

Gender Socialisation and Identity Formation Across Generations

By

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Abstract

This paper explores the contemporary relevance of gender socialisation within the broader framework of identity formation and intergenerational education processes. Drawing on sociological and interdisciplinary perspectives, the authors examine how gender identity is shaped through dynamic interactions across various socialisation contexts—family, school, peer groups, and media—highlighting the increasing fluidity and complexity of gender roles in postmodern society. The study reflects on the evolving meanings of masculinity and femininity, addressing the interplay between structural change and individual agency. Emphasis is placed on the relational dimension of gender, viewing it not as a fixed attribute but as a socially constructed process influenced by cultural models, generational transmission, and contextual negotiations. The analysis further considers the ambivalence between homogenisation and differentiation tendencies in gender identity construction, arguing for an integrated and reflexive approach to understanding gender as a relational resource. In doing so, the paper contributes to ongoing debates on gender equality, diversity, and education in contemporary multicultural societies

Keywords: gender, socialization, education, generations, identity

Introduction

The question guiding this reflection is: How topical is the issue of gender socialisation today? Why do we have to talk about identity and gender differences, and why are these aspects so closely linked to family relationships and generations in socialisation processes?

The issue of identity has always been problematic, and gender identity is also increasingly involved in this process of complexifying social and personal reality and often has its implications (Carter, 2014; Bettis & Ferry, 2016; Crespi, 2020). If identity usually refers to a concrete difficulty of expression for the individual, gender differences often refer to the conflict between cultural models and reference values. One relevant aspect is the need for new reflexivity on gender differences. The increasing ambivalence of the themes of identity and difference within processes of differentiation and inequality is an unavoidable element in the reflection in the face of some

substantial changes (Connel, 2023). All this makes relevant some aspects.

First, the sexual/gender dimension is present in everyone's experience. It is an element that continually recurs in all the situations we experience, from our defining ourselves as men and women, from our relationship with men and women to the diversity we experience in affective and family relationships (Endendijk, Groeneveld & Mesman, 2018; Skinner & McHale, 2022). It also confronts the broader society, the reference models, and the mass-media culture. The importance of the context and culture of reference lies in the fact that relationships 'happen' and where they can be facilitated (or not) in implementing responsible involvement.

Secondly, we see the change in gender roles from different perspectives: historically, culturally, politically and socially (Lindsey, 2015). The evolution of gender relations and its cultural meaning are politically linked to the mainstream of equal opportunities.

The third one is that of gender socialisation because the construction of the gender/sexual identity originates in the socialisation experiences that each life and experiences, i.e. from the fact that the transmission of gender models takes place through the generational axis in the family, at school and in relations with adults (Neimand, 2016; Thorne, 2024). Forming gender/sexual identity is a relational path, where relational involvement is the responsibility of different actors (families, schools, peers, media, and so on) and cultural aspects. The relationship between the generations is now more complex due to the faster changes and opens spaces for renegotiation on what gender roles and rules are compared to how previous generations understood it.

Gender, identity and social change

In recent decades, attention to the category of *gender* has occupied increasingly considerable space in studies relating to identity construction and socialisation processes (Sawer, Jenkins & Downing, 2020).

At the social level, characteristics are based on gender, psychological states, and interpersonal ways of illustrating individual differences (Torrioni, 2014; Salle, 2023). Suppose gender relations make explicit the attributions of meaning and content that are proper and specific to sex membership and relations between the sexes (Riesman & Davis, 2013). If so, this can be understood through the meanings that terms such as men and women take on occasionally within social practices, both as inescapable and constitutive elements of social relations and as fundamental components of society. Sexual difference manifests itself in all social practices and can also be used to explain the mechanisms of social organisation and the social construction of gender differences. Although differences between men and women individuals have always existed, the need to theorise and question them on

an individual and societal level is always present and includes reflection on processes that lead to the construction of such differences (Oakley, 2016; Bainotti & Torrioni, 2017; Abbatecola & Stagi, 2020).

During socio-historical development, the creation of boundaries between the feminine and masculine universes has traced the evolution of an organisation of society that allows the identification of norms, roles and tasks of each, both within one's own membership and in the comparison between the two sexes (Priulla, 2013; Riesman & Davis, 2013). This has contributed to an increasingly articulated structure of action between people, institutions and organisations; gender diversity has been a starting point for managing any activity and maintaining social order.

In modern societies, sex roles were rigidly differentiated between men and women, as were social activities and responsibilities (Lindsey, 2015). In the face of today's enthusiasm, surplus and complexity, *gender* identity formation and relationships result from the dangerous combination of structural and symbolic elements in post-modern society.

On the post-modern horizon, the rigid division of roles is increasingly overtaken, and the position of genders appears uncertain and undefined. Men roles and positions can sometimes intertwine with women ones and sometimes diverge to assume a position that is as differentiated and unambiguous as possible (England, 2010). Gender identity becomes a challenge in the face of the complexity of post-modern society as the dialectical tension between the internalisation of cultural gender models and the ultimate goal represented by the achievement of a gender role that responds to the social and cultural expectations of society comes to be characterised, today, as a rather complex and risky process (Ruspini, 2009, 2018; Crespi, 2020).

In contemporary society, the representation of genders has changed profoundly compared to previous generations. In fact, we live in a society where the definition of men and women no longer appears as differentiated as in the past and is linked to the acquisition of traditional, stereotyped roles, and the crossing of men and women distinctions is now much more flexible (Monceri, 2010) and even non-binary from some perspectives. The current horizon is in fact, characterised by complexity (and risk) and identity is no longer rigidly anchored to a traditional role of man or woman but appears more fragmented and linked to the different experiences of the individual through which the subject can meet a variety of styles, fashions, tastes and behaviours, and develops reflexively. If the main objective is to identify gender identity with the assumption of a role that can be defined stably by the subject, today the acceptance of this role is problematic compared to the past because it can change more easily

with different biographical paths chosen by the subject.

Many contemporary authors who deal with gender, identity, and social roles consider gender as a specific part of the social structure (Riesman, 2009, 2023) and are inclined to accept the existence of several models of man and woman. The structure of such models appears uncertain and ill-defined as the current reality seems to no longer adhere to a single model of men and women, anchored to conventional principles based on sexual difference, but presupposes a more individual and personal quest linked to each person's own experiences and based on the comparison between genders, a relational and related identity (Cranny Francis *et al.* 2017). For example, Connell's (2006, 2023) pluralist hypothesis assumes a dominant model of masculinity alongside the presence of less prevalent others. Models of masculinity and femininity are not rigid and unchangeable structures but change over time.

The theme of identity has been increasingly discussed in the sociological debate over the last few decades regarding the changes linked to globalisation. There are different definitions of identity, which privilege some aspects instead of others, and the concept itself has become a dilemma since a high degree of differentiation and complexity is perceived at an individual and social level (Carter, 2014), which was not present in the past.

Gender has been seen occasionally as a way of classifying and indicating the existence of types. According to some authors (De Cataldo & Ruspini, 2014; Scott, 2023) it can be a perspective of analysis or an analytical category with which to investigate reality empirically. Much depends in this sense on the researcher's interest in observing society. Gender is often used as a fundamental category to analyse specific phenomena empirically and proposes a denomination of the gendered way human beings present themselves and are perceived in the world.

Therefore, it is easy to see how gender affects every aspect of a person's existence and identifies and influences everyone's roles, behaviour, expectations, and relations with the social system.

All this considered, considering the most current social changes, it is interesting to wonder what elements explain this social disquiet today concerning the definition of men and women, of being a man or a woman, of sexuality and/or gender in socialisation processes are?

The more general (and generic) answer is to be found in the significant changes that have particularly affected the condition of women in recent decades. These are linked to the radical transformations that have occurred in different spheres, from family and educational relations to the world of work (Lindsey, 2015; Ruspini, 2018;

Stacey, 2021) and have undoubtedly influenced the attention paid by the social sciences to the processes of construction of the feminine and masculine.

The process of socialisation is inescapably the basis of the life of society, as it is how man becomes a fully-fledged social being. Every society guarantees its own future and the survival of its culture through its ability to influence individuals, especially new generations. For this reason, socialisation implies the existence of socialising subjects who mediate between the individual and the social system. The societal changes and their consequences on the socialisation process, particularly how the socialisation agencies perceive these changes, call for an in-depth study.

In contemporary society, socialisation to the gender is a risky path involving structural, relational and cultural factors, confronting social conditions and individual and societal expectations within a society characterised by uncertainty and, complexity and multiple possibilities of choice.

Gender, sexual differences and socialisation processes

In everyday life, gender is something we usually take for granted. We instantly identify people as men or women, boy or girl, and implicitly organise most of our daily interactions based on this distinction. Ideas about appropriate behaviour for each gender is supported and circulated continuously by people from various sectors of society: teachers, parents, media managers, and institutional representatives (politicians, clergymen, scholars, etc.). At the same time, however, these roles and expectations do not represent a condition suffered and imposed exclusively from the outside, from social norms, or authority.

A question arises at the beginning of this reflection: is it possible to think of a socialisation that is not also socialisation to gender? Socialisation and gender are two aspects that strongly link identity construction, which is the exact outcome of the socialisation process. Perhaps it is only improper to speak of socialisation to gender, since socialisation itself can only be within gender, which is a prerequisite for it. However, gender is also a social construction determined by a specific reference culture.

People construct themselves, often willingly, as masculine or feminine: every day in the way men and women behave, they implicitly claim their place in the gender order, often deriving pleasure from this polarity of difference (Coman, 2016; Torrioni, 2014; Bettis et al., 2020). However, gender differences, taken for granted as natural, conceal a pitfall: biological differences tend to be transformed into social and political inequalities, which in practice have always led to an apparent asymmetry between men and women, with the latter at a constant

disadvantage.

There is no intrinsic reason for concern about biological differences: men and women bodies are, of course, different. Nevertheless, then, where does the problematic aspect of gender membership lie? And furthermore, how do we explain the distinctions between men and women that remain today, along with some residues of a traditional social representation of gender?

The final product of socialisation is how we are, behave and think. From birth, we are moulded into the being that society wants us to be. Through socialisation, we also learn what is appropriate and inappropriate for both genders according to the dimension of sexuality. Socialisation is a relational process between different generations and aims to construct identity (in this case, sexual/gender). If gender is extremely important in the overview of sociological studies, it is even more so if one sees it from an intergenerational point of view when discussing gender socialisation. The centrality that this process assumes is also because society is gender-educatedⁱ that everything that happens must do directly or indirectly with gender (Neimand, 2016).

Gender socialisation is the process through which an individual learns and reworks his or her own gender identity (starting from a sexual difference), confronting a common culture, roles and expectations related to men and women, socialising agencies (family, school, peer group and media), within a given socio-cultural context. In fact, in this process, one acquires the beliefs, values and norms regarding the roles and expectations that are associated with each sex and gender roles and on which each person builds his or her identity as belonging to one sex or the other and as a culturally constructed gender identity) (Carter, 2014; Bettis & Ferry, 2016; Chambers & Gracia, 2021).

While socialisation appears to be very broad and includes various aspects of an individual's personality, socialisation to gender is an important dimension in identity construction because sexual distinction is the first in which the social being is immersed. The biological datum of sexual identity is an element that cannot be ignored and based on which the gender socialisation process then develops.

Concerning education and socialisation, the debate also focuses on the relationship between biological attributes and the social construction of gender identity since the distinction between these two terms and their use is never *neutral (or neutral)* (Bonvillain, 2020).

The first distinction is based on the biological datum, acquired from birth and indissolubly linking the individual

to one of the two sexes. The term *gender*, on the other hand, indicates the social classification of an individual as belonging to the men or women category, i.e. the *gendered* nature of social identity, unlike the expression *sex*, which refers to an anatomical/biological definition of the human being (Lips, 2017). As suggested by Wilson (2023) gender can, therefore, be interpreted as a situated concept because its social and cultural nature means that it can vary over time and according to the society and culture in question.

Secondly, in contemporary society, the representation of men's and women's has changed profoundly compared to previous generations. The 'genders' seem to have entered a cultural process that makes them fluctuate, change, and move towards new ways of interacting with each other, which involves a redefinition of roles and their underlying meanings, starting from the sexual difference. The process of gender socialisation accompanies the individual to learn and re-elaborate his or her own gender identity through a comparison with the socio-cultural context in which he or she is inserted, since men and women characteristics and roles are not constant or universal but vary in space and time.

The formation of gender/sexual identity is necessarily a relational process, where relational involvement is the responsibility of different actors (the different generations) and the cultural aspects they carry. The formation of this identity occurs according to the twofold socialisation process involving society, the group, and the individual, and it is open to the dimensions of risk, choice, and responsibility.

In this context, the individual learns and reworks his or her own gender identity through a comparison with the socio-cultural context in which he or she is inserted, since men and women characteristics and roles are not constant or universal but vary in space and time. It is a process that can ideally be divided into phases that accompany the subject's physical, psychological, and social development (Stockard, 2006; Kretchmar, 2011; Darmon, 2023).

The first phase is characterised by initially recognising one's biological belonging to one of the two sexes. In the second phase, there is the 'research' phase, in which the subject tries to define his/her own *gender* identity also based on cultural stimuli received from the context. This phase can lead to a satisfactory reorganisation for the subject, or it can encounter difficulties. This may happen because the process is still in progress, in evolution, and therefore one perceives one's condition as a situation of instability; or the difficulty of definition may represent the outcome of a path of acquisition of one's *gender* identity that is not very personalised and creative, a simple reproduction of a reference model learned without a personal re-elaboration (DuBois & Shattuck-Heidorn, 2021;

Morgenroth et al. 2021). In addition to diversifying over time, *gender* identity also differs according to the contexts in which it takes place since the process is both individual and social and all the socialisation agencies contribute to it: family, school, peer group, media, work experience, etc.

Gender socialisation across generations

When we talk about gender socialisation we refer to the totality of attitudes, acts, gestures and interests implemented daily by those who carry out an educational task concerning gender experiences and gender relations in the younger generations (Carlson & Knoester, 2011; Platt & Polavieja, 2016).

Gender socialisation is a more focused form of socialisation; it is how new generations are socialised in their gender roles in every society. We learn and reframe our gender roles through the socialisation agencies that are the family, school, peer groups, and the media in our society. Concerning gender socialisation, each of these agencies can foster a stereotypical, neutralising or reflexive view regarding the construction of identity and gender identity (Coman, 2016).

All this originates in the social experiences that each life and experiences, i.e. from the fact that the transmission of gender models takes place through the generational axis, in the family, at school and in relations with adults, and today also in relations with peers and in the socio-cultural experience of the context in which one is born and grows up. The formation of gender/sexual identity is a relational process, where relational involvement is the responsibility of different actors (the different generations) and cultural aspects. The relationship between the generations is now more complex and opens spaces for renegotiation on what it means to be a woman, and a man compared to the way previous generations understood it; in this space of confrontation, conflict can be generated in part or, on the contrary, educational disengagement in daily life.

The socialisation process thus implies a fundamental role of socialising subjects, who mediate between the individual and the social system. The changes present in society and the consequences they have on the socialisation process, particularly how the socialisation agencies themselves perceive this change, call for in-depth knowledge (Almy & Sanatullova-Allison, 2016; Mesman & Groeneveld, 2018; Thorne, 2024).

In the first place, the socialisation process can be seen as an ‘upward reference’ (vertical socialisation), towards agents who are institutionally and recognisably in charge of a socialising function: the family and the school. Secondly, it can be seen as a horizontal reference (horizontal socialisation), i.e., towards the peer group, social

class, gender affiliation, and, finally, the mass media. Finally, since socialisation is a process that lasts over time, one can also think of a chronological and longitudinal reference (longitudinal socialisation) that shifts the attention to the moments of adult socialisation or resocialisation (Fornari et al. 2022; Crespi & Scocco, 2024).

Based on this generation-specific interpretation, we can better re-understand the link between transitions, genders and generations.

First, the generational transition is about the handover between one generation and the next; each generation binds to itself and binds to the next through the so-called intergenerational transmission, which takes the form of the transfer of goods, both material and immaterial (Carlson & Knoester, 2011). This process has to do with the very ability of post-modern man to make sensible choices to plan.

Secondly, in the case of gender identity, there are many keys to the interaction that intergenerational transmission brings into play, both because of the multiplicity of agencies that influence this process and because of the presence of different cultural models of being a man and a woman today (Risman & Davis, 2013). The increasing complexity and confusiveness in defining roles and tasks in educational processes make this relational process more complex and with uncertain outcomes.

In highlighting the socialisation process to gender, it is more important than ever to conceive it as a relational system. This option makes it possible to recover the temporal value of the experiences and insert them in a complex network of relationships, enriching the interpretation of the autobiographical pathway of everyone and recognising the value of all the subjects involved. In fact, understanding the changes in the link between generations and the transformation processes concerning *gender* identity, in a generational perspective that connects times, places and symbols of transmission is now a compulsory choice (Molla, 2016; Ruspini, 2018; Ghigi, 2019), to observe reality in its complex space-time pattern.

Therefore, gender identity construction passes through the generative confrontation between the different generations, where the values and reference models of one's gender belonging are acquired. The depth and depth of the social relationship over time indicate the possibility that it may be continuous, structuring itself in an increasingly stable way thanks to the different relationships between the subject and the different actors involved.

In fact, the development of gender identity occurs throughout growth, in a continuous interaction with socialisation contexts characterised by different generations.

These contexts are all united by the presence of the two genders; men and women meet in each of these places, relating frequently and sharing different moments of their existence. For this reason, they represent privileged areas through which it is possible to analyse differences and similarities at a generational level.

Gender identity, therefore, can be better understood as a relational and generative process within the *trade-offs* between the different generations. Only by reconsidering all the aspects involved in this process can an in-depth analysis be carried out, trying to reconstruct a more comprehensive picture of the acquisition of men and women gender identity, which may give rise to new insights and questions for the future.

Two tendencies are present in the socialisation processes of the new generations: the first advocates the need for greater homogenisation of behaviour, the second emphasises the importance of differentiation and the maintenance of gender diversity. Both modes are proposed by the family and the school, albeit with different emphases on socialisation content.

In today's society we are witnessing, especially in the lives of adolescents and young people, the homogenisation, the in-distinction of growth paths according to gender, the loss or elimination of the importance of the biological dimension of belonging, an element not intended as pre-determination, but a useful factor of reflexivity in the construction of the relationship between body/mind and sociality. On the other hand, some instances stress the distinction in different ways and at different times and are linked to the idea that there are differentiated paths even within the men and women sphere. There is no single way to be/feel belonging to the men/women gender, but different experiences and nuances further characterise the field of analysis.

Finally, all this originates in the socialisation experiences that each individual lives and experiences, i.e. the fact that the negotiation of values and expectations linked to different visions of gender models takes place in any case through the generational axis, in the family, at school and in relations with adults.

In the relationship between generations that characterises the processes of socialisation and that takes place in the relational space of the relationship between adults, children and adolescents, an important theme is that of difference/indifference or gender inequality/equality, or rather the ambivalence in the values and regulations concerning gender/sexual differences within each culture and society. This is a fundamental aspect in an increasingly multicultural society in which socialising contexts are characterised by different and sometimes competing, if not conflicting, cultural perspectives.

The theme is gender difference/equality, which is the ambivalence in values and norms regarding gender differences. On the one hand, there are, and have been historically, instances of egalitarianism, i.e. instances that tend to make the similarity, equality or, in a certain sense, the annulment of the difference between men and women, more evident. Today we are witnessing, especially in the lives of adolescents and young people, the homogenisation, the in-distinction of growth paths according to gender, that is, the fact that men and women experiences can be interchangeable. On the other hand, we have the more differentiation instances that stress the distinction in different ways and at different times and are linked to the idea that there are differentiated paths within the men and women spheres. There is no single way to be/feel belonging to the men/women gender, but different experiences and nuances further characterise the field of analysis.

Therefore, the relationship between the generations is more complex today and opens spaces for renegotiation on what it means to be a woman, and a man compared to the way previous generations understood it. In this space of confrontation, conflict, or, on the contrary, educational disengagement in daily life can be partly generated, but it is also a new opportunity for relational guidance open to dialogue and future challenges in the process of change, such as the current one.

Differences, inequalities and dissimilarities or neutralisation of gender identity in socialisation?

Sociological reflection has long pointed out that gender identity is not only an individual and biological attribute but also a social, cultural and relational construction: the debate is still open. We speak of 'gender identity' to refer to how being a woman, or a man is socially defined. Moreover, as we have seen, this concept clearly highlights the distinction between sex and gender, which has long been debated because it underlies different ways of interpreting 'sexual difference' (Hoominfar, 2021).

Thus, the acquisition of one's gender identity is influenced by the transmitted cultural values and models. Culture is a valuable and indispensable source for constructing a horizon to place one's gender belonging. The dialectical tension between the internalisation of cultural models and values associated with the role of a man and a woman and the final objective represented by the attainment of a gender role that responds to the social and cultural expectations of that society comes to be characterised, today, as a rather complex and risky process.

There are two main orientations on how gender identity is constructed and distinguished. The former emphasises the greater homogenisation of behaviour, while the latter emphasises the differentiation and maintenance of gender diversity(ies). Both modes are present in social and relational contexts, and the joint transformation of

structural and behavioural-objective elements gives reason for the paradoxical contextuality of these two tendencies.

Despite the constant emphasis on the importance of difference(s), the thesis of a progressive homogenisation based on certain structural elements is often emphasised within the post-modern culture. On the subjective behaviour front, too, the trend seems to be the same. In fact, gender differences within mass consumption and behaviour diminish and sometimes are even cancelled. This rapprochement, almost to the point of overlapping identities, seems to show that boundaries are progressively being erased.

The homogenisation thesis between the sexes does not, in any case, seem to explain the current reality very well since if it is true that some gender variations are attenuated, others are amplified. Just think of the models mentioned above of masculinity and femininity or transgenderism and the many different sexual orientations (Monceri, 2010). On the one hand, the presence of conflicting drives towards homogenisation and increasing differentiation on the other, mean that uncertainty becomes a stable component of the relationship between men and women. We should probably speak of a new gender differentiation that values diversity not only between men and women, but also between men and men and between women and women and relates them. Between difference as an aspect that inexorably separates men and women, and equality as an element that cancels out differences, the dialectic between these two poles passes through an awareness of the unrepeatability of the human being and the relationality of the person.

Conclusion

The starting point for reflecting on gender, once shaped by the need to explain the pressing demands of feminist movements and the struggle to improve women's conditions, now faces a renewed challenge: to give a positive and meaningful interpretation of difference, and to value relationships and diversity across the various paths of life. The expanded possibilities for gender expression have opened new ways of relating beyond the traditional men-women binary.

Considering the elements analysed, it becomes clear that constructing gender identity is now more uncertain and risk-laden than in the past. At the same time, however, it is increasingly centred on individual choice and personal responsibility. Where biographical trajectories were once largely predetermined by sex and gender affiliation, this is no longer inevitable. Today, individuals are presented with greater freedom of choice and partial reversibility in their life paths. Yet, this increase in autonomy is accompanied by a heightened sense of insecurity and

uncertainty about the future. Gender identity construction has become a dynamic, lifelong process—shaped by ongoing interactions from childhood through adulthood. These processes, and the differences they involve, are increasingly framed as individual choices, often shaped by the specific relational contexts in which they unfold.

It is, therefore, useful to adopt an interpretive framework that considers the relational dimension of gender and sexual identity experiences. A particularly innovative perspective views gender not merely as an individual trait or political claim, but as a social relationship—rooted in biological difference but socially constructed in diverse ways. The new frontier lies not in asserting gender specificity for its own sake, but in recognising and valuing it. Reframing gender as a relational resource allows us to envision a future in which similarity and difference coexist—without one erasing the other, and without sacrificing the value of the relationship itself.

The development of gender identity occurs through continuous interaction with socialisation contexts across different generations, where values and role models are transmitted. Only by reconsidering all the elements involved in this process can we attempt a more comprehensive analysis that helps reconstruct a fuller picture of how men and women identities are formed and opens the door to new insights and questions for the future.

Socialisation processes both shape and are shaped by identity traits, social expectations, and relational and cultural norms related to gender. While the meanings associated with gender roles and identities continue to evolve, they still retain a powerful normative and classificatory function. Gender socialisation is the result of a process in which individuals confront challenges posed by their context and must mobilise resources—successfully—to meet those challenges. The central risk lies in the mismatch between available resources and contextual demands.

Gender socialisation thus emerges as a complex, risk-filled process—a weave of challenges and supports. These challenges arise in contexts marked by both gender indifferentiation and persistent stereotypes, where achieving a stable gender identity can be a difficult task. The resources available to individuals are shaped by relationships with family and school and by gender norms acquired across various settings. It is therefore essential to study socialisation from an integrated and relational perspective—one that brings together individual agency, interpersonal interactions, and broader structural dimensions.

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