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## A possible explanation of the achievement of gender and gender identity

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### Abstract

This paper discusses whether a psychological theory referred to as the self-presentation theory may explain how gender and gender identity is developed in an Indian tribe in the Amazon basin. The hypothesis in this paper was that the processes involved in the achievement of a gender identity among the Sharanahua Indians must be understood in relation to their culture and their environment. When it comes to the hypothesis regarding the proposed applicability of the self-presentation theory, it was found to be difficult to apply the theory directly onto the Sharanahua Indians. A conclusion is that one should pay more attention to the social and cultural behavioural aspects of the culture being investigated.

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*Keywords:* Gender; gender identity; self-presentation theory

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### 1. Introduction

The Sharanahua Indians are a small Indian tribe, located along the Upper Purus River in Peru. The focus in this paper is upon the same village as Janet Siskind's book: *To hunt in the morning*, from 1973. The name of the village is Marcos, approximately 90 individuals live there together, and they share the name Sharanahua. Sharanahua means "the good people". They form a distinct tribe, or we might say a cluster of kinsmen, with their own culture, language, myths, beliefs and customs.

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The Sharanahuas have been pacified for some 55 years now, by the Peruvian government. Today the Sharanahuas are few in numbers, because of the consequences of being exposed to new diseases and their lack of prior immunity. Earlier they were nomads, but today their residence pattern has become more permanent. They usually live in what they call "malocas", which are long houses. Today a household normally consists of a so-called extended family. A woman, her husband and their children, together with for instance the oldest daughter's husband and their children, illustrates the potential make-up of such an extended family, which functions as an independent household. Two men and two women are the minimum number that can maintain an independent household.

The residential pattern among the Sharanahua is matrilineal, but their descent rules is based on patrilineality. Subsistence is provided mainly by hunting animals, which is done by the men, and by collecting fruits, and other plants in the forest, which is done by the women. Besides hunting and gathering, the Sharanahuas also have access to fishing in the Purus River.

## **2. The cultural heritage**

The cultural heritage of the Sharanahuas has produced a contemporary society with a strong focus on meat. Getting and distributing meat is the main preoccupation for most of the people of the village. As a reflection of this, the dominance of subsistence activities is observable in everyday life. Even kinship rules reflect or are affected by this dominance.

We end up with an inescapable fact: If a woman intends to eat meat, she has to enter into a relationship with a male hunter. On the contrary, for a man to get palm fruits and cooked food, he has to associate with a woman. So, man the hunter has to associate with woman the collector.

The basic assumption thus becomes that to carry out work and to share its products; the individuals must relate to the opposite sex in either a permanent or temporary association.

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### 3. The social structure

The social structure of Marcos has a tremendous influence on the composition of the social and material living conditions that the Sharanahuas find themselves in. As a traditional society, Marcos is characterized by a high degree of consistency of social demands over time and in different situations. This favours stability and continuity of self-experience. Changes are observable within the Sharanahua community, but these changes do not progress as rapidly as in our western industrialized societies. In our society, one's identity is more fragmented and more related to internal differentiations and external influences. We can clearly state that the Sharanahua Indians learn a complex network of gender-related concepts and symbols from their own culture, but this is by no means restricted only to the Sharanahua Indians. In addition, the cognitive representation of gender among Sharanahua individuals influences their gender-related behavior and thought processes.

According to Lippa (190), gender differences in nonverbal behavior can be interpreted in terms of men's and women's gender roles. The social settings that make gender roles particularly salient and that assign different status to men and women create marked differences in the behavior of the Sharanahua men and women. Several gender differences in nonverbal behavior that exists among the Sharanahua Indians can be explained in relation to the status and power differences between the sexes. The Sharanahua children often learn about "male" and "female" behaviours without being directly involved. Learning by observing one's parents is a process we could call "socializing gender". The interplay between biological, psychological and cultural potentials and constraints on the individual can probably be observed in all phases of the Sharanahuas Indians' life span, as the perception of gender continues to evolve. It is quite clear that the men are those who are economically and politically dominant among the Sharanahua Indians. We can see this for instance when it comes to a subsistence activity like providing food.

As we have seen earlier, getting meat is the main preoccupation in Marcos. This may indicate that hunting probably has a higher status among the Sharanahua Indians than collecting plants and fruits have. Besides, the amount of game is the decisive factor when it comes to population density, and the residential pattern's size and durability. This can easily lead to an imbalance when it comes to men's and women's status and power. This imbalance is rectified by participating in the collective efforts, such as fishing and the special hunt.

The self-presentation theory of gender is actually a theory that tries to take the cultural and social aspects into account. This theory was probably developed with Kessler's and McKenna's (1978) own social structure and environment as the main focus, but claims to be universally applicable. One problem could be that the psychological explanations of gender identity and gender role characteristics are biased from a western perspective. When it comes to the hypothesis regarding the self-presentation theory's proposed applicability, it can be difficult to apply the theory directly onto the Sharanahua Indians. We must pay more attention to the social and cultural behavioural aspects of a culture. A challenge of doing this might be that within psychology, one is interested in measuring and explaining behavior, and to show these behaviours statistically. The frequency of the observed behaviours is of great interest. Within anthropology one is more interested in looking at the structural patterns and trying to grasp a society as a whole. This is what we call the holistic perspective. The problem arises as the perspectives may be too different. Doing interdisciplinary research or analysis can be productive, but then one has to be able to accept or relate to the other discipline's definition of concepts and theories.

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#### **4. The research hypothesis**

The hypothesis in this paper is that the processes involved in the achievement of a gender identity among the Sharanahua Indians must be understood in relation to their culture and their environment.

A psychological theory called the self-presentation theory of gender will be discussed in order to verify this hypothesis. This is a theory that was originally developed in 1978 by the two American social psychologists Kessler and McKenna (Lippa, 1990). It is possible to ask many questions concerning both the Sharanahuas and their gendered identities. In this paper two questions will be asked and sought to be answered: What is the gender identity among the Sharanahua Indians? How do the Sharanahua Indians formulate their gender identities?

An attempt will be made in this article to show how the psychological and the anthropological approaches to the gender concept differ from each other, and to discuss what problems this may lead to. This naturally leads to another important question that will be asked later in the paper: Is it possible to apply the self-presentation theory of gender to the Sharanahua Indians, in order to understand or explain their own perceptions of gender and gender identity? Because most social psychologists focus their research and theories on findings in their own environment, is there a risk that they are too ethnocentric in their focus and explanations of for instance such a concept as gender?

##### *4.1. Psychological versus anthropological use of gender as a concept*

One of the main problems in trying to connect psychology and anthropology is that even though the disciplines share the same concepts, they define them differently. Both disciplines may deal with the same problems, but they use different methods and tools, resulting in different theories. Both disciplines are sorted under what we may call the "soft" sciences, as opposed to disciplines such as mathematics or physics that like to regard themselves as belonging to the "hard" sciences.

This doesn't imply that such social sciences as psychology and anthropology should be regarded as less scientific than the "hard" sciences. What it does imply, however, is that in contrast to the "hard" sciences, psychology and anthropology are concerned with human beings in a context-related way. If we narrow our view down to the

differences between psychology and anthropology, we find that for a psychologist, the ideal research situation would be the experimental situation. This often includes standardized procedures and questionnaires to be filled in, preferably in a laboratory. For the psychologist it is important to be able to control the different variables, and to see how the independent and the dependent variables relate to each other.

For the anthropologist, the situation is quite different. The usual method in anthropology in order to collect information is to do fieldwork. This fieldwork involves the use of participant observation, and usually requires that the anthropologist stays within the chosen community for a long period. This means that one has come a long way from the psychologist's safe, and well known, environment, and often both in time and distance. We can exemplify by using the gender concept to show how the constructing theories differ.

#### 4.2. *The gender concept*

One does however see a link between psychology and anthropology in Lippa's book. He describes Margareth Mead and the culture and personality school. Mead was influenced by the German gestalt psychologists Köhler, Koffka and Wertheimer (Lippa, 1990). According to Lippa (1990) in his book *Introduction to social psychology*, the concept of gender has a number of components, including biological sex, gender identity, and choice of sexual partners and cultural definitions of feminine and masculine behavior. The first component, biological sex, is multidimensional and is composed of chromosomal sex, hormonal sex, internal and external genitalia and secondary sex characteristics. The second component is gender identity; by this Lippa means a person's sense of being male or female. The third component focuses upon the individual's choice of sexual interest, such as for instance that a heterosexual individual is sexually attracted to people of the other sex. The fourth component of gender is concerned with the social roles and the cultural definitions of masculinity and femininity. According to Lippa again, we usually perceive these four aspects of gender to form a relatively cohesive whole, but in reality they are more loosely related than our common sense notion would suggest (Lippa, 1990). As one can clearly see, Lippa's definition of the gender concept does include such factors as biological sex.

Within anthropology one doesn't include biological sex when discussing the gender concept. On the contrary, the main idea behind the gender concept within anthropology is that gender is based on a cultural and a social interpretation of the differences between men and women. The strength of the anthropological concept of gender is the emphasis on the cultural aspects, and its potential to project this concept onto different cultures.

It is also important to be aware that it is not the biological differences that define gender, but the interpretation of these (Kulick, 1987). Kulick's definition of the concept of gender is used in this paper as it is a representative anthropological point of view.

According to gender studies in anthropology, we have to consider gender as a system of differences that interacts with other systems of differences, such as class, age, etc. To obtain an understanding of the gender concept and the related achievement processes among the Sharanahua Indians, one has to be aware of these different approaches within anthropology and psychology.

Anyway, what is important regarding the gender concept is to avoid what we might call "sexual dichotomism". This means that we will have to treat the sexes as two groups with overlapping characteristics, instead of seeing the sexes as two entirely distinct categories. Generally gender identity is intrinsically linked to such factors as politics, power, economy and the environment. Together they contribute to creating and sustaining the gender differences among the Sharanahua Indians. These different mechanisms for institutionalizing the Sharanahua Indian life course function as background forces and reference points for their personal orientation.

#### 4.3. *The self-presentation theory of gender*

A theory that was originally developed by Kessler & McKenna in 1978 and extended by Deaux and Major in 1987, hold as its basic assumption that gender is a direct cultural invention and at the same time a social construction. Gender is also seen as a self-presentation that we enact in certain social settings and with certain other individuals. (Lippa, 1990) Kessler and McKenna's theory tries to emphasise cultural and social constructions, and considers gender-related behavior to be a social performance. Their theory seems to be applicable to the

Sharanahuas.

According to Kessler & McKenna's (1978) theory both the Sharanahua men and women "play" their roles as men and women depending upon their concepts of gender. These roles are also portrayed according to the expectations of others and in relation to the setting in which the Sharanahua men and women happen to be. The different self-presentation strategies among the Sharanahua men and women may be used to display what these psychologists consider to be masculinity or femininity. Edward O. Wilson, the father of modern socio-biology, argues that because women were responsible throughout the evolutionary history of our species for bearing, nursing and caring for children, they evolved to become more nurturing. Men, because they were responsible for hunting and fighting evolved to be more aggressive (Lippa, 1990).

#### *4.4. Masculinity versus femininity*

These definitions are the subject of a very emotional discussion. According to social psychology, masculinity is seen as the degree to which an individual reports to have instrumental personality traits. Femininity is seen as the degree to which an individual reports to have expressive personality traits. (Lippa, 1990) For the psychologists it is of interest to be able to measure everything in scales or charts. The question then arises, whether this is ethnocentric or not?

This social psychological approach to masculinity and femininity is clearly related to socio-biology. Here one takes for granted that men are more aggressive and that women are more nurturing, due to evolutionary history. One must allow the cultural and social aspects to enter the discussion. Margareth Mead was already in the 1930's discussing masculinity and femininity and the variations in the different cultures (Lippa, 1990). As the feminist theories evolved within anthropology, the masculinity/femininity debate silenced. Instead we now prefer to talk about the gender concept.

Then, let us take a look at the Sharanahua Indians in order to decide what constitutes a man or a woman in their world. We can begin with the collective identity. The collective identity consists of sharing the name Sharanahua, and those who live in the same village. For men the collective identity consists of participating in a particular drug ritual, which creates a sphere exclusively for men. This ritual is forbidden for women. The reason the men give for this, is that the women do not know how to hallucinate, and therefore it becomes dangerous for them to participate in the ritual. We could pose the question: Who is on guard while the men participate in the drug ritual? Maybe the power is transferred to the women during the drug ritual?

Today, another collective activity is the special hunt that occasionally takes place in Marcos. During the special hunt, women are in charge, in the sense that they can decide when the men should go hunting. This collective hunting brings in a larger amount of meat, and is executed when the women decide that they have not eaten meat for a time. A third collective activity is fishing, which makes the gender-related differences less distinct than in hunting.

So, what about the individual identity? The individual identity is based on the individual's conception of personality. Here, when we speak of identity, we mean that a person retains a continuity of self-experience across different social roles and different biographical phases that are based on the self-concept. A personality designates an individual's particular organized structure of motives, attributes, traits, attitudes and action competences that is the biographical product of coping with environmental and organismic demands.

From an anthropological point of view, we are more interested in looking at the whole society instead of particular individuals. In anthropology, life stories are used to portray personal interpretations of shared understandings. Within social psychology one has both possibilities. One may either choose to look at the individual or the society as a whole. One important question that has not yet been solved is the relation between the individual and the individual representations of shared understandings.

## **5. Conclusion**

The Sharanahua women are more responsible for child-rearing and for other domestic duties, and men are responsible for hunting. This sex-based division of labour among the Sharanahua Indians necessarily leads to gender differences in behavior and to the stereotypical perception that women and men are different. As a result of this, from a psychological point of view, one could easily perceive the Sharanahua women to be more nurturing and the

Sharanahua men to be more assertive and competitive than they really are, but this does not necessarily need to be so. It is important that we do not forget the power of the social settings to govern social behaviours and to affect the Sharanahuas perception of gender. Clearly, however, the development of a gender identity and sex differences also involves a cognitive process of self-labelling and self-definition. The Sharanahua Indians are not male or female only through what they are conditioned to do. They are also male or female through what they think of themselves. Lippa's assumption is that an individual at Marcos must develop stable gender categories to function properly in the Sharanahua community. Lippa (1990) says that once the Sharanahua children develop a stable gender identity and develop stable gender categories, they begin to identify themselves with others of their own sex. By the age of 6 or 7, he presumes that the Sharanahua children consistently realize that sex and gender are constant and that they are linked to male and female genital differences. As they grow older, the children continue to develop their concept of gender, together with the cultural symbols that are associated with gender among the Sharanahua Indians (Lippa, 1990).

One problem arises from the fact that Siskind (1973) did not study how children perceive gender. Therefore it is difficult to know whether Lippa (1990) is right or wrong in his assumptions. In this way, it appears difficult to explain the gender differences among the Sharanahua Indians, and the differences in gender-related behavior that exists in Marcos.

The achievement of a gender identity is also closely linked to the development of a personality. According to the German social psychologist Klaus Hurrelmann (1988), the development of a personality is based on the assumption that both social (environmental) and psychological (personal) factors together affect the formation of a personality. According to Hurrelmann, the achievement of a personality is a prerequisite to develop a gender identity. One should be aware that these processes take place at the same time. This development is dependent upon an interaction between members of the Sharanahua community.

According to Lippa (1990) culture, learning, self-concept, sexuality and personality all come together to produce the extraordinarily complex phenomenon of gender. A solution could be to exclude biological sex when discussing the gender concept. Besides, masculinity and femininity must be seen as separate and independent traits. At the same time, we must not ignore that masculinity and femininity share some overlapping characteristics. In other words, we should think of masculinity and femininity as polarizations on a long continuous dimension. We must try to both understand and explain the gender achievement processes among the Sharanahua Indians as a result of the relationship that exists between the individual and his or her environment. The result is that regardless of theoretical explanations, the individuals at Marcos come to possess gender-related personality traits. This means that they will continue to experience the internal tendencies to behave in what we may call culturally defined "masculine" or "feminine" ways in the future. This is the reality for the Sharanahua Indians both now and in the uncertain future that lies ahead of them.

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