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Fashioning Gender Identity

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Based on observations in public places, Cahill notes the importance of socialization to the establishment of gender identity in children. People are taught, from their earliest years, how to recognize, interact with, and behave in ways that are appropriate to their gender. Many sociologists have argued that individuals' gender, as Cahill illustrates, is not socially lodged in their genitalia but in the way they act, look, and dress. Learning gender is a process that occupies a significant portion of parent-child interaction and is clearly visible among young age peers as well. You may have encountered this debate as nature vs. nurture, or the extent to which we are determined by biological predisposition or socially learned environmental conditions. While the answer may lie in a combination of the two, a sociological perspective generally looks more at nurture as a determining factor. Can you relate this to your own experiences as a child? Can you recall ways in which your parents may have dressed you, decorated your room, or treated you that helped to paint a gender image for you? Can you imagine a world that is truly androgynous, one that pays no attention to sex differences in people? How might that change society?

The transsexual ... Agnes changed her identity nearly three years before undergoing sex reassignment surgery. After five years of covertly consuming synthetic estrogens (Garfinkel 1967, pp. 285–288), two months of dieting, and much rehearsal, Agnes transformed herself into a female on a late August day in 1956.

> Taking a room in a downtown hotel, she changed into female clothes and went to a local beauty shop where her hair, which was short, was cropped and rearranged in the Italian cut Sophia Loren had made popular. (Garfinkel 1967, p. 145)

On her return home by bus that evening, Agnes was the proud recipient of several soldiers' attentions. Although still haunted by her past life as a male and

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the secret of her masculine genitalia, Agnes was a female for many if not most intents and purposes from that day forward.

Like the rest of Agnes's story, the manner of her identity transformation is of more than passing interest to students of social life. Agnes's masculine genitalia did not prevent her from being seen as a female nor did her pharmaceutically produced feminine form automatically make her a female in others' eyes. Rather, she secured her claim to a female identity by changing her clothing and hairstyle. The more general sociological lesson is obvious. In everyday social life, the identification of people as male or female has less to do with anatomical characteristics than with what Goffman (1963, p. 25) termed "personal front"—"the complex of clothing, make-up, hairdo and other surface decorations" the individual carries on his or her person. That is the complex of materials out of which male and female identities are commonly fashioned in our society. By implication, they may also be among the materials out of which self-identified males and females are biographically fashioned.

This article concerns the biographical fashioning of self-identified males and females in early childhood. During my 18 months as a volunteer staff member of both a university-affiliated and a parent cooperative preschool in Southern California, I observed the children who attended those schools under a variety of circumstances and interviewed a number of them and their parents. In addition, I subsequently recorded informal discussions with the parents of other children in fieldnotes. The following empirical exploration of the contributions of appearance management to young children's gender socialization is based upon these fieldnotes and others' observations and findings. . . .

ESTABLISHING GENDER IDENTITIES

In our society and probably most others, an infant's external genitalia are visually inspected moments after birth, and, in most cases, he or she is immediately identified as a boy or a girl. . . . [Although] parents are subsequently reassured of their infant's ascribed sex-class identity every time they change the infant's diapers or bathe him or her . . . others who have contact with the infant seldom have the benefit of that anatomical reassurance. Moreover, as the often reported "Baby X" studies suggest, we are not very adept at ascertaining the ascribed sex-class identity of a clothed infant in the absence of other identifying information. The adult participants in those two studies played with one of three infants who were dressed in either "a yellow jumpsuit" (Seavey, Katz and Zalk 1975, p. 105) or an undershirt and diapers (Sidorowicz and Lunney 1980, p. 70), and some were given no hint as to the sex-class identity of the infant with whom they played. When subsequently asked, the overwhelming majority of these uninformed participants misidentified the infant's ascribed sex-class placement. Such presumed indications of masculinity and femininity as body shape, physical strength (Seavey, Katz and Zalk 1975, p. 107) and frequency of smiling (Sidorowicz and Lunney 1980, p. 71) proved unreliable.

Yet . . . we implicitly consider an infant's ascribed sex-class identity as prescribing how we should view and treat him or her. When, for example, college

students were shown a videotape of an infant crying in response to the opening and closing of a jack-in-the-box, those who had been told that the infant was a boy attributed the crying to anger while those who had been told the infant was a girl reported that "she" was frightened (Condry and Condry 1976). It would seem that we respond not so much to infants but to sex-class identified infants. That is apparently why, despite the obvious risk of clever retorts at our expense, we sometimes ask an infant's accompanying caregiver the literally ambiguous question: "What is it?" We are not simply asking whether the infant is a boy or a girl but thereby also requesting guidance in how we should respond to and talk about him or her. It is seldom necessary to request such guidance, however.

For the most part, parents and other caregivers in our society silently announce their infants' sex-class identities "to whom it may concern" by draping and decorating infants in what might best be termed "sartorial symbols" of sex-class identities. They often color code infants in terms of the traditional masculine blue and feminine pink, commonly dress them in miniaturized versions of adults' sex-class associated costumes, and sometimes even tape bows to female infants' hairless heads. Such conventional, sartorial symbols of sex-class identities enable anyone who comes into contact with an infant to immediately identify the infant as a boy or a girl. In Gregory Stone's (1962, p. 106) phrase, they "invest" the infant with a sex-class identity.

Moreover, the sartorial investiture of infants with sex-class identities also serves indirectly to invest them with presumed male or female human natures. To borrow from Stone (1962, p. 106), "the responses of the world toward the child are differently mobilized" depending on whether there is a bow taped to or a baseball cap resting upon the child's head. For example, as the findings of [a] previously mentioned stud[y] suggest, we tend to view an infant who has a bow taped on her head as ... frightened rather than angry when she cries. In contrast, we tend to view an infant who is wearing a baseball cap as ... angry rather than frightened when he cries. Because of these divergent views of differently dressed infants, we tend to treat them differently and thereby encourage them to behaviorally express their presumed male or female human natures. The psychiatrist Robert Stoller (1968, pp. 62–63) once observed that "one can see evidence" of children's "unquestioned femininity or masculinity" by the time they begin to walk. That may be so, but much effort goes into producing this evidence not the least of which is the effort devoted to the sex-class management of infant's personal fronts. It is because of such efforts that we look for evidence of infants' masculinity or femininity and act so as to insure that they will provide behavioral evidence of such presumed male or female human natures.

RECOGNIZING GENDERED IDENTITIES

Although young children may be behaviorally expressing their presumed masculinity or femininity by the time they begin to walk, they are undoubtedly unaware that they are doing so until somewhat later in their biographies. Before they can appreciate the gender expressive significance of their behavior to others,

they must first learn that their social environment is populated by two distinct categories of persons. It is not until they begin to acquire their native language that they start to learn this fundamentally important lesson about the world into which they were born.

Young children's exposure to the everyday usage of such identifying verbal labels as "mommy" and "daddy," "girl" and "boy," and "lady" and "man" encourages them to sort people into sex-class related categories (Cahill 1986, pp. 299–302). Although it may be some time before they understand that such two-term collections of identifying verbal labels all point to a single, underlying system of dichotomous classification, children as young as two years of age identify clothed individuals in photographs as "mommies," "daddies," "boys," and "girls" with a high degree of accuracy. ... (Thompson 1975). However, it is doubtful whether young children would do so unless there were obvious perceptible similarities among and differences between these categories of persons. As a number of students of language acquisition have concluded ... perceptible similarities are the most important determinates of young children's categorical applications of their rudimentary vocabularies.

It seems that as children begin to acquire their native language they develop tentative hypotheses about the criteria on which others' application of sex-class related identifying terms is based. They then empirically test those hypotheses, heed others' responses to their own applications of sex-class related identifying terms, and thereby acquire a practical understanding of common associations between various aspects of personal appearance and sex-class identification. For example, the following occurred on a preschool playground. I (C) was sitting on the side of a sandbox, and a 35-month-old boy (S) was standing in between my legs. He reached up and tugged my beard.

S: That daddy! That daddy!

C: My beard?

S: Yeah. That daddy.

I later learned that this boy's father had been clean-shaven since before the boy's birth. Thus, rather than indicating that his "daddy" and I shared this perceptible characteristic, the boy was apparently testing his hypothesis that a beard was a sign of "daddiness," of membership in that class of persons called "daddy."

As might be expected, some individuals' personal fronts are confusing to young children in this regard. For example, I (C) was holding a 39-month-old girl (K) when a male preschool teacher (J) with a full beard and mid-back length hair which was gathered together into a "pony tail" approached. The young girl looked at me and then at the teacher.

K: You a boy. He a girl 'cause got a pony tail.

C: Oh yeah?

K: (looking at J) You got a pony tail.

J: Yes.

The young girl then looked back at me and grinned. While this girl seemed to recognize that the teacher was not "really" a girl, she obviously considered a

"pony tail" a sign of "girlness." Indeed, she may well have been attempting to elicit a response from either the teacher or me which would clarify the confusing sex-class identifying implications of the teacher's personal front.

For the most part, however, our sex-class related management of both our own and our children's personal fronts does heighten the perceptual similarity of males and of females and the perceptual dissimilarity between males and females. It is primarily these perceptual similarities and differences that direct young children's application of sex-class related identifying terms in our society. . . . Although adults sometimes do instruct young children about the defining anatomical characteristics of males and females, those instructions are often more confusing than enlightening in a society in which bodies are typically clothed. For example, I was once approached by a 37-month-old girl on a preschool playground who informed me "you a girl." When I asked why I was a girl, she replied: "Cause no got penis." This girl was apparently applying a recently learned but misleading lesson when no one has a visible penis as is commonly the case in our society.

Like this girl, children apparently do take adults' instructions regarding the sex-class identifying implications of anatomical characteristics to heart, but those instructions are simply of little practical utility or significance to them. When, for example, four- to six-year-olds were asked what was the most important consideration in deciding whether someone was a boy or a girl, many referred to the genitals, yet hair length had the greatest influence on their sex-class related identifications of "anatomically correct" dolls with different body shapes and wigs (Thompson and Bentler 1971).We adults may implicitly assume that anatomical characteristics are the most obvious grounds for sex-class identification, but that is not obvious to young children as the following anecdote dramatically illustrates.

> A colleague's four-year-old son and his father enrolled in a father-son swimming class at the local YMCA. The participants swam in the nude, but some of the fathers wore bathing caps. On the way home from the first session, the boy asked his father why so many "women" had attended the class. When his father inquired "what women," the boy replied: "You know, in the hats."

Regardless of what adults may tell young children, they know that it is bathing caps, hairstyle, clothing and other surface decorations which make someone either a mommy or a daddy, a woman or a man, or a boy or a girl in everyday social life. That is the lesson they learn through observation and practical experimentation with the identity transforming power of appearance management.

EXPLORING GENDERED IDENTITIES

Soon after children acquire their native language, as George Herbert Mead first suggested, they start behaviorally to explore the social identities or "roles" which are implicitly encoded in the everyday usage of that language. In Mead's (1934, pp. 150–151, emphasis added) words, the play of young children . . . is play *at*

something. A child plays at being a mother, at being a policeman: that is, it is taking different roles.

Moreover, as Stone (1962, p. 109) noted some years later, this role playing commonly involves "dressing out" of the roles or social identities which others consider the child's own and "dressing into" those which he or she is temporarily assuming. For example, the younger children in the preschools at which I observed often assumed the identities of so-called "superheroes" such as "Superman," "Batman," and "Wonderwoman." Appearance management was an integral part of this role playing. The children would fashion a "superhero" cape out of paper and tape or by tying the sleeves of their jackets around their necks. When the materials necessary to fashion such a cape were not available, the children would protest that they could not play "superhero" despite reassurances from teachers and other adults to the contrary. Moreover, children typically would not answer to their given names when wearing one of these makeshift capes but only to one of the identifying terms associated with a "superhero" cape. To adult eyes, these children may have only been playing, but it seems in their own eyes they were magically transforming themselves into different kinds of persons by altering their personal fronts.

It is particularly notable in the context of this analysis that the younger children at these preschools paid little attention to inconsistencies between the gendered identities which they sartorially assumed and their ascribed sex-class identities. For example, it was not uncommon for young boys to assume the identity of "Wonderwoman" nor for girls to assume the identity of "Superman." It was also not uncommon for these children to engage in what adults call "crossdressing." Most did so occasionally, and some did so routinely as illustrated by the following excerpt from an interview of a mother (M) of a 35-month-old girl.

M: You know my daughter S——has this short hair cut and people are always saying what a nice boy she is.

C: Does she get upset?

M: No. In fact, some days she comes down and says that she wants to be a boy today. It's amazing how she already knows about clothes and all. When she wants to be a boy she puts on jeans and finds dirty socks. Not dirty, but older white socks that are . . .

C: Dingy?

M: Yeah, dingy.

Like Agnes, this young girl was already a sophisticated, practical sociologist. She knew that by altering her personal front she could transform her sex-class identity in others' eyes, and as Cooley (1922) reminds us, our identities are little more than reflections in others' eyes.

However, those with whom a child has regular contact are typically informed of his or her ascribed sex-class identity. Although they may temporarily indulge the child's sartorial assumption of gendered identities which are inconsistent with his or her ascribed sex-class identity, in most cases they will

eventually discourage him or her from doing so. For example, the following occurred in a preschool classroom. Two 40-month-old boys (S, T) were playing doctor when a 38-month-old boy (E) who was wearing a "dress-up" dress and high heeled shoes approached.

E: Fix me (pointing to the unfastened zipper in the dress).

S: You're not a girl.

T: You're a boy.

S: Those are girl things.

E hurriedly slips out of the dress and kicks off the shoes.

Through experiences such as this, most children quickly learn that the alchemy of appearance management is limited. Ultimately, it does not enable them to escape the sex-class identity with which others have and continue to invest them.

In addition to discouraging "cross-dressing," others also encourage young children to "dress into" their ascribed sex-class identity. For example, a preschool aide (A) encountered a 39-month-old girl (S) who was dressed in a bright yellow sunsuit bordered with lace and matching sun bonnet. The girl snapped the straps of the sunsuit with her thumbs and looked at the aide.

S: I got lace.

A: You're all girl aren't you S?——You're so sweet.

At other times this encouragement of children's sartorial expression of ascribed sex-class identities takes the form of invidious comparisons as the following illustrates.

> A 43-month-old and 37-month-old girl who are both wearing summer dresses are sitting on a preschool playground. Another 37-month-old girl who is dressed in jeans and a smock is standing nearby. A preschool aide walks by and addresses the two girls in summer dresses. "There's a couple of pretty girls." The other girl pulls her smock away from her body, looks at the aide, and remarks: "My dress." In response, the aide asks: "K——, why doesn't your mom ever put you in a real dress?"

In a variety of ways, therefore, both adults and older peers implicitly instruct young children that they are obliged to manage their personal front so that it clearly announces their ascribed sex-class identity. Others thereby implicitly inform young children that they have little choice but to embrace that identity as their own. . . .

EMBRACING GENDERED IDENTITIES

Some years ago, Nelson Foote (1951, p. 7) noted that self-identification involves both appropriation of and commitment to an identity. He then observed that

> . . . the compulsive effect of identification upon behavior must arise from absence of alternatives, from unquestioned acceptance of the identities cast upon one by circumstances beyond his control (or thought to be). (Foote 1951, p. 19)

In most cases, others' responses to a child's experimentation with the identity transforming power of appearance management prevents the child from escaping his or her ascribed sex-class identity. From the child's perspective, that identity is cast upon him or her by circumstances that are beyond his or her sartorial control. Thus . . . ascribed sex-class identities do begin to have a "compulsive" effect on most children's behavior by the end of the preschool-age period of their biographies. Having been fashioned into self-identified males and females by others, they begin to fashion themselves into gendered persons.

One of the most obvious indications of older preschool-age children's commitment to their ascribed sex-class identity is their unswerving dedication to its sartorial expression. For example, a 60-month-old boy who had unusually long hair which was often gathered together into a pony tail attended one of the preschools at which I observed. One morning the boy's mother visited his preschool teacher to protest the school's dress code. When the boy's mother started to gather his hair into a pony tail that morning, he told her that his teacher had said that he could not wear a pony tail at school anymore. The teacher informed the mother that she had never said anything of the kind. The boy later admitted that he simply did not want "girl's hair" anymore. On another occasion at the same preschool, I observed a 55-month-old boy refuse a woman's offer to help him put on a necklace because, in his words, it was "for girls." When the woman told him that he could wear the necklace and pretend that he was a king, he again refused. He emphatically reminded her that he was not a "king" but a "boy." Perhaps kings could wear necklaces as the woman suggested, but this boy was well aware that doing so was no way to confirm his identity as a boy.

Many mothers have also told me of their frustration with their preschool-age daughters' sudden refusal to wear slacks and insistence upon wearing dresses regardless of the weather or impracticality of engaging in certain activities when doing so. However, girls of this age do not seem as concerned as boys about avoiding sartorial symbols of the other sex-class identity. For example, I often saw the older girls at the preschools at which I observed wearing one of the boy's caps or jackets but never saw an older boy wearing a girl's hat or jacket. . . .

For whatever reason, it seems that we consider a greater diversity of personal fronts compatible with a female identity than with a male identity in this society. A girl with short hair who is wearing jeans and a flannel shirt will commonly be recognized by others as a girl if she also wears earrings or a necklace. That is exactly why boys must not wear earrings or a necklace if they hope socially to confirm their identity as a boy. Men may wear an earring or a necklace or a pony tail and still socially confirm their male identity, but boys do not have that luxury. Excluding the genitalia which are typically concealed, young boys and young girls are commonly indistinguishable from one another except for some small, sartorial badge of female identity. Thus, young boys

must vigilantly avoid any and all sartorial symbols of female identity in order socially to confirm their identities as boys. . . .

ALIGNING APPEARANCE WITH GENDERED IDENTITIES

Although most children are clearly committed to their ascribed sex-class identities by the end of the preschool-age period of their biographies, they do not simply conform to conventional standards of sex-class related appearance management as a result. Rather, they continue to experiment with the management of their personal fronts while simultaneously attempting to "align" (Stokes and Hewitt 1976) the resulting sartorial expressions with their presumed masculinity or femininity. For example, I observed a 55-month-old boy (S) slip into a red "dress-up" dress in a preschool classroom and then walk over to a 51-month-old girl (M).

S: TA-DA-DA (in an affected high pitched voice).

M: Silly.

S: TA-DA-DA.

M: You're silly.

S: DA-TA-TA (in an affected low pitched voice while slipping out of the dress) SUUUPerman!

As M's comments indicate, S's behavior while wearing the dress was accountably "silly" or playful and, consequently, the sex-class identifying implications of the dress were not taken seriously. As if that were not enough to establish the expressive unseriousness of the dress, S then emerged from that feminine cocoon in an unmistakably masculine form. He thereby maintained his social claim to the identity of boy despite having worn the dress.

Children's experimentation with their personal fronts also takes unexpected expressive turns requiring improvisation in order to confirm their presumed masculinity or femininity. For example, I overheard the following playground conversation between two five-year-old girls (F, R) and a five-year-old boy (N), all of whom were painting their faces with watercolors.

R: I have to put on make-up 'cause I'm on a date.

F: I'm wearing make-up 'cause I'm going to the doctor.

N: I got mine on 'cause it's Halloween.

Once the girls defined the watercolors as "make-up," the boy apparently needed an explanation or account to neutralize the sex-class identifying implication of its use. His solution was ingenious. He declared that it was the one day of the year on which males can wear make-up with impunity. It is apparently through experiences such as these that children gain an increasingly sophisticated, practical understanding of the elasticity of and points at which conventional

standards of sex-class related appearance management snap back with an identity undermining force. . . .

CONCLUSION

Although primarily suggestive, the preceding examination of young children's gender socialization . . . indicate[s] that appearance management is a principal mechanism of [gender identity acquisition]. Sex-class related appearance management socially invests infants with sex-class identities and, thereby, with male and female human natures. It also promotes young children's sex-class identification of both others and themselves. In addition, others' responses to children's experimentation with the identity transforming power of appearance management encourages them to embrace behaviorally their ascribed sex-class identities. They consequently begin to align their sartorial expression with . . . conventional . . . standards of sex-class related appearance management and to manage their personal fronts so as to announce clearly their ascribed sex-class identities to others. [They thereby become gendered persons to themselves as well as to others.]

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