with others of the same sex and how these associations influence gender socialization.

## **5. PEER GROUP INTERACTIONS AND THE CULTURE OF CHILDHOOD**

When examining peer groups, scholars have found that gender can be seen in social behaviors in ways that are not apparent when individuals and their traits and behaviors are looked at alone. In particular, boys and girls tend to behave differently depending upon whether they are with other boys, other girls, a mixed-sex peer group, or with adults. In short, children, like all people, act in different ways, depending upon the situation in which they find themselves. Many studies have demonstrated that children clearly prefer to play with others of the same sex. These preferences appear spontaneously, when children are not under pressure to make choices, and they are especially strong in situations that are not monitored by adults. While situations can be structured in which boys and girls interact comfortably together, the general preference for gender-segregated interactions appears very difficult to change. It appears as early as 3 years of age and increases in strength over time, maintaining a high level until at least age 11. The preferences appear to be very difficult to change and do not seem to be related to individual level measures of various aspects of masculinity and femininity. Children do maintain cross-sex friendships, but they tend to occur within their homes or neighborhoods and are often hidden from the larger peer group (Fagot, 1994; Maccoby, 1990, p. 514).

In general, children's activities may be seen as involving a "culture of childhood," a pattern of games, activities, roles, norms, and even jokes and folklore that are passed on from generation to generation of children with little, if any, active involvement by adults. Most important for our purposes, this culture is highly gendered. Cultural elements, such as norms, values, and the material elements such as toys and playthings, are strongly

gender typed. In addition, there are strong subcultures that are highly gender segregated. The gendered nature of the culture of childhood is markedly different in many ways from that of adults—with, as a cognitive developmental perspective would suggest, much more rigid distinctions between roles for males and females and more extensive and apparent sanctions for violating these roles (Maccoby, 1991a, p. 538; Powlishta, 1995).

In examining children's interactions, scholars have tried to determine what distinguishes the interactions of groups of boys and groups of girls and have found differences in both games and activities as well as interactional styles. Boys tend to play in larger groups, in rougher activities, and to take up more space when they play. Their interactions tend to be focused more on their mutual interest in activities and more often tend to involve displays of dominance, with the use of interruptions, commands, threats, and boasts. Girls tend to form close, more intimate friendships with one or two other girls and are more likely to express agreements with others, allow others to have a turn in speaking, and to acknowledge points made by others. Both boys and girls successfully influence others in their interactions; they simply tend to do so through different styles (Maccoby, 1990, p. 516).

The developmental psychologist Eleanor Maccoby points to two factors that seem to underlie the development of gender segregated play groups in the preschool years. First, girls seem to find boys' more rough and tumble play styles and orientation toward competition and dominance aversive, and thus try to avoid it. Second, given their different interactive styles, girls find it difficult to influence boys, for their characteristic style of polite suggestion does not match the style of direct commands more often adopted by boys. A basic element of group process is the notion of exchange, or mutual influence. Maccoby hypothesizes that because boys and girls find it difficult to find interaction patterns that allow such mutual influence, they tend to avoid forming groups that include children of both sex groups (Maccoby, 1988, 1990, p. 515; see also Fabes, 1994).

Ethnographic studies of peer groups among children and adolescents have documented the nature of gender-segregated peer groups as children grow older. Extensive observations have revealed the importance of interactions with others of the same sex in helping children develop their gender identity and definitions of appropriate gender roles, as children actively discuss and develop definitions of masculinity and femininity. These discussions involve not just areas of toy choice or games, but also the nature of sexuality and sexual relationships (Eder, 1995; Fine, 1987; Holland & Eisenhart, 1990; Jordan & Cowan, 1995; Thorne, 1993; Voss, 1997).

It is again important to note that other theories used to understand gender socialization can be used to account for processes within peer groups. Observations of peer groups indicate that children clearly reinforce each other for behaviors that are deemed either appropriate or inappropriate in terms of gender (Fagot, 1994). Children also tend to model other children as they try to develop behaviors that they believe are appropriate. Cognitive processes, which are linked to developmental changes, are clearly involved as children decide whether or not to enter a play group and the extent to which gender segregation should be maintained. Although the processes involved in gender socialization within peer groups are not yet fully understood, most scholars in this area believe that diverse theoretical and methodological approaches will be needed to develop a full understanding (Maccoby, 1994; Martin, 1994; Serbin, Moller, Gulko, Powlishta, & Colburne, 1994).

Research is also needed to understand fully the long-term implications of childhood gender segregation for gender segregation and inequalities in adult life. Boys' peer groups

seem far less amenable to direction and supervision by adults than do girls' peer groups, leading researchers to speculate about connections between peer group interactions and boys' later difficulties in school, such as lower grades and greater behavior problems (e.g., Fagot, 1994, pp. 62–63; Jordan & Cowan, 1995). Others have noted possible difficulties in children developing competencies, such as interpersonal interaction styles, that are more typical of the other sex, thus enabling more effective cross-sex interaction (e.g., Leaper, 1994). Still others have speculated about the relationship between childhood gender segregation and adult patterns of interaction, both within the family and within the world of work (e.g., Maccoby, 1991b, 1995).

Although both boys and girls prefer interactions in gender-segregated groups, data indicate that boys are far more concerned with gender segregation than are girls. Girls receive less punishment from their peers for cross-sex behaviors than do boys. In addition girls are far more likely to interact with adults than are boys, while boys are resistant to interactions with either girls or adults (Fagot, 1994, p. 60; Maccoby, 1990, p. 516; 1994, p. 88). While girls' aversion to boys' interactive and play styles can explain why girls tend to avoid boys, it cannot as easily explain why boys tend to avoid girls. Psychoanalytic theory directly addresses this issue.

## 6. PSYCHOANALYTIC THEORY

Psychoanalysis was founded by Sigmund Freud in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. From the very early years of the discipline Freud and his students and followers debated the nature of gender socialization—how childhood experiences influence boys' and girls' ideas about themselves, their gender, and sexuality. Two general perspectives developed. One, based on Freud's own writing, emphasized the centrality of the Oedipus complex and its resolution to differences in male and female development. According to Freud, girls, unlike boys, could never fully resolve the Oedipus complex and were fated to have a weaker superego, Freud's term for the conscience. Even in Freud's lifetime this view was sharply attacked and many of Freud's students developed an alternative perspective, which has come to be one that most contemporary psychoanalysts, based on their clinical experience, accept today.

Writers in this second perspective emphasize the importance of the fact that the mother is the first person to whom all children, both boys and girls, relate. During their early years children develop strong relationships with their mother (or other female caretaker). Because this very strong early tie is almost always with a woman, children's first identification is feminine, rather than masculine. As children become older and more independent they need to lessen the very strong ties that they had with the mother figure during infancy. They also learn what it means to be a male or a female. For a girl, this is relatively easy because the mother was the first person with whom she identified. However, psychoanalytic theorists suggest, achieving gender identity is harder for a boy because in the process he must reject his first identity as feminine. In addition, because fathers and other men often are not such a central part of young boys' lives as are mothers and other women, it may be hard to develop a strong idea of just what masculinity involves.

Because the boy knows most intimately what is feminine, he comes to define masculinity as being "not-feminine." In his behaviors and relationships with others he devalues what is feminine and denies his attachment to the feminine world. To use psychoanalytic



terms, he represses the feminine identification developed in his early relationship with the mother. As a result, boys' gender identity tends to be somewhat more tenuous than girls' gender identity (see especially Chodorow, 1974, 1978, 1989; Deutsch, 1944–1945; Dinnerstein, 1976; Fairbairn, 1952; Horney, 1967a, b; Klein, 1960; Mead, 1949).

The sociologist Talcott Parsons (1955, 1970) suggested that the process that psychoanalytic theorists describe as “identification” could actually be seen as learning to play a social role with another person in complementary, reciprocal role interactions. In these terms, children first learn to play the role of child, which is complementary to the role of mother. This role is not gender typed, as both boy and girl infants learn to feel loved and nurtured as well as to nurture others. As children grow older, their role relationships expand and they gradually develop more independence, loosening this first tie with the mother. At the same time, they become more aware of their identity as a boy or a girl and begin to learn roles associated with this gender identity. Miriam Johnson has noted the special role of the father in helping both boys and girls develop these understandings, as the father tends to become more involved with children as they become older and more aware of gender differences. (See Johnson, 1988; Lerman, 1986; Stockard & Johnson, 1979, 1992 for a complete discussion of these traditions.)

Both the traditional psychoanalytic view and the more sociological role-oriented version of this perspective suggest that the motives underlying boys' strong preferences for gender-segregated play groups and their avoidance of female-typed activities can be traced to these early experiences in the family and, especially, the virtually universal early relationship between infants and a mother or other female caretaker. Building on this premise, these theorists suggest that when fathers are more involved in early child rearing boys would be less likely to exhibit signs of “compulsive masculinity” and, in adulthood, would be less likely to promote strong patterns of gender stratification (e.g., Chodorow, 1974, 1978, 1989; Johnson, 1988). Support for these speculations comes from clinical evidence from the psychoanalytic tradition, ethnographic field studies of adults, and analyses of cross-cultural data on societies in which fathers take a wide range of different roles in child rearing (e.g., Coltrane, 1988, 1992; Williams, 1989).

## 7. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Understandings of gender socialization have advanced a great deal over the last few decades. Contemporary theories emphasize the importance of the child's role in developing a gender identity and understanding of gender roles. Central to these approaches are notions of changing cognitive awareness and understandings of the world, the development of cognitive schemas, and interactions in peer groups. Psychoanalytic theory can help fill in gaps left by other approaches by explaining motives underlying boys' relatively intense support of gender-segregated activities. It also describes the central role of family relationships in the development of gender identity.

Contemporary understandings of gender socialization also highlight the ways in which gender development is complex and multidimensional. This complexity suggests that we would be well served by both theory and research that attempt to understand the common ground and linkages between the various theoretical perspectives and research traditions used in this field. Researchers in the cognitive tradition have often drawn on insights of social learning theorists. Less common has been work that attempts to integrate psychoanalytic theory, understandings from biology, and psychological and socio-

logical theories. Some preliminary work indicates that such efforts could be fruitful (e.g., Fast, 1984, 1993; Schore, 1994), but clearly, much more remains to be done. In addition, the majority of contemporary research and theorizing has focused on the United States and Western Europe (but see Berndt, Cheung, Lau, Kit-Tai Hau, & Lew, 1993 and Turner and Gervai, 1995 for exceptions) with surprisingly little systematic comparisons across racial-ethnic and social class groups even there. Much more extensive comparative and cross-cultural work is clearly needed.

Finally, much of the writing that links gender socialization to gender stratification in the adult world (with the notable exception of the psychoanalytic tradition) is highly speculative. In the 1970s sociologists tended to shift their framework of analysis from socialization to a broader view of the lifecourse (see Elder, 1994, p. 8). Yet, there has been very little research that provides the lifecourse perspective to gender socialization and encompasses the span from early childhood to adult life. If analyses of gender socialization are to ultimately help us develop more gender equitable societies such analyses will need to become much more common.

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