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Article

Gender Socialization and Identity Theory

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Abstract: Gender socialization is examined through a social psychological lens by applying identity theory and identity control theory. Current research from the fields of family and sociological social psychology are surveyed to provide a better conception of how the family operates as agents of socialization, and how identities that are cultivated and fostered in youth provide meaning throughout the life course and maintain the social order. The application of identity theory shows how gender is a diffuse status characteristic, which is salient in person, role, and social (group) identities, and also across social situations. Identity control theory is applied to show how emotions operate within an internal control system to stabilize gendered identities and perpetuate the social structure. Both theories are specifically applied to understand socialization dynamics that exist for children and families.

Keywords: gender; socialization; identity; identity theory; identity control theory

1. Introduction

The idea that gender is learned through socialization is ubiquitous in sociological literature on gender [1–3]; the prevalent sociological viewpoint generally rejects biologically deterministic [4] explanations for differences in gender and gendered behavior. This article examines sociological facets of gender and gender socialization by applying identity theory [5–7] and identity control theory [8–10] to explain how gender stereotypes emerge and perpetuate throughout the human life course. While the etiology of gender and the causes of gendered behavior are difficult to study, these two variants of identity theory offer a

sound theoretical framework that describes why gender ideals and stereotypes perpetuate, as well as how the socialization process operates internally. By employing identity theory and identity control theory to the study of gender, we can better conceive why gender identities seem to be so important for individuals, and why gender identities generally perpetuate across the life course after they are formed.

Gender socialization and the family have a broad and varied literature [2,11,12]. Research on gender in childhood, adolescence, and adulthood consider different stages that are unique to human development. The focus for this discussion is based on how males and females *learn* masculinity and femininity through family/primary group interactions, and how they are *socialized* into dichotomous, “traditional” gender roles. Specifically, the idea that males learn masculinity and masculine impressions in *opposition* to femininity and feminine behavior is examined. These mechanisms of socialization are examined as identity processes that the family and other primary groups help to create and maintain.

2. Gender Socialization and Families: A Review of the Literature

Before examining the socialization literature on gender and families, a definition for “family” is needed. Following literature that has documented the diverse nature of contemporary families [13], family here is understood as *any primary group of people who share an obligatory relationship with one another*, rather than the traditional, legal conception which limits the definition to married couples with children [2]. This more inclusive definition is provided so as to broaden the scope of what a family truly is; it is also provided to emphasize that socialization occurs for *every* actor in society, regardless of their type of familial surrounding. Indeed, a benefit of the variants of identity theory regards their inclusiveness in that any agents of socialization—whether legally bound or otherwise—have similar effects and influences on children. What is important for understanding identity processes is not how the structure of society views authority figures or official familial members *per se*, but rather how proximal agents nurture and socialize children. Families are the most proximate agents of identity socialization; both identity theory and identity control theory can explain the socialization process regardless if these agents fall within the traditional boundaries of “family”, or if they are qualitatively different.

2.1. Family and the Construction of Gender

The socialization of children in the family unit has been examined in various ways. Research has generally focused on four traditions: the *parent effect perspective*, the *child effects perspective*, the *reciprocal socialization perspective*, and the *systemic-ecological perspective* [12,14]; each perspective provides a unique understanding to child socialization. The parent effect perspective addresses how the different styles, behaviors, and dispositions of parents socialize traits and behavior in children. This perspective is the most common area of inquiry in literature on gender socialization. The child effects perspective reverses the order of operations in family socialization, focusing on how children socialize parents. A common area of inquiry in the child effects perspective examines how the presence of a child forces mothers/fathers to enter the workplace to support the added economic stress a child brings, hence influencing parents to develop additional, new identities. The reciprocal effects perspective examines how

both children and parents socialize one another reflexively; the impact of gender and family socialization are mutually tied to both entities. The systemic-ecological perspective considers that gender and family socialization is neither a parent-to-child nor child-to-parent process, but that all family socialization is embedded in an *environment* or *context* that can have great impact. This perspective treats family socialization as a social system in which multiple sources of socialization simultaneously impact both parents and children.

The parent effect perspective is the oldest in the tradition of socialization theories and provides the basis for the proceeding discussion on socialization. This is primarily due to the fact that while identity construction is a reflexive process, more cues are provided to children *from* parents (especially in infancy and youth) than the other way around. This is an important aspect to understanding how identity theory serves as a control mechanism for actors (as will be examined shortly); parental definitions of acceptable behavior—which is usually gendered—is internalized by children early on and serves as a foundation for all subsequent interactions. Regardless of the application or analysis of the family, the family is usually the first unit with which children have continuous contact and the first context in which socialization patterns develop [15].

2.2. Gender Socialization by the Family: An Either/Or Dichotomy

Gender socialization is often examined by sociologists to determine how and why males and females act differently. The socialization process begins at birth; families usually treat newborns differently according to their sex [12,16–19]. Indeed, families begin to socialize gender roles even in delivery rooms—boys are dressed in blue while girls are dressed in pink (or other colors that are symbolically attached to gender). From the moment that a baby enters the world it is inundated with symbols and language that shapes its conception of gender roles and gender stereotypes [20]. Language used by families to describe boys is often centered on physical characteristics and such themes as strength and agility, while language appropriated to girls by families might address affection, expressivity, daintiness, or fragility. These different approaches and treatment of babies by the family serve to shape behavior patterns and define boundaries. These boundaries are eventually internalized and become *identity standards*—the references in which interactions, settings, and contexts are used to compare the self to others [8,21–24]. Literature in this area examines the mechanisms that differentiate what is considered acceptable for male and female behavior, and how such behavior evolves over time.

2.3. Homophily

One of the crucial distinctions to understanding how gender identities are learned by family socialization and perpetuated throughout life concerns *homophily*. Homophily describes the tendency for network connections to be same-sex rather than cross sex; it begins as soon as children are able to choose their playmates [25–28]. This homophily is linked to social process and emerges as children learn from their families and through experience that sex differences are permanent personal characteristics [26,29].

Boys and girls learn and develop in gendered subcultures which generally influence social networks and future interactions.

Literature concerning homophily generally addresses how males and females develop ties to others [30–33]. Some of this research addresses networks that evolve in adulthood, and other research examines the dynamics that develop between boys and girls that eventually lead to differentiated groups. Homophily and the literature on family gender dynamics examines how boys and girls are socialized differently to attach themselves to others. For example, when a father (or father and mother) teaches a son to be aggressive and encourages playing sports and doing activities that involve negotiating interchanges with others, the son will likely learn that appropriate behavior is to interact with a wide range of people in heterogeneous groups. When a mother (or mother and father) encourages a daughter to interact intimately with others and encourage more one on one playing, the daughter will likely internalize messages and cues that promote likewise behavior later in life. These identities that are internalized early during child socialization (both from the family and from other sources) serve to create a highly differentiated world of acceptable behavior [25]. The literature on homophily provides valuable insights to how males and females self-segregate into homogeneous groups, which many times are promoted and encouraged by the family.

2.4. *Psychoanalytic Perspectives on Gender*

I address psychoanalytic theory and the work within this field specifically to explain how socialization that occurs at the family level serves to create differentiated gender identities (during the time when family has the highest impact, both concerning proximal and temporal aspects of socialization). Psychoanalytic theory's treatment of gender hinges on two of Sigmund Freud's most important findings: the notion of *internal conflict* and the idea that we have an *unconscious* part of ourselves that motivates us but about which we are unaware [19]. These notions are important for understanding the differences in how males and females potentially learn gender differently from the family. While psychoanalytic theory might seem to be an odd juxtaposition for the study of gender and families, Freud was one of the first figures to posit gender as disconnected from biology—that gender is not destiny and innate but rather acquired [19].

The idea that males learn what it means to be masculine by acting in ways that are “not feminine” is a powerful element to the general understanding of gender. Based on psychoanalytic theories of gender, boys tend to have more difficulty achieving gender identities because of their close relationships with their mothers. While both boys and girls are socialized early by their mothers (or primary feminine figure perhaps), girls are provided with cues that they do not abandon as they age while boys must struggle to define their gender as what “isn't” like their mother [1]. This is especially true as males are more involved in such searching for cues to determine acceptable behavior than are females.

The efficacy and validity of Freud's theories have been severely criticized over the years, and his major theories have perhaps limited use for many aspects of sociology and social psychology (let alone the sociology of the family!). The main utility of his work is used here to show that boys learn masculinity as an *oppositional construct* to femininity more than girls learn what it means to be feminine by what is

non-masculine. As mentioned briefly in the introduction, males are more apt to seek for cues concerning gendered behavior as they try to separate themselves from the identity of their mother.

Concerning the process of “learning” gender, identities are formed that provide information for how to act across various situations. The fact that gender construction occurs early by psychoanalytic processes is only one facet of gendered identity construction. The socialization from the family, both by mothers and fathers, supports and strengthens identities; children learn what acceptable behavior for specific circumstances is, and what behavior is generally *never* acceptable. This socialization is acquired differently by males and females, and the gender identities that are formed serve to differentiate the sexes in all levels of interaction. Bell provides an explanation for how gender identities are forged independently for girls and boys in the family setting:

[B]oys’ identification with masculinity, necessary to attain the correct gender role, happens through rejecting what stands for femininity. Boys come to recognize that what they are supposed to be is what their mothers are not...Rejecting femininity is then consonant with denigrating femininity, so that tasks, traits, and qualities associated with being feminine are considered less socially valuable than are tasks, traits, and qualities associated with being masculine ([19], p. 156).

This rejection of femininity occurs early, and perpetuates throughout the life course for males. Contemporary work in this area limits Freud’s emphasis on phallogocentric models of behavior (*i.e.*, the Oedipus complex that boys grapple with during youth) and other controversial themes (such as Freud’s assumption of heterosexuality, the subjectivity of what is the “mother”) [34–38].

2.5. *Doing Gender*

Another perspective on gender socialization is influenced by ethnomethodology and provided by West and Zimmerman (and others) [39,40]. In this perspective, gender is understood as created and maintained while actors assume and play out roles in society. Here, emphasis is placed on the fact that many roles and tasks in society tend to be gendered. Doing yard work, cooking in the kitchen, caring for children, working on a presentation for one’s boss—activities such as these often carry some form of gendered meaning, both for actors performing these tasks and for others observing them. When actors fulfil the expectations and scripts for these “gendered” tasks they are actually “doing gender”. Gender thus is something created and maintained in *practice*; doing a task associated with a specific gender creates and perpetuates meanings that define who one is and what it means to be a man or woman, or masculine or feminine. In the “doing gender” perspective, gender is a routine, methodical, and recurring accomplishment [39]. Fenstermaker and West elaborate on this perspective:

When we view gender as an accomplishment, an achieved property of situated conduct, our attention shifts from matters internal to the individual and focuses on interactional and, ultimately, institutional arenas. In one sense, of course, it is individuals who do gender. But it is a situated doing, carried out in the virtual or real presence of others who are presumed to be

oriented to its production. Rather than as a property of individuals, we conceive of gender as an emergent feature of social situations: both as an outcome of and a rationale for various social arrangements and as a means of legitimating one of the most fundamental divisions of society ([39], p. 4).

The “doing gender” perspective helps us understand the social constructionist aspect to gender and how gender identities are not static but rather fluid entities that are continually formed in social interactions. Gender may be fundamental, institutionalized, and enduring, but because actors “do gender” as a process in social settings gender meanings and identities are always capable of and ripe for change [39,40]. This perspective aligns with identity theory’s idea of gender identity commitment and salience, which will be discussed shortly. The more one “does gender” among others in interactions, the more likely ones gender identity will become more committed, and thus salient within the self.

2.6. Variants of Identity Theory and Gender: Nascent Stages of Inquiry

The idea that gender is learned differently by the sexes is prevalent in much of the literature on gender and socialization. This phenomenon is specifically examined to show how identities that are formed by the family become internalized. Research on gender or gender socialization in literature on identity theory often examines how internalized socialization processes are maintained by a control mechanism (known as an *identity control loop*, explained shortly) which compares internalized standards (*i.e.*, for appropriate gender behavior) to perceptions of others (*i.e.*, how others react and respond to behavior) and, through emotion, regulates interaction between individuals [41].

Work within identity theory [5] and identity control theory [42] examines how and why such identities perpetuate, and why they do not often change even when in situations that persuade altering patterns of behavior. When applied to gender, identity theory’s treatment of gendered identity construction is fascinating for many reasons. One of the most intriguing elements to gender is why human beings (who are supposedly rational creatures, or at least capable of rational thought and behavior) *continue* to operate according to gender expectations and stereotypes. Identity theory explains why such (sometimes) irrational behavior perpetuates, and also why both men and women adhere to the identities they learn early on that are acquired from the messages and cultural influences of family and society.

Of particular interest in this article is how gender is influenced by families and how family shapes and molds a child’s self-concept. This theme is common in the family literature, but treatment within the identity theory literature has not been as extensive. Indeed, one of the prime reasons for undertaking this project of applying the derivations of identity theory to socialization and family influence is to address the vacant areas within identity theory. While there is a dearth of research that deals directly with families and identity theory (especially identity control theory), there is work that addresses how children assimilate and internalize messages by primary caretakers [43,44].

Identity theory is used in such work as an underpinning to describing how identities emerge by family socialization, which generally occurs through the following three ways: (1) by ascription; (2) by identification (*i.e.*, when children claim or cultivate similarity to a parent; and (3) by discovery of

resemblances between oneself and a parent [45]. Identity theory offers a framework that shows how the ascribed, identified, and discovered elements to socialization develop. Research in this area examines the attachments children have to others (such as parents) and how gender ideals are transferred from generation to generation [46–50].

While there has been a glut of exploratory and descriptive research concerning gender socialization, much of it is not theoretical [51]. I use identity theory to show why gendered behavior emerges and perpetuates. Identities that are forged by individuals, families, and social structures can be explained by applying the phenomenon to the identity framework. The following discussion provides an explanation to how and why actors internalize gender, and why once they are internalized they are slow to change. In order to apply identity theory to family socialization and gender, the theory needs to be systematically developed. The following section briefly examines identity theory and its evolved sub-theory, identity control theory.

3. Using Identity Theories to Understand Gender

To understand how families socialize gender roles and construct identities, it is necessary to review the components of identity theory. Identity theory is social psychological theory that emerged from structural symbolic interactionism [7,52–58]. Similar to other structural symbolic interactionist theories, identity theory assumes that society is a patterned, stable social structure. Identity theory has mostly addressed role engagements, specifically how individuals create and maintain meanings in the multiple roles they play. Once actors develop identity meanings they are motivational toward behavior. In identity theory the self is a reflexive process that is revealed in social interaction and portrayed to others through identities that fit specific situations.

Variants of identity theory have three main emphases. One emphasis addresses the relationship among social structures, identities, and behavior, and how actors' many role identities are organized in a *salience hierarchy* [7]. A second emphasis addresses how *internal dynamics* within the self influence behavior [21,59,60]. The third area also specifically examines role identities, but conceives identities arranged not only in a salience hierarchy, but also in a *prominence hierarchy* [52]. In this variant of identity theory, identities are high in one's prominence hierarchy when they are seen as an *important* facet of the self. All three variants are important and add to the general understanding of identity within structural symbolic interactionism; however, most research has developed from the first two emphases and focused on the ideas of Stryker and Burke [9,61]. Therefore, the discussion below focuses on the two most prevalent variants of identity theory that have established empirical research programs.

3.1. Identity Forms: Person, Role, and Social Identities

Identity theory assumes that the self is comprised of multiple identities. Based on the work of James [62], identity theory posits that there are as many different selves as there are different positions one holds in the social structure (and also as many selves as there are individuals to whom one is connected). These identities determine how an actor behaves when *alone*, while playing a *role*, or when attached to a *group*.

Thus, identities are commonly classified in three ways: *person identities*, *role identities*, and *group identities* [9,61]. *Person identities* refer to the self-meanings that allow an actor to realize a sense of individuality. Person identities are self-meanings such as being *dominant*, *competitive*, *caring*, or *honest* [63]. These identities are often activated because they are not generally unique to any specific circumstance; they rather apply across many situations. *Role identities* (e.g., athlete, worker, student, *etc.*) are defined by the meanings one attributes to the self while performing a role. These meanings emerge from socialization and through culture, as well as by the unique, individual assessment of what a role means for an actor. Role identities are a combination of *shared* and *idiosyncratic* meanings which are developed over time and played out by an actor during interactions [9]. *Social identities* describe identity meanings actors have when they identify with groups or categories (e.g. Mexican, American, Muslim, NRA member, *etc.*). When one has a social identity others are categorized as either *similar* or *different*, depending on whether others are classified as part of the in-group or out-group. Social identities allow actors to create a sense of unity with others and share common bonds, and provide mutual reinforcement to act in various ways. Social identities also allow actors to feel good about themselves (*i.e.*, social identities have a self-enhancement dimension), as well as reduce uncertainty about their environment. All three types of identities can operate simultaneously, indeed in many situations actors have multiple identities activated—including role, social, and personal identities.

3.2. Identity Salience: Stryker's Identity Theory

Gender socialization and gendered identities are greatly a function of identity salience. To address how this operates a more detailed look at Stryker's work is necessary. Stryker's hierarchical approach to identity seeks to explain how individuals will behave in a situation based on how well identity meanings match the meanings in a situation [61]. Behavior is a function of how *salient* and *committed* identities are for actors as they interact with others in the social structure [64]. *Identity salience* refers to the probability that an identity will be invoked by the self or others in social situations; *identity commitment* refers to the degree to which actors' relationships to others depend on specific roles and identities. The more committed one is to an identity, the more salient an identity will be. The more salient an identity, the more likely a person will perform roles that are consistent with role expectations associated with the identity, perceive a situation as an opportunity to enact an identity, and seek out situations that provide an opportunity to enact the identity [9,61]. Identities that are regularly committed to are the identities that are invoked most often across situations. Past research that addresses these aspects of identity has examined how one's religious identity influences behavior. This research showed that actors who are committed to relationships based on religion have highly religious identities and seek out opportunities to behave in ways aligned with the identity. These identities are a function of the amount of time people spend doing religious activities [6]. Stryker's work generally emphasizes how the salience hierarchy for identities determines human behavior because the relative salience of one's identity directly influences choice and action—the higher an identity in the hierarchy, the higher the likelihood the identity will be activated, and played out in a social encounter [61,64].

3.3. Gender as a Person, Role, and Social Identity: Perpetuating Gendered Behavior

Identity theory helps to explain why gendered behavior and gender stereotypes that are learned through family socialization perpetuate over the life-course. In brief, gender identities are *diffuse* identities can assume *any* of the three types of identities [65]. One's masculinity or femininity can be engaged and triggered by various situations and are not specific to person, role, or social identities. The interactions that occur while occupying any (or all) of these roles is often based on internalized beliefs about gender and appropriate behavior of one's gender, and these interactions sustain the gender system as a whole; even when social structural conditions change, gender cues that are internalized by families and in youth serve to maintain the stability of human behavior (and behavior that is gendered) [25]. Identities based on gender affect the basic rules that people use to frame interaction [40,66]; the fact that gender can emerge in person, role, and social (or group) identities shows how powerful perceptions of gender are [67]:

Interacting with another requires at least a minimal cultural definition of who self and other are. Perhaps because it is a simple, fast, habitually used cultural dichotomy, research shows that people automatically sex categorize (*i.e.*, label as female or male) any concrete other with whom they interact, even when other definitions, such as teacher-student, are available ([25], p. 192).

The following discussion addresses how gender can be a person, role, or social identity, and links much of this identity spectrum to the socialization that occurs during youth and in the family.

3.4. Gender as a "Person" Identity

To review, person identities describe the set of meanings that are tied to and sustain the self as an *individual* rather than sustaining a role or group [9]. Culture, and most importantly, socialization impacts the dimensions of meanings which form the basis for one's "person" identity [68]. For example, these identities may take the form of being *dominant* or *submissive*; these are traits that are not usually internalized equally between boys and girls while socialized by the family, and subsequently they are also not traits that equally resemble men and women as adults. Males tend to learn that dominance, autonomy, and aggression are linked to their gender; females grow up in surroundings that promote being collectivistic, expressive, and connected [37,69]. Socialization along these tracts begins as soon as babies are born, and families help to cultivate person identities for their kin according to gender.

Person identities are generally *salient* identities; they are triggered in many situations and figure into many interactions, relationships, and behaviors [68]. For example, a wife who's has a person identity of being compassionate is likely to exhibit compassionate behavior in many situations. Or, a father who is highly controlling is likely to attempt to control many facets of his surroundings. Since person identities are activated across many situations, they are especially powerful agents of socialization for children. Because the family is a primary source of learning behavior and norms, these person identities are internalized and eventually emulated by observing adults and others. Coupled with the fact that many characteristics of person identities tend to vary according to gender, it is in the family setting that gender differentiation is first learned and internalized. Since person identities are often activated, they perpetuate

and solidify over time. Boys who are encouraged to be assertive become men who are defined by the same characteristics. Girls that learn compassion, caring, and expressivity become women with the same internalized identity standards. Person identities are salient, individually characteristic identities that encompass many of the traits associated with gendered behavior. This typology of identity especially shows how individuals, while unique entities, still internalize personal mannerisms and identities that are in line with expected gender behaviors. These expected behaviors emerge from various sources, but initially from the family.

3.5. Gender as a “Role” Identity

Considering that role identities include the meanings that a person attaches to themselves while performing roles, it is easy to understand how gender expectations, behavior, and stereotypes perpetuate when engaged in role taking. Role identities are socialized identities; the meanings of specific roles are learned by considering the context of the role and the social surroundings in which it is played. Role identities thus are learned early on, and many of the different roles actors learn and play are based on *differentiated* expectations for behavior; this differentiation is often gendered.

For example, the family is especially defined by role identities. The role of mother, father, son, daughter, grandmother, grandfather, husband, wife, *etc.* are all role identities that are based within the family. These roles also share a common theme: they are based on *sex*, and sex is highly correlated with gender. It is also interesting how role identities share many characteristics of person and social identities; gender, being a diffuse characteristic, defines *all* types of identities. The following passage and subsequent example explain in detail how role identities define the family structure:

[T]he meanings associated with role identities are both shared and idiosyncratic, and individuals must negotiate the latter with others who may have a different set of understandings about role identity meanings. Whatever the identity meanings, they are linked to the meanings implied by one’s role behavior; in other words, there is correspondence between these self-meanings while in a role and role behavior ([9], p. 89).

For example, the role identity of “mother” may involve meanings of being *nurturing* and *caring*; the performance of mothering matches these meanings as in feeding and bathing a child or engaging in warm and intimate interactions. The role identity of husband may include meanings of *powerfulness* and *control*, and the behavior of husband should match these meanings by being the one who makes the major decisions in the family [9].

The oppositional characteristic of role identities is also privy to gender. Role identities are based on a self/other dichotomy; roles cannot exist alone—rather they are defined as *alternatives* to other roles [59]. For example, one cannot be a student without the existence of an alternate other who is a teacher, and vice versa; one cannot be a medical doctor without there being patients. In line with the previous discussion of psychoanalytic theories of gender and families, one learns what it means to be male or female in reference (and against) to the alternate gender. Learning behavior then is a form of role-taking. Boys that identify with the roles of their fathers are likely to also learn that many of those roles are defined by what behavior

is prevalent and acceptable; this socialization operates similarly for girls. Of course, boys and girls can interpret roles of the opposite-sex parent, but gender is likely to be salient here as well. For example, the roles of parent and child are abstract categories, but the ways in which these roles are played is contingent on what sex the parent and children are. Treatment of the “child” by the “parent” is likely to vary according to whether the child is a boy or a girl; role taking thus involves gender. Here identity theory shows how gender is socialized across many situations, in families and throughout the life course. Gender is socialized into person identities, and gender operates while assuming roles as well.

3.6. Gender as a “Social” Identity

Social identities represent an individual’s group memberships [70], and concern an individual’s participation in such collective categories as political affiliation, religion, or nationality. Libertarian, Jew, and American are examples of social identities that a person can assume. Culture, and especially socialization influence the meanings of different group memberships and provide cues for what behavior is expected from such memberships [9]. While many social categories refer to identities that are assumed in adulthood (*i.e.*, being a Republican likely is a function of age), the family is often the primary group that nudges individuals toward the groups in which one eventually becomes attached. Some group memberships are based on gender, and many groups are defined by gendered behavioral norms and expectations.

One’s gender identity is socialized early on in one’s life, and it is in the nascent stages of development where individuals learn how being a boy or girl means more than simply assuming a role; it also means sharing similar viewpoints and behavioral expectations with a larger group of similar gendered individuals. For example, parents who place their children in gendered organizations (such as Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts) contribute to the creation of a gendered social identity. Girl Scouts are what girls “do”; Boy Scouts are what boys “do”. Here children learn norms and expectations that come to be labeled as masculine or feminine. Little girls may accompany mothers to gatherings with other women; little boys may go to sporting events with fathers. Each of these activities instills a sense of the things females and males commonly do in opposition to one another, and in these activities a sense of social identification with one’s particular gender emerges.

It is easy to see why gender can be conceived as a social identity when considering that individuals often refer to others of same or different gender as part of one’s in-group or out-group. For example, a woman who proclaims, “We are women, hear us roar!” is referencing gender as a social category, *i.e.*, as a *group* in which she belongs, not as a role or idiosyncratic personal characteristic. Notions of gender being a group are commonly found in feminist literature, and many social organizations center on gender differences for inclusion (e.g., the National Organization for Women (N.O.W.) and Mothers against Drunk Driving (M.A.D.D.).

This type of gender socialization certainly occurs in the family, but it is particularly evident in such socializing agents as schools. For example, the idea that boys learn what it means to be masculine by attempting to do that which is “not feminine” is evident in the patterns and characteristics of schoolyard

play [71,72]. Research has shown that boys tend to play in large groups (*i.e.*, by playing sports that have multiple member teams, *etc.*) while girls tend to form smaller, more intimate relationships. This phenomenon is potentially prevalent more in school settings than in the family as there are more opportunities for tactics of inclusion and exclusion for children at school (*i.e.*, there is simply a larger congregation of individuals at school than there is at home). The social identities that boys form are likely to be different than the social identities formed by girls. Since social (or group-based) identities are defined by their uniformity of perception and action among group members [9,73], it might be posited that boys learn to incorporate social identities earlier than do girls. If this is so, it is aligned with the idea that boys are socialized to be leaders and to be competitive while girls are socialized to be caretakers and supportive, and also with the fact that men tend to have more powerful positions within social networks than do women [28,74–76].

Social identities are not universally developed by all individuals. They rather are similar to person identities and role identities in that gender socialization (whether from the family or otherwise) greatly determines how identities are formed and maintained. The socialization that children receive by parents or significant authority figures (uncles, grandparents, *etc.*) within the family align children into separate tracts that are dependent on gender.

The previous discussion has shown that while there are different types of identities that are either constantly, usually, or occasionally activated, these identities are greatly predicated on gendered behavioral expectations that are socialized during the early stages of development. Identity theory's triadic typology of identity (person, role, and social) is greatly defined by gender; families socialize children to be individuals, assume roles, and eventually determine group membership. All such forms of identity involve gender and all have varying levels of expectations for how males and females should act according to traditional gender ideals.

3.7. *Salience and Commitment: Identity Hierarchy and Gender Construction*

An application of identity theory to gender is incomplete without a discussion of identity salience and commitment. As described previously, salience refers to the probability that an identity will be activated in a situation; commitment refers to the number of actors that one has connection to through an identity and how strongly one is attached to others based on the identity. Since gender is a diffuse characteristic that is emergent across multiple situations, it is therefore a salient identity much of the time. Whether operating in personal, role, or social identity categories, gender can be a highly salient (and committed) aspect of the self. To understand how the gender identity becomes salient we first need to see how it first becomes committed, because identity commitment determines identity salience.

The “gender” identity becomes committed as children become more embedded in social networks, as they are introduced to others and forge new relationships. Since gender meanings of some kind define most social settings and social interactions [77], it is sensible to posit that the more individuals a child interacts with in their environment, the more committed they will become to their gender identity. Certain situations and relationships will increase commitment to the gender identity, depending on how many

individuals a child interacts with and how strongly attached a child is to those specific individuals. For example, a child who every day plays with a group of same-sex (or even different-sex) children may develop a more committed gender identity than a child who spends most of their time playing alone. This would occur because the child who plays more with others has the opportunity to play out the meanings of the identity among others in their environment. Over time each encounter with such others offers additional opportunities to play out identity meanings, and the identity becomes a mechanism by which one is connected to the others. As children interact with others and play out their gender identity it becomes more committed. As the identity becomes more committed, it becomes more salient.

Boys' and girls' (and consequentially men's and women's) friendship networks are often gendered [15,17]. These friendships are often based on gender roles—boys tend to play rougher, girls' play is often defined by sharing. Gender, being salient across many situations, serves as a mechanism of perpetuating interaction norms and also replicates the social structure. Gender identities that are developed, socialized, and internalized early (a function of the family's proximity and influence on shaping conceptions of reality) become references for acting in various contexts [78,79]:

Gender is a diffuse status characteristic (a characteristic that is not attached to a specific skill) in interaction. When activated (as it is in most encounters), it invokes cultural assumptions that men are competent and valuable and that women are incapable and not to be taken seriously; thus women are placed at a disadvantage ([65], p. 195).

This offers an explanation to why women generally are treated as subordinates in many areas in society (in terms of unequal salaries, *etc.*). Because gender is salient across so many different situations, the behavioral cues that have been stabilized (which are largely based on stereotypes and traditional myths about how the sexes should act) over time perpetuate the social order. Gender increases as a salient identity as children are socialized by the family and other sources of socialization, and this process replicates itself over the generations, perpetuating the behavior, expectations, and hence inequalities between the sexes that still exist today.

Identity theory explains how gender is diffuse and exists as a highly salient identity, whether characterized as *person*, *role*, or *social*. The socialization process that begins with the family serves to cultivate all types of identities and provides references to self and others. Gender and family socialization are thus enmeshed together; gender transferred across generations both directly and reflexively. Identity theory might not explain the origin of such a phenomenon, but it does offer strong evidence to how and why such gendered characteristics differ between the sexes and why they perpetuate over time.

Now that the traditional tenets of identity theory have been applied to gender and family socialization, I turn to a derivative of identity theory which more closely examines how gender identities serve as *control mechanisms* for individuals during interactions.

4. Using Identity Control Theory to Understand Gender

Burke *et al.*'s work, often referred to as identity control theory, addresses the internal workings of the self as a cybernetic control model [7,52,53,58–60,80]. The emphasis in identity control theory is on how

identity and behavior are linked by common meanings. When one understands the meanings an actor has for a specific identity, one can predict the meanings associated that actor's behavior. The process of "matching" identity meanings to behavior operates as a perpetual control system [21]. Here internal identities serve as standards that influence behavior. Identities are sets of meanings attached to the self—these meanings provide references for individuals.

In the identity control model, identities are "activated" when situational meanings match the meanings of an identity. More specifically, the triggering of an identity activates an internal feedback loop that compares one's perceptions (called *reflected appraisals*) of who they are to how they are seen by self and others in the environment. The feedback loop is a process in which an actor has a *standard* (self-meanings), an *input* (self-perceptions), a *comparator* (which compares the input to the standard), and an *output* (behavior). More broadly, the first component of the identity control model (the *identity standard*) refers to the *meanings* one attaches to an identity. The second component (the *input*) refers to the *perceptions* and self-relevant meanings from a situation which includes self-perception and the meaningful feedback obtained from others (reflected appraisals). The third component (the *comparator*) refers to a process of *comparison* between the perceptual input and the identity standard. The fourth component (the *output*) refers to the individual behavior which results from the comparison of *self meanings* to *others' reactions* [61]. The function of this feedback loop and identity process is to match situational inputs or perceptions with the identity standard. When the process is interrupted, *i.e.*, the comparator does not align with the standard, an individual will experience negative emotion [21].

4.1. Identity Control Theory and Emotion

The identity control model incorporates the set of meanings attached to the self and how persons perceive themselves in situations. It also allows one to predict how people will act and *feel* in specific situations [63,65,81]. Stets and Burke state the basic tenets of the identity control process: "Any discrepancy between perceived self-in-situation meanings and identity standard meanings...reflects a problem in verifying the self, and as a result of this the individual experiences negative emotional arousal such as depression and distress...anger...and hostility" ([64], p. 222). The key to identity control theory is that any discrepancy between the standard and the perception results in *negative* emotion. This is the main mechanism for how gendered behavior perpetuates, as is addressed shortly.

4.2. Identity Control Theory and Gender

Identity control theory's treatment of gender focuses on the meanings actors place on sex categories and how gender forges one's identity. The identity control model therefore serves to explain how one will behave depending on the set of meanings they attach to their self-conception of gender and gender roles in society. For example, "male" and "female" are identities that have meanings attached to them. Males typically embody such traits as being dominant, competitive, and autonomous; females are usually seen as submissive and cooperative. These traits are internalized by men and women—they receive information concerning their gender identities from others around them. For example, a wife gets feedback from her

husband about who she is. The wife then can internalize this feedback and attend to it, either changing her behavior or not depending on the nature of the feedback. If the behavior is changed, it is likely that the husband will provide different feedback that is more in line with the new behavior. Contrastingly, if the new behavior does not alter subsequent feedback the wife receives from the husband, the meanings of the wife's identity standards may change (albeit slowly).

Meanings of gender are standards for both males and females in the identity control model, and behavior aligns with the standard until a perception has been made that signifies a dissonance between the standard and behavior (this perception coming from the actions and appraisals of others). When this dissonance occurs, the actor will alter behavior so as to gain appraisals that re-align with the identity standard. For example, a male that identifies himself as highly masculine (*i.e.*, very strong, aggressive, and direct) will likely be distressed if another tells him that he reacts like a woman in certain situations. Because the man's self-defined identity standard is that of ultra-masculinity, the man will feel negative emotion. The man will then attempt to alter his behavior, perhaps using more "masculine" mannerisms in order to realign the reflected appraisals back to match the identity standard. This also works for a female who sees herself as ultra-feminine. If she receives information that she is acting as a man would, or if her gender is perceived as ambiguous, negative emotion will ensue. The incorporation of emotion is a prime advantage of identity control theory. Again, this is discussed in more detail later when addressing how emotion serves to control and perpetuate gender identities.

Identity control theory offers an agentic explanation of how gender meanings are constructed by actors through social processes. Men tend to have identity standards that are defined by autonomy, agency, and independence; women tend to have identity standards that are defined by connectedness, expressivity, and compassion. These gender characteristics are emergent and internalized continually as men and women experience the social world. Identity control theory therefore provides sociologists with a powerful schema that shows how gender is constructed, defined, and perpetuated.

4.3. How Identity Control Theory Operates to Control Gendered Behavior

The basic mechanism for controlling one's behavior is *emotion* [21,82–84]. While most work within Identity control theory examines behavior as the result of the comparison of the standard and the perceptions of others, emotion operates as a perpetual control system for gender ideology. When an actor acts in ways that are dissonant with their identity standard, negative emotion ensues. Here the emotional reaction to the dissonance is seen as an effect of the disruption in the control loop. However, emotion, specifically the *fear* and *dislike* of experiencing negative emotion, operates as a mechanism that solidifies gendered behavior. I examine this more generally and address how family socialization and subsequent gendered behavior is explained by identity control theory.

When children are socialized by their parents, they are immersed in a world with which they have nothing to compare; the family during infancy and beyond serves not as a passive transmitter of culture but rather an active agent in screening in and screening out elements of culture [15]. This process of socialization and gender construction is accomplished in two ways: (1) by means of *activities* (such as

playing with others, visiting places, participating in sports, *etc.*); and (2) through *comment* and *comparison* (*i.e.*, evaluating such activities and the people who do or not participate in them [15]). Through these processes, gender is constantly developed. Boys and girls learn what behavior means and henceforth attach identity expectations to behaviors. These identity expectations become identity standards for boys and girls that are strengthened by repeated comparisons between the internalized expectations and subsequent appraisals of behavior. When boys and girls act in ways consistent with their specific gender, they are supported and reaffirmed. When they act in ways discordant with gender ideals they are sanctioned, and experience negative emotion. Identity standards become more and more stable as behavior affirms the standard; negative emotion is continually avoided by acting in accord with the gendered expectations required by mothers, fathers, siblings, and eventually greater society.

This continued “avoidance” of negative emotions that ensue from disruptions in the identity control process serve a *manifest* and *latent* function: to allay stress and bad feelings as well as to reaffirm and maintain the social order, respectively. Reducing stress and limiting experiences of negative emotion is a manifest function of staying within “acceptable” gender boundaries; actors that continually attempt to keep the identity control loop flowing smoothly are inadvertently providing cues to themselves and others concerning what behaviors are acceptable (hence the latent function—reaffirming the societal structure). Consistent with the previous discussion on identity theory, behavior such as this is often gendered (as gender is a diffuse status characteristic and salient across many situations) [65,77,79,81].

5. Conclusions

This article has examined the ways in which family socialization can be applied and explained by an identity framework. While the locus of gender, gendered stereotypes, and gendered behavior remains relatively obscure, identity theory and identity control theory can identify how and why such phenomena perpetuate. The aim of this endeavor was to further the understanding of the socialization process, especially the mechanisms of how gender ideals are maintained and replicated. This was attempted by incorporating a theoretical structure that is yet to be fully fused and incorporated with the existent literature on family and socialization. Identity theory’s explanation for how role typologies are defined by gender and how gender is salient across multiple situations, as well as identity control theory’s use of emotion as a control system both serve to provide a better understanding of why males and females experience the world in different ways.

Further research is needed to test the generalizations made in this article. This is especially true for work concerning the family setting and child socialization. Much of the current research in identity theory that examines the family addresses such themes as marriage and the division of household labor; the socialization process (especially in the earliest stages of socialization) is a relatively vacant area that needs to be explored. It is hoped that the conceptual application of identity theory and identity control theory that is presented here will provide an impetus toward testing how and to what degree such claims are empirically verifiable. Many aspects of identity theory and its derivatives are still in their relative infancy

as theories; the application of these theories to gender, socialization, and the family is a logical step to make the theories more robust and sociologically viable.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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