

Sapiro, Chapter 3  
**Individual-Level Approaches to Understanding Women's Lives**

- 1. Individual-level, rather than system-level, explanations of how women act.**
  - a. Individual-level approaches rely on individual-level disciplinary methods - psychology - rather than on sociology, history, and economics, which attempt to explain group behavior, as in the previous chapters.
  - b. Some individual-level approaches overlap with system-level explanations discussed in the previous chapter (such as biological explanations for women's subordination).
  
- 2. Overview: how does gender affect an individual's development?**
  - a. Gender may be the first and most influential defining characteristic of an individual.
    - i. Gender is the first identity factor we notice about babies.
    - ii. Gender shapes our vulnerability to many forces, such as genetically based diseases
    - iii. Gender shapes the life chances and opportunities we are likely to receive, as well as the way we work and relate to other people.
  - b. However: "the similarities between men's and women's lives in the US are much greater than the differences. This similarity occurs largely because the differences *among* women and *among* men are so large" (79).
  - c. Stereotyping of "Femininity" and "Masculinity"
    - i. "Femininity" and "masculinity" are cultural stereotypes applying to individuals and personality characteristics.
      - (1) Sapiro defines stereotypes as "beliefs or expectations people have about members of particular social groups" (81).
    - ii. "Androgyny" is the quality of having an equal balance of characteristics, or flexibility about one's gender-based characteristics.
    - iii. Bem sex-role inventory (subject of your writing assignment for today)
  - d. Intelligence: apparent differences in cognitive skills.
    - i. Verbal, math, and cognitive skills: there are some differences, but they may be accountable to testing bias.
      - (1) Research shows that there is little difference in verbal skills, although studies more recent than this textbook suggest that women are more articulate.
      - (2) Differences in math ability (from high school onward, men test better than women at math problem-solving) seem largely a result of nurture.
  - e. Personality: apparent differences in aggressiveness/passivity.

- i. Men consistently more aggressive, tested from early age. However, it's difficult to measure personality differences, since reporting is so tainted by cultural expectations.
  - ii. Overall, there may be minor differences, but they are largely dependent on context, socialization, and other factors.
  - iii. The appearance of gender differences in personality depends on how they are measured: whether a researcher looks at *attributions* (how people describe themselves), *personality scales*, or *behavioral measures* can strongly influence the result the researcher obtains. Example: if women report feeling more distressed than men, is it because they're more distressed or because they're more likely to report feeling distressed?
- f. Sapiro emphasizes that context plays an enormous role in the appearance of "fixed" gender differences. As we consider individual level differences between men and women, it's important always to ask "under what circumstances? with regard to what situations?" (85).

### **Five Approaches to Explaining Women's Subordination at the Individual Level**

#### **3. Biological theories: to what degree does biological gender shape human personality?**

- a. Biological sex gives us
  - i. primary and secondary sex characteristics,
  - ii. the ability to reproduce,
  - iii. height/weight/muscle distribution, fat ratios, etc. However, the influence of biological sex on individual development is probably much less than the influence of cultural conditioning. If "biology were destiny," Sapiro says, "we would see more evidence of persistent, cross-cultural differences than we see" (87).
- b. Biological theories fail to explain more than rudimentary behaviors for several reasons.
  - i. Biological features are affected by environmental conditions and mediated by social norms. (Her example: a linear progression in the 20thC for faster speeds for runners - training, nutrition, and other factors, not evolution, account for increases.)
  - ii. **Another important idea, not addressed directly by Sapiro: supremacy is culturally defined. Thus, while men make a big fuss over their superior upper-body strength, we hear fewer accolades for women's proven superiority in small-motor coordination, endurance, and higher pain threshold.**

#### **4. Psychoanalytical theories: to what degree do gender differences in psychological development shape human personality?**

- a. Psychoanalytic theory, one of the most important social-science developments of the 20<sup>th</sup> C, focuses on "typical" human development and its affect on personality and behavior.

- i. Many psychoanalytic theorists have considered gender, but Freud's work has been the most influential.
- ii. Freud emphasizes the importance of “drives” - psychic energies that cause people to act. The primary drives Freud is concerned with push an individual towards what he calls eros (the love or sex drive) or thanatos (the death or destructive drive).
- iii. Freud provides an ingenious functionalist explanation of Victorian sexual arrangements.
- iv. At birth, children are not sexually differentiated. During infancy and childhood, they define themselves in interaction with their environment. They go through four early stages of sexual development:
  - (1) at birth, polymorphously perverse and bisexual
  - (2) infancy - oral phase - gratification through the mouth; narcissism
  - (3) toddlerhood - anal phase - defer to Mom by regulating excretion
  - (4) 4 to 6 - phallic or genital phase - they discover their sex/uality
- v. At 4-6, Oedipal/Electra complex inaugurates child's experience with adult sexuality and, if resolved through the child's failure to achieve gratification, result in “appropriate” heterosexual development.
  - (1) Both boy and girl, to become adults, must refocus their love for Mom onto more appropriate outside objects. Both genders, Freud argues, become aware that boys have penises and girls don't, and that penises, because they're associated with powerful Dad, must signify power.
    - (a) Boy at first struggles to wrest Mother away from Father to “have her for himself,” but is rebuffed by Dad. In competing unsuccessfully with Dad, he develops castration anxiety which will productively cause him to restrain himself and refocus his desire onto another woman.
    - (b) Girl recognizes that Mother, is castrated and defective because she has no penis and no power - and has made Girl just like her! Girl stops adoring Mom. She looks outward for a solution to Mom's and her matching castrated bodies. First she focuses on wresting Father away from Mother (becoming “Daddy's Little Princess”). However, Mom puts the kibosh to this. Girl then focuses on getting a substitute penis - first a man, then a man-baby.
- vi. Then children enter a “latency” period, lasting till puberty, which gives them a rest from all this trauma.
- vii. What are the consequences of men's path to “maturity”?
  - (1) heterosexuality
  - (2) monogamy (marry a woman just like Mom - give her Mom's name, too)
  - (3) productive repression of inappropriate desires

- (4) castration anxiety, making the boy into a good citizen who won't violate cultural taboos
- viii. What are the consequences of women's path to "maturity"?
  - (1) heterosexuality
  - (2) an orientation towards marriage and childbirth as sexual definition
  - (3) a lack of repression/superego because of a lack of castration anxiety
  - (4) a hatred and fear of female sexuality, which has been presented to them as shocking, deficient, and trauma-inducing
  - (5) passivity and masochism
- b. Problems with Freudian explanations:
  - i. the female-development story was an afterthought for Freud - he had a lot of trouble thinking it up, whilst the male-development story came easily to him
  - ii. deeply bound up with Victorian sexual arrangements
  - iii. neglects influence of culture - "one can see whatever one wants to see" (92)
  - iv. the pattern is impossible to prove using clinical methodology
  - v. mostly an argument that "civilization" results from repression of inappropriate desires (bottom of 92)
- c. Several thinkers have challenged Freud's formulations.
  - i. Nancy Chodorow rethinks Freud's paradigm to explain the patriarchy results from child-rearing arrangements
    - (1) women become nurturant, she argues, because they fail to separate from mothers; this accounts for women's being in charge of child-rearing and the persistent failure of men to become nurturers, and a vicious cycle results
  - ii. Other rethinkers of Freud, such as Karen Horney, used his theories to invert/explain others of his theories
    - (1) "womb envy" is an example of splitting/projection of "penis envy"
  - iii. What is useful about Freud?
    - (1) focus on relationship between sexuality and social and cultural life
    - (2) development of idea/theories of **unconscious**
    - (3) focus on early childhood as formative time
    - (4) description of patriarchal family and gender norms
- d. **Cognitive-developmental theories focus on conscious development**
  - i. These theories focus on the development of the *conscious* mind - skills and reasoning - in interaction with the environment.
  - ii. Cognitive theorists tend to describe development in terms of stages.
  - iii. Gender is discovered/negotiated through interaction with an environment - and in order to please the self. Children tend to hold to rigid patterns of gender stereotyping.
    - (1) Kohlberg: children emulate their same-sex parent. But for different reasons: boys see men as powerful. Girls see women as "nice" and identify with them because they value this quality (?) and, perhaps more important, because they value conformity (Piaget confirms). But (at some level) girls also recognize that "nice" is not powerful and so are less rigid about gender stereotyping.
    - (2) Bigler and Liben: children have rigid stereotyping about gender because they haven't yet figured out that objects can be classified in multiple ways.

Children with multiple-classification skills tend to be less stereotypical about gender

- iv. Fluidity/flexibility tends to be identified with feminine stereotype males are more rigid (Kohlberg morality study; Gilligan)

**e. Learning theories focus on the importance of socialization**

- i. Socialization is a process in which children imitate models they see. Learning theorists identify how cultural agents socialize children.
  - (1) Parents: Children treated differently by their parents according to gender; increases during adolescence; is sometimes challenged during adulthood.
  - (2) Schools:, mass media, arts, religion, other institutions all transmit gender ideas.
  - (3) Problems:
    - (a) "I was socialized this way" denies personal responsibility
    - (b) Socialization affects some individuals more strongly than others, leading some people to escape the effects of socialization.

**f. Synthesis - Cognition + Learning - "Doing Gender"**

- i. Gender schemas (Bem) offer a more comprehensive approach to how gender is inculcated into individuals. Gender schemes are a "network of associations about gender that organizes or guides an individual's perceptions" (bottom of 104). Researchers who "do gender" use these gender schemas to explain how people manifest and interpret gender. Two examples
  - (1) emotions theory
  - (2) metaphoric ideas about gender - phallic objects, moon
- ii. "Gender schematicity" refers to an individual's tendency to see stereotypical gender in things, including the self, and to use gender as a means of classifying the world. (Gender "aschematic" means you are less likely to do so.)
- iii. Swim study argues that people are now less sexist, though this may reflect wishful thinking or denial about sexism in general rather than cultural progress about gender discrimination.

**5. What's the difference between institutional theories and individual theories?**

- i. Institutional-level theories imply that people are forced to adhere to gender norms
- ii. Individual- level theories imply people learn, and therefore choose, to adhere to gender norms
- iii. Overall, it is very difficult to say what makes a person act in a particular way because the interaction of factors is so complex.

**6. What is discrimination?**

- a. not necessarily bad; means to "pick and choose carefully."
- b. people judging others on the basis of gender schematicity
- c. not always intentional, obvious, or malicious
- d. nonetheless persistent
- e. is it possible to discriminate against yourself?