

Understanding Gender Socialization

Every society organizes itself around strict ideals about what it means to be normal. Normalcy codes separate worlds of men and women by ascribing to each sex strict expectations about what it means to be masculine and what it means to be feminine. The word ascription means that your “birth defines you.” The ascribing of human traits, which we label feminine, are ascribed to women. They include being soft, dependent, emotional, care-giving, deferring, forgiving and selfless. The human traits we ascribe to men we call masculine, and they include being strong, expert, dominant, superior, intelligent, entitled and independent. This division of human behavior is what we now refer to as gendering. Gendering splits human behavior into two distinct worlds. To be “gendered” means that we are viewed as women or men first, before anything else is known about us. That viewing is accompanied by preconceived ideas about who we are and how we should behave, based on our sex alone.

Since our identities as human beings interpenetrate throughout our lives, the expectations of others are important to us from the very moment we are born. In order to feel accepted by society, children absorb cultural rules and grow up thinking of them as natural, normal and inevitable. These ideas about masculinity and femininity are learned by the child in a variety of ways. The first gender learning begins slowly, by watching their parents, who are the main socializers. It continues as the child listens to their parents and other significant adults who they accept as “authority” in their lives. The “self” of the child depends on the gender learning process to build their identity and understand the world in which they live. The messages will change as the child grows into various stages of maturity. They become more intense and more complicated. Conversely, lack of conformity brings about negative consequences, the greatest of which is alienation.

So the dependent child at all stages of life internalizes so deeply the cultural messages of masculinity and femininity that their own true, unique self struggles to survive and, at times, disappears into our deep subconscious minds, creating an intra-psychic split. “Self” is not listened to or used as a source of our deepest truth. No one explains this system of socialization because few people understand it. There is no “signed consent” on our part. There is “no release”, either, except through conscious awareness that includes a careful examination of our humanness which must include a program of personal resocialization. Resocialization calls upon each person to systematically recognize the “myths” of gendering and its destructive influence on our self-perception. Resocialization asks us to travel deep inside of our own personality to discover the subtle and profound ways gendering has controlled our thinking, feeling and social

interaction. That discovering is slow, and can be painful at times, because by the time we make it, we've already paid the heavy price of cultural conformity.

However, lifting the "yoke" of socialization frees us up to choose a life that belongs to us. We learn to be sensitive to ourselves without alienating others. We learn that our lives are more believable when the quality of our relationships relies on real dialogue, and that can only happen when we are authentic.

Authenticity evolves as we peel away the layers of cultural myths that have governed our lives. Now our "true self" can guide us because it re-emerges from the depths of uniqueness and consciousness. The reclaiming of our lives is liberating and refreshing, because it gives visibility to a realness we have been "silencing" for such a long time. Eventually, we come to realize that resocialization is desirable and possible within us and around us. We come to realize that, as we remake ourselves, we also help create a new world in which cultures honor what it means to be a "person" more than it honors the myths of normalcy for men and women. Behaviors we once distinguished as masculine or feminine are now accepted as the full gamut of human potential.