



Exploring Psychology

Exploring Psychology: Gender 3

Wendy

To help me consider Lisa Lee's story, I have with me Troy Cooper, who writes from a social constructionist perspective and Amy Johnston, who explains the biological psychology perspective, I'll be explaining the psychoanalytic perspective. Let's take the first question. How did Lisa Lee's biological sex interact with the social construction of her gender, as she was growing up? Amy.

Amy

Lisa Lee is a clear example of the problems of sexing or gendering babies on the basis of external genitals. If you are ambiguous or appear male, as Lisa Lee did then you are likely to be misclassified and it is a misclassification because genetically Lisa Lee is quite clearly female, she is 'XX', there's no ambiguity there. Hormonally, the situation is a bit less clear. One of the problems with CAH children is that we don't know when those hormones kick in from the adrenal glands. It could be as early as eight weeks in gestation and they could continue up until a year after birth. So in terms of hormones, it's not clear whether or not she would be classified as male or female. In terms then of what that does to her brain structure, particularly during development, it's equally unclear. Her brain may have been, if there is such a thing, masculinised or feminised depending on when those hormones were released, as well as how much were released.

Wendy

She did talk about the feminine side of her own childhood. How would you account for that?

Amy

She did, she clearly indicates that her gender is a result of both her biology and her environment. She talks about her physiology, being thin, slight, feminine, not having a deep voice, her voice didn't break. Which are quite clearly a result of her physiology, interacting then with how she feels and how others related to her.

Wendy

Troy. From a social constructionist perspective, how do you understand what she told about her growing up?

Troy

As, I hope I indicated in the section on the social construction of gender, the social constructionist view is that whilst there are clearly biological differences between the sexes. What is important is how people give meaning to and value to those differences between the sexes. Whether biological, or in terms of behaviour and experience, and in Lisa Lee's case, it's quite clear that because she had a slight build, when she was young, even though she had been assigned to be a boy because she didn't like to play football she was seen to be feminine. And it was on this basis at school, that she was bullied because she was seen to be feminine although she was also at the same time, meant to be a boy. And again, in the section I hope it came across, that what is important about the social construction of gender is the doing of your gender. Being masculine, doing masculinity. Being feminine, doing femininity and that Lisa Lee was having problems in doing her masculinity, as it then was meant to be.

And this perhaps comes across in her reluctance to go into the boys toilets at school, as she said a secondary all make school she didn't want to go into the toilets. She made sure that she didn't during the day and this would be because, perhaps in that environment above all other, that is where masculinity is most obviously done. And she was worried about being bullied and picked upon very strongly, if she went into that environment and couldn't behave in appropriate ways. However, Wendy I know from the psychoanalytic perspective, you might give quite a different story of her reluctance to go into such an environment.

Wendy

It is and I think it's a complimentary story. Psychoanalysis would emphasise the meaning of anatomical difference. So the little boy's penis is terribly important as the signifier around which the experience of gender identity is built. The fact that she was not able to claim this signifier which is universally what is meant to enable you to be male rather than female, must have been extremely difficult and it's hardly surprising that she avoided the boys toilets which is where that lack would have been on public display.

I think that psychoanalysis would say something else, in relation to Lisa Lee's experience, which is how important is childhood development and childhood experience. And there are two things which come across very strongly in her story. One is the experience of being a boy, when it's ambiguous, and the bullying, and the stuff about the difficulty of claiming unambiguously one gender or the other. But the other is about her family relationships, her lack of love and care that she got at home and that's a story which is not gendered but which clearly had very, very profound effects, on how she grew up and the fact that she had to grow up looking after herself and a bit of a loner because there was nobody else to give her that love.