



Exploring Psychology

Exploring Psychology: Gender 4

Wendy

What happened to her understanding of her gender identity when she did finally discover the correct biological facts? Amy, you again?

Amy

Well, I think Lisa Lee is also a very good example of the importance of plasticity, in the development of human identity. Lisa Lee went from knowing herself to being a boy, to knowing herself to being hermaphrodite, to knowing herself to be a girl, genetically, biologically. But what she actually says is that she never doubted initially that she was a boy and that she now hasn't changed her behaviour, or changed her feeling, as a consequence of that information. She's absorbed that information but she doesn't classify herself either as male or female. Her behaviour, she feels, hasn't changed as a result of that information. So it suggests to me that your brain or your psychology isn't gendered male or female but rather somewhere in between and you're able to adapt to completely different personas biologically placed upon yourself.

Wendy

Troy?

Troy

Yes, I mean in terms of the social constructionist perspective it's very, very interesting, Lisa's response to learning that she was a biological female because, in social terms, it seemed to have disrupted completely her sense of gender identity. She was a little boy, or a youth, trying to be a man, at least. Although having a feminine side. And on then on learning that she has in fact a biological basis, it seems to completely disrupt her gender identity. And she talks about not seeing herself as either, masculine or feminine but as just been herself. She doesn't particularly identify with one group or the other. She doesn't see herself as more strongly masculine or feminine and so in those terms in social constructionist terms, you might say she's almost 'de-gendered', and not 'de-sexed' obviously, but de-gendered by this.

Wendy

And she comments doesn't she, that people find it strange. And there I think she is experiencing the social pressure. That she is expected to be one thing or the other. She said people expect her to be this or that. And that she explains her resistance partly in terms of her obstinacy. When somebody wants me to be one thing, I will stand out for the opposite. And she has to actually oppose some very, very strong pressures to be one thing or the other. In order to actually be this, neither one thing nor the other, or in the middle, as she puts it.

Troy

Yes. It's perhaps especially poignant also, that when she had the diagnosis of hermaphroditism and was told that she was going to die. Her response was 'at least I don't have to make the choice now. It's all over.' And that is indicative of the great pressure that is placed on individuals to belong to one side or the other.

Wendy

Yes. It's hardly surprising that you just want to avoid having to carry on fighting that fight, in the face of an awful lot of really abusive bullying behaviour, from the outside. And having no safe place, except in her own company, which is how she developed.

Troy

Biologically CAH is not a separate category to male or female when medics use that term, that medical term it's not used as an indication of some ambiguous or potentially ambiguous biological sexual category. It's simply a medical problem - a hormonal problem, an enzyme problem. And so, even from a medical perspective, the medics who understanding her biology, will still be pushing her into one category or the other. Not somewhere in between.

Wendy

So she has continued not to clearly one thing or the other. But of course this has also been affected by the fact that she was doused in male hormones, following the diagnosis as hermaphrodite. So how does she experience herself nowadays, the third question that we posed ourselves. Amy, what would those male hormones have done, which she was taking over at least five years of her adolescent and youth life?

Amy

Well again it's not clear because it would depend very much on the hormonal environment, present within her prior to that time. And it's important to remember of course, that hormones aren't just involved in sexual development, or the development of sexual organs, or brains, or gender identities. Sex hormones are some of the most widely used medications in history and are really important for the development of all sorts of organs, lungs, kidney, liver, blood vessels. So you can't just think about those sex hormones as just relating to her gender identity, is the first thing to say, the other thing to say is that whilst she doesn't classify herself as either male or female, she does talk about having children, at some point and so it seems that her identity is able again to demonstrate this plasticity, so that her biology and her environment can both be encompassed by how she perceives herself. So she is able to change her perception of herself, as her biology, as it were, or her identification of her biology changes.

Wendy

And Troy, from a social constructionist perspective, when Lisa Lee gets this expert diagnosis how would you see that as affecting her experience of her gender?

Troy

Well, when Lisa gets the first medical diagnosis she accepts that as the truth, she sees that the medical opinion that's given to her as something that's objective. In terms of her gender, as she goes through the entire process, which appears to be about five years of medical diagnosis she learns that she has to weigh up the evidence that she is given from medical experts, about what her gender is and that it's only at the end of a very long process that she comes to a conclusion, and so do they, as to what her gender is, and how it relates to her biological status. What Lisa seems to be doing now, is going through a process after de-gendering herself of, after that tremendous traumatic process of learning that there was a difference, even a disparity, between her biological sex and her social gender of re-gendering herself.

And in terms of what she tells us. That seems to come through in her talk about for example the need to become thin again. Thin, as we all probably know, is currently very important for women in the west, in terms of doing or producing their femininity, of being attractive. And Lisa talks about her need to become thin again. Of course, we have to recognise that in the traumatic process she's been through she gained much more weight than could ever be normal, because of her hormone treatment. And so it's not just a question of her wanting to become thin, in the fashion plate sense but she wants to become acceptable physically recognisably female. And so she wants part of that, a necessary part of that is to lose weight to do that. And the other important thing is that she talks about having a child. And again in our culture, and perhaps this is a universal in many cultures, that is one of the most important ways of doing adult femininity. Is to have a child and to bring that child up and to nurture it. But, again Wendy perhaps that brings us back to the psycho dynamic perspective because in the psycho dynamic perspective, having a child has other importance.

Wendy

Well that's right. The women psychoanalysts who came after Freud, emphasised that it wasn't just the possession of the penis, that secured a person's gender. But the most valuable possession that a woman had, was a womb and that this is something that men might envy women for because it's the basis of all creation. And here is Lisa Lee who grew up assuming that she was a boy, discovering that she has a womb, that she can have children. And through that she can realise a very important psychological desire which is through having a son. And I thought that it was very important.. will be very important for her future gender experience because by looking after a boy in the way that she was never looked after as a child. She can re-live and repair the experience of having had a really very miserable childhood as a boy, through having a son, and to care for that son, as a mother can and so maybe that is the moment that will really secure her gender identity. If, indeed, she does have that child.