

Review Article

The Neo-Social Development of Gender Identity: A Social Contagion

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Abstract

In recent years, gender identity has become a topic of intense public debate. Two main perspectives have emerged. One perspective suggests that gender identity is an issue of not aligning with the assigned gender at birth, and the other, a psychological phenomenon that is influenced by societal trends, otherwise known as a social contagion. Social contagion holds that factors such as peer influence, media representation, and evolving societal norms significantly shape one's understanding of gender identity. Gender-affirming care and support are recommended solutions to alleviate gender dysphoria resulting from this phenomenon. However, a counter perspective, grounded in biological and Biblical truths, emphasizes that gender identity is an intrinsic part of a divine purpose and reflects God's creation. The complexity of self-discovery, societal influences, and religious beliefs has led to contentious debates on the nature of gender identity. The range of perspectives stresses the need for respectful and empathetic conversations encompassing diverse viewpoints while promoting a more comprehensive and purposeful society rooted in truth. Ultimately, the discourse on gender identity must merge into one objective—stabilizing and perpetuating society.

Keywords

Gender Identity, Gender Development, Gender Dysphoria, Gender Fluid, Social Contagion

1. Introduction

In recent years, gender identity and its developmental factors have gained widespread attention and stirred considerable debate in academic circles and public discourse. This heightened focus has raised a critical question: Is the ongoing fixation on gender identity predominantly an issue with not aligning with one's assigned gender at birth or a psychological phenomenon, subject to the influence of social trends, considered to be a social contagion?

The concept of social contagion provides a fitting framework for understanding the dynamics at play in the ongoing debate on gender identity. In its various forms, social contagion describes how ideas, emotions, behaviors, and even

diseases can propagate within a social network or community, similar to a contagious process where those around them influence individuals [1]. For instance, emotional contagion exemplifies how one person's mood can reverberate and affect others, while behavioral contagion illustrates how behaviors or actions can cascade through a group [4]. Likewise, opinions and beliefs, like a contagion, can permeate a community as individuals adopt the views of those with whom they interact. This concept holds even more relevance in the digital age, where true and false information can rapidly disseminate through social networks, amplifying the influence of social contagion.

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Received: 15 May 2024; **Accepted:** 11 July 2024; **Published:** 23 September 2024



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The influence of social contagion is not one-dimensional, as it can have both positive and negative effects [4]. It can catalyze the promotion of healthy habits and the dissemination of innovative ideas. Simultaneously, it can facilitate the propagation of detrimental behaviors and distorted ideologies. This duality of influence accentuates the phenomenon's complexity, making it essential to critically assess how it may shape the landscape of biological concepts, such as the binary identity of the male and female gender.

The prevailing contemporary literature on gender identity is critically examined while asserting that the present-day fixation on gender identity is, indeed, a psychological phenomenon influenced by societal trends.

2. Understanding the Literature

2.1. Gender Development

Gender development in young children to adolescents is a dynamic process influenced by intrapersonal, behavioral, and social factors within societal systems [5]. Children begin to grasp the concept of gender at a young age by absorbing societal cues and understanding the expectations for boys and girls. Typically, by age three or four, children can differentiate between males and females based on appearance and behavior, which forms the foundation of their ideas about expected gender-specific behavior. Additionally, they pick up gender stereotypes and may disapprove of behaviors that deviate from these prescribed roles. The understanding of gender roles is significantly shaped by same-sex imitation, social sanctions, and self-efficacy, ultimately affecting career choices and abilities [5].

2.2. Sex Roles

Zosuls et al. [9] offered an overview of the history and trends in gender development research, focusing on studies published in *Sex Roles*. The journal celebrated its 35th anniversary and its substantial contributions to research on children's and adolescents' gender development. The authors examined how research in the field has evolved since the journal's inception in 1975 [9], shedding light on the field's growth and transformation over the decades.

Within this historical context, Zosuls et al. [9] highlighted key contributions and milestones that have had a lasting impact on the field, including pivotal studies on gender differences, gender socialization, gender stereotyping, and gender identity. These studies have significantly shaped the trajectory of gender development research.

The article delved into current theoretical perspectives and debates in the field, emphasizing the ongoing nature-versus-nurture debate, the interplay between biological and socialization approaches, and the conflict between cognitive and socialization perspectives. These ongoing discussions continue to influence the direction of gender develop-

ment research.

Lastly, the article looked toward the future of gender development research, highlighting the importance of diversifying research topics, methodologies, and age groups. This broader approach is considered essential for the field's continued growth and relevance.

2.3. Early Childcare

Bennet et al. [2] added that early childcare experiences can significantly impact a child's gender development. Children who begin daycare around two or three tend to form same-gender friendships more frequently, suggesting that their environment can shape their preferences and self-identity, especially within their homes. For example, they may insist on wearing clothing that aligns with their gender, such as boys showing a preference for "boy" clothes. However, the authors noted that children do not rigidly adhere to these expectations, and there can be variations in their clothing choices. They said these experiences also influenced how children expressed their gender through appearance.

Moreover, the effects of early childcare experiences extended beyond play and clothing choices. Boys who started daycare at age 3 tended to develop a stronger sense of their gender identity and identification with their gender, making them more certain about their place in the world as boys. However, these effects did not consistently apply to girls or very young children, and the impact on gender self-identification can vary based on a child's age and gender [2].

2.4. Social Pressure

Adolescents can face pressures from various sources, including parents, peers, and self-identity. Research by Cook et al. [3] highlighted how these pressures can impact how much a teenager feels they belong to their gender and whether they conform to traditional gender roles. Interestingly, the research suggested that boys felt more pressure to conform to these roles but may not have changed how they saw themselves.

The study revealed that self-imposed pressure, stemming from adolescents' internalized gender role expectations and peer pressure, was significantly associated with a tendency to conform to their respective gender norms. In practical terms, when adolescents felt internal or peer-induced pressure to conform to stereotypical gender behaviors, they were more likely to exhibit behaviors aligned with conventional gender expectations. Notably, self-imposed pressure had a lasting influence on adolescents' gender identity. Over time, those subjected to such pressure demonstrated increased conformity to their gender norms, emphasizing the enduring impact of self-imposed pressure on the evolution of adolescents' gender identity.

Contrary to conventional expectations, the study unveiled an aspect of gender development where adolescents who

deviated from conventional gender norms and exhibited behaviors not typically associated with their gender did not consistently face heightened external pressures. In some cases, such non-conforming behavior was linked to greater self-acceptance, indicating a more flexible and self-affirming approach to gender identity.

The research further underscored the intricacies among various sources of pressure. It was observed that parental pressure often triggered an increase in peer and self-imposed pressure, revealing a complex network of influences among these sources. This dynamic highlighted the importance of considering the conflicting nature of pressures from parents, peers, and self-identity.

These findings hold significant implications for our contemporary understanding of adolescent gender development. They emphasize the need to differentiate between sources of pressure, each of which plays a distinct role in shaping adolescents' gender identity.

2.5. Gender-Affirming Care and Support

Sansfacon et al. [8] delved into the experiences of adolescents who embarked on a journey of self-discovery, leading them to realize that their gender identity differed from their assigned gender at birth, highlighting the complexity of understanding and confirming one's true gender. The research identified three distinct pathways individuals took to confirm their gender identity.

In pathway A, some adolescents recognized their true gender identity at an early age, experiencing gender dysphoria. They affirmed their gender identity and chose to transition through medical or social means, often coming out to their parents and accessing gender-affirming care early in life.

Pathway B involved individuals who also experienced early dissonance between their assigned and true gender but chose to delay their transition, sometimes due to personal or social factors. They postponed their transition, taking more time to come to terms with their gender identity before starting the transition.

In pathway C, some individuals did not experience significant gender dissonance or discomfort with their assigned gender until later in life, often around or after puberty. They then embarked on a journey to understand and affirm their true gender, challenging the conventional notion that gender identity becomes apparent at a very young age.

This study further explored how adolescents described their gender, revealing diverse identities. Many used binary terms like 'female/woman/girl' or 'male/man/boy'; others identified as more gender-fluid or non-binary.

The research challenged the outdated idea that young people should demonstrate a static gender identity before accessing social or medical transition. Instead, it highlighted the importance of providing gender-affirming care, an approach advocated to benefit their well-being. This ensured that they received necessary support and medical interventions

promptly, aligning their physical and gender identities authentically.

Ultimately, the study emphasized the significance of creating trans-positive and affirming spaces for young people, whether in educational settings, families, or policy formulation. These spaces were essential for individuals to understand and explore their gender, fostering confidence and authenticity. It centered the voices of trans youth in understanding gender identity development, encouraging inclusivity and empathy [8].

3. A Counter Perspective

Contemporary academic literature on gender identity may address the complex process that begins in youth and continues through adolescence. However, it is still vital to consider whether the current focus on gender identity is a genuine expression of self-discovery or a psychological phenomenon driven by societal trends.

Various influences, including societal cues, stereotypes, personal traits, and behavior, shape the current views on gender identity. Some studies even emphasized the significance of creating inclusive spaces and offering gender-affirming care and support [8]. These spaces often serve as safe and supportive environments for individuals to explore and express their gender identities. Discussions, personal experiences, and shared stories within these communities may contribute to the spread of gender-related ideas and identities, fostering a sense of belonging and understanding.

Peer groups, particularly among adolescents and young adults, also play a significant role in the social contagion of gender identity. Young people questioning their gender may be influenced by the experiences and identities of their friends, which can lead to a sense of camaraderie and shared identity within the group.

The representation of transgender and non-binary individuals in mainstream media is another factor in this discussion. When well-known figures openly discuss their gender identities, it can ignite conversations and raise awareness about the topic within society, potentially leading to a greater acceptance of diverse gender identities.

Families and the dynamics within them can have a profound impact. Supportive parents and family members can provide a nurturing environment for individuals to explore their gender identities, fostering the concept of gender fluidity and furthering its social influence.

Political and legal changes have also had a significant impact on the debate. Measures like recognizing non-binary gender markers on identification documents contribute to accepting and recognizing diverse gender identities, inspiring individuals to embrace other options.

Educational institutions play a crucial role as well. The inclusion of gender diversity in curricula and the establishment of gender-inclusive policies can shape the beliefs and attitudes of students. Exposure to information and discussions about

gender diversity in educational settings can lead to a more open-minded and accepting society of these philosophies.

From this perspective, social factors and institutions facilitate the spreading of ideas and world views. It explains how people can rapidly attach themselves to pathological ideologies, overtaking their intellectual faculty and divorcing them from moral objective truths.

To shed light on the challenges adolescents face as they navigate societal trends regarding gender, Mmari et al. [6] delved into the memories of adolescents from different cultures around the world, aiming to uncover how they learned about societal expectations concerning gender. They revealed that adolescents often struggled to recall specific stories or situations that contributed to their understanding of these expectations. For younger adolescents, maintaining gender norms and socialization can be somewhat abstract, making it challenging to relate to and remember concrete instances. A researcher in Cuenca, Ecuador, succinctly captured this challenge by stating: "Perhaps the most complex part for younger [adolescents] are the questions about gender norms and socialization as they did not relate to these abstract concepts and felt that 'you do not have to learn' these rules" [6].

The difficulty young adolescents face in recalling concrete examples of learning societal gender expectations suggests that the complexity of attributing their gender identity development primarily through self-discovery challenges this idea. Hence, adolescents may not consciously or actively seek to conform to societal expectations but be directly influenced by prevailing societal forces and current cultural trends into believing that gender is a fluid concept developed as they navigate life experiences.

Gender fluidity may play a powerful concept that promotes individual autonomy and celebrates the diversity of human gender experiences. However, it rejects the idea of a fixed binary system. It recognizes that every person has the right to define and express their gender identity in a way that aligns with their self-perception. By embracing this concept, cohorts of this perspective suggest that society can foster a more inclusive and diverse community that respects the experiences of people who do not conform to traditional gender expectations.

Nonetheless, the significant issue of gender dysphoria cannot be ignored. It may be the single leading effect of undertaking a psychological phenomenon driven by the current whims of society and the reason why psychological distress perpetuates in those battling it. This distress can have profound effects on individuals, leading to anxiety, depression, and a range of emotional challenges that affect daily life, relationships, and overall well-being. To address this issue, advocates suggest providing access to gender-affirming care, including hormone therapy and gender-affirming surgeries. This care is believed to help individuals align their physical appearance with their gender identity and reduce the distress associated with gender dysphoria.

However, gender-affirming care practices may not achieve

the goal of promoting well-being and mental health that advocates of this perspective desperately seek. Instead, it may advance the very psychological condition attempted to be reduced.

Therefore, it seems that the present-day fixation on gender identity is, indeed, a psychological phenomenon influenced by societal trends. The solution to this social contagion may be very unpopular but morally necessary.

The Unpopular Yet Necessary Perspective

While the existing literature provided insights into the intricate and multifaceted nature of gender identity development, it is important to consider an additional perspective that acknowledges the influence of biological and theological factors, as presented in Christianity, particularly in Genesis 1:27 [7]. It reads, "So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them" [7]. This biblical passage forms the foundation of Christianity regarding gender. From this viewpoint, gender identity is seen as a reflection of God's deliberate design and deeply rooted in a larger purpose—the stabilization and perpetuation of society.

Gender identity is not a mere accident or a result of chance but is instead a reflection of God's intentional creation. The complementarity of male and female is not a random occurrence but a part bigger purpose to ensure the continuation of human life. The family, consisting of a husband and wife, is considered the fundamental building block of society.

This divine purpose goes beyond procreation. The gender roles males and females play within their relationships, and subsequently in society, are important for their development. Men and women's intrinsic temperament to provide a safe environment where their families prosper is an innate quality built in them, each having specific roles directed by their nature. Men are generally aggressive and protective, while women are generally nurturing. This is not regarded as a fluke. Instead, it reveals a purpose to improve humanity across every aspect of an unpredictable yet meaningful life.

4. Conclusion

The topic of gender identity has become highly debated in recent years. Some emphasize the importance of self-discovery and self-acceptance. Research indicates that societal cues, peer pressure, and early childcare experiences influence children's gender development. Supportive families, legal changes, and inclusive educational institutions also shape the understanding of the contemporary literature on gender identity.

However, the conversation around gender identity is complicated and somewhat contentious and, in some instances, involves the impacts of societal influences, personal self-discovery, and religious beliefs. While societal factors can substantiate the conceptual narrative of self-discovery, it is also essential to acknowledge the perspective rooted in scientific and Biblical truths that see the role of gender as part

of an ultimate divine purpose rather than what is generally attributed. As these discussions continue, it is crucial to appreciate the diversity of viewpoints and engage in open, empathetic conversations. Assessing differing convictions is a challenging but necessary effort that requires mutual respect and understanding while promoting a more objective and purposeful society rooted in truth.

Author Contributions

Jose Antonio Hernandez is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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