Human Development Models Applied to Transgender Children

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INTRODUCTION

For many individuals, gender is one of the very first defining characteristics of our lives. If an expecting family isn't already determining the sex (note here, sex – not gender) via ultrasound months before a due date, the first words muttered during a child's birth is the prideful declaration of "it's a boy!" or "it's a girl!" based on the external genital structures that child appears to have. However, most modern scientists and sociologists would recognize that gender – what is being assumed in this scenario – and sex – what is being observed – are not the same thing. For many children, gender is something that they discover and its biological base is not as strong as what was once assumed (Fast & Olson, 2018).

For many children, however, things aren't as simple. Not only do sex and gender develop at different points in the lifespan, but there is also a growing number of instances where the gender that a child identifies with does not "match" what would be socially expected because of their sex assigned at birth (males and boys, females and girls), which is what is called "transgender" in current society. However, an important caveat to note is that there is some ambiguity in the reasoning of this growth. Are there more transgender people (and especially children) now than there was before? Or, is the likelihood of being transgender moderately consistent but more people are being open and honest about their identity because of growing visibility and access to language and understanding?

When it comes to transgender identity, the age old question is often asked: Nature or nurture? While many have looked for biological explanations of gender diversity, many have moved more toward a nurture approach, given that gender in and of itself is socially constructed. Others have moved away from the nature vs. nurture debate entirely. Given the social and

environmental nature of gender, two theoretical models may prove quite interesting in this discussion: Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model, and Bandura's Social Learning Theory.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Like the population of transgender children it is discussing, it is important to note that the existing literature surrounding this topic is constantly growing. And as with any area of study that is growing, it is to be understood that the previously (and currently) existing body of work is small and underdeveloped (Steensma et al., 2013). With a large gap in available information working in tandem with active spreading of misinformation, the need for accurate research is dire. However, these dire circumstances also make clear that every new bit of information the research finds makes the truth about transgender children more clear and can have significant, positive impacts on this incredibly marginalized population.

Considering the direct relationship between a lack of support and understanding from parents and the transgender child's likelihood to become depressed or even attempt suicide, it is absolutely essential that a comprehensive understanding of gender identity in children is explored and made readily accessible, as this information can save lives (Simons et al., 2012). And while more information is needed, any and all information coming in is not inherently good. Between an inconsistent and unreliable history of diagnostic criteria for transgender children and continuing exploitation of said history by notably cisgenderist researchers who use their power to push their own biases against transgender individuals in clinical literature, it is important to note that there is a large misinformation crisis to address (Steensma et al., 2013).

One of the most notable topics that has been spread both in academic and public discourse has been surrounding a perceived lack of stability in children's senses of gender

identity. When cisgenderist researchers used vague and often inaccurate (by today's standards) criteria to assess gender dysphoria in children for their research, they exploited the subsequent results of not many children reporting a consistent sense of dysphoria as they aged and entering adulthood, labeling children's senses of their own gender as feeble and misleading, a rhetoric that is still prevalent in both academic and public conversation surrounding gender identity – especially in children (Steensma et al., 2013).

However, "misleading" is ironic here, as much of current literature surrounding gender identity in children says quite the opposite. In fact, research has recently shown that children – especially those of transgender experience and identity – have an incredibly strong understanding of gender and their own sense of identity. In addition, it is clearly showing in research that – when allowed to express and identify as their felt gender – these children are virtually no different than their cisgender counterparts of the corresponding gender. This congruence with their fellow children was experienced across a wide variety of components including object preferences and even the gender make-up of their peer group. As stated by the research itself, "the data reported here should serve as evidence that transgender children do indeed exist and that their identity is a deeply held one," (Olson et al., 2015).

Even more important than validating that transgender children do – in fact – exist, is acknowledging that the diversity of gender experience in humans, especially children, is a completely normal component of the human condition and should be treated as such. In continuing to acknowledge that gender is much more complicated than what originally has been stated in Western culture, many researchers are even imploring that researchers going forward be more intentional about including transgender children as a valid and normal variation for comprehensive study of gender development in children, and generally include them in any

research that discusses and studies children. There is an incredible opportunity, they suggest, to continue to be leaders in the fields of research and contribute to theories of gender development so that they may only strengthen over time (Fast & Olson, 2018).

THEORIES

With the constant debating of nature versus nurture surrounding gender identity – and a great many other topics – that occurs in a culture driven by etiology, there are a wide variety of theories that could address either side of the debate. Given the more modern understanding of gender as something that is socially constructed and varies from culture to culture, there is a strong argument to be made that theories that focus more on relational, systemic, and environmental factors that contribute to human development would be more appropriate to explain and understand gender identity. While there may be some biological predispositions that contribute to the formation of gender identity, they are simply that: a predisposition. In addition, it is important to note and validate many transgender individuals' expressed discomfort in biologically-based etiology research surrounding gender identity, because of potential misuse for purposes of genocide and eugenics if there were ever to be findings of a biological "source" of transgender identity that could be exploited. Of course, this fear has only been exacerbated by current political climates in the United States.

BRONFENBRENNER'S BIOECOLOGICAL MODEL

The first theory that could provide some useful insight in discussing gender and children is Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model. While noted for changing shape multiple times being known by many names, the foundation of Bronfenbrenner's understanding of development is an

important one with many contributions to our modern understandings of human nature and how

humans develop throughout the lifespan (Tudge et al., 2009).

At its base, the foundation of the model assumes the individual lies at the center of an

ecosystem, with various concentric rings of different systems expanding out from the center. At

the beginning of the circle is the microsystem. As the most central system in the model, the

components here are some of the most integral and most immediate. This will include

relationships with the individual's primary systems such as the family, school, work, etc. At the

next level is the mesosystem, which consists largely of interactions between different members

of the microsystem. As the model stretches farther from the center, components become far less

direct but no doubt still impactful, such as the exosystem being direct impacts to the microsystem

that indirectly impact the individual and the macrosystem which is comprised of overarching

components of the human experience like cultural and social beliefs, laws and policies, etc.

(Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994).

As time passed, criticism of the model led to Bronfenbrenner expanding it. Eventually,

Bronfenbrenner added an even outermore system, the chronosystem, which represented time and

historical context that can impact an individual's development in addition to the more internal

systems of the model (Tudge et al., 2009).

With these ecosystems established, they provided a framework with which to organize

and look at the various things that can impact an individual throughout their development, as

well as see the ways in which various systems can interact. In particular, Bronfenbrenner's model

looked at the process, person, context, and time – using these to frame greater conversation about

development. With the context established through the various systems, Bronfenbrenner could

assess the processes of interactions between and within these systems – the context – and how

they can impact the person and their unique characteristics at the core of the model (Tudge et al., 2009).

BANDURA'S SOCIAL LEARNING THEORY

While Bronfenbrenner's model allows for a comprehensive look at the systems impacting human development, Bandura's Social Learning Theory gets a bit more on the ground level and provides a more intimate look into how some of those impacts can look. At its very core, Bandura's Social Learning Theory is a very academic way to say "monkey see, monkey do." Humans, according to this theory, learn behavior by observing similar behaviors in social contexts when those behaviors are displayed by others. In combination with conditioning as a driving cognitive function in this process, behaviors displayed can have a rather profound impact on the individual who observes them. And in fact, this theory built off of research surrounding classical conditioning (McCullough Chavis, 2011).

As this theory developed, it was important to note several factors present in various social interactions and observations of behavior that could strongly influence the likelihood that an observed behavior would be learned and repeated by the individual making the observation. It is an obvious assumption that humans won't repeat every single action that they see. However, what are some of those defining factors that cause humans to want to repeat them?

First and foremost, individuals are more likely to repeat behaviors that are performed by someone they perceive as powerful. And with children? That could be nearly anyone – especially someone older and/or perceivably larger than them, literally holding power *over* them. In addition, which is where the classical conditioning comes in, an action that is met with reward or praise will be much more likely to be repeated. Lastly, any similarity that the individual can find

themselves bearing with the person doing the behavior will simply add extra points of motivation for the observing individual to want to repeat said behavior – given that humans are social creatures and want to feel a sense of belonging and community (Prati, 2012).

REVIEW & CONCLUSION

As mentioned previously, there are many merits on which either of the mentioned theoretical models would be beneficial when discussing the issue of transgender children. And with the many justifications each model has for being applied to this topic, there is obviously something to be desired in the other model.

For example, Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model is incredibly comprehensive, mostly to its benefit. If gender identity is to be recognized as a social construct and something that varies from culture to culture, it would be beneficial to use a model that has a wider scope and explicitly considers social and cultural contexts in a more comprehensive manner that would do more justice to that facet of gender identity.

On the contrary, however, where Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model provides comprehension and a rather wide scope, it can prove to be rather simplistic when getting to the specific systems and their potential impacts. While the process, person, context, and time component that was since added to the model is more helpful now that it's been implemented. However, the point still stands that what Bronfenbrenner gains in comprehension, it loses in specificity when applying to specific and complicated topics.

As for Bandura's Social Learning Theory, it proves to be quite the opposite in a lot of ways. While Social Learning Theory shares a lot of common foundation with the Bioecological Model in regard to environmental impacts on development, there is something so beautifully

simple yet direct about Social Learning Theory, especially when applying to a concept that is not so simple in and of itself. While Social Learning Theory is much more on the "ground level" in regard to human development, it is very clear in the how and why of it all, which is why I do think that it would be a preferable model in discussing the wide variety of complicated facets surrounding the experience of transgender children.

In addition to the common modern understanding that gender is a social construct, there is a lesser known modern understanding – that gender is performative. Gender is something that one *does* in a society to fit in. Children, as well as adults, are in a constant state of observing and learning how to "do" gender. As mentioned from the very beginning, society is placing an incredibly strong emphasis on gender from the beginning – telling children how to gender since day one in this world.

While the dogmatic nature of gender roles and cisheteronormative patriarchy in dominant discourse seem to have a moderately high success rate given the high volume of people who identify as cisgender and experience the gender that was modeled to them by their parents or other caregivers, we also have to recognize this is not something that children receive from an isolated source. Children do not exist in a parent-child vacuum, and are shown how to "do gender" in a vast multitude of ways in a gender-saturated society, through peers, other family members, media, school, etc. Children are in a constant state of window shopping for gender but not even aware that they are actively seeking out these cues and behaviors. Yes, dominant discourse may tell a child how to do gender "correctly," but it is not a perfect system. And sometimes, the classical conditioning in a child's brain sees how gender is done a different way and their mind says "I want that one," forever engraining that desire in their mind.

Now, this is not to say necessarily that Social Learning Theory would infer that every cisgender person is locked in a prison of their own mind, built by coercive dominant discourse and rigidly confining them from the limitless possibilities of gender. However, the signs are clearly there that dominant discourse can have at least some influence. Especially with the mentioned rapid growth in visibility of transgender identity and genders outside of a rigid binary structure, it's important to know this: transgender people aren't recruiting. No one is handing out pamphlets on Wednesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays. People are in a constant state of learning to do gender. More people are simply seeing direct challenge to the limits they've been told, and giving themselves permission to explore the possibilities of what they've known deep inside this whole time. In a world of limitless possibility, there's about as many ways to gender as there are people on the earth, and it's just getting started.

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