

Gender Attitudes in the United States

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To begin, it is important to establish a definition of what gender is and how it is different from sex. In the sociological world, sex is understood to be a biological category that is based on the persons reproductive organs (Crossman, 2018). At birth, most fall into the categories of either male or female, but some are born with both reproductive organs, and they would be classified as intersex (Crossman, 2018). In terms of gender, sociologists define this based on one's identity, presentation of self, behavior, and interaction with others (Crossman, 2018). Most sociologists believe that gender is a learned behavior, making it a socially constructed category.

According to sociologists, gender is a socially constructed idea. Now how do we "learn" gender? In our society we learn gender through what is known as socialization. Socialization is a lifelong process of an individual or group of people learning the expected norms and customs of a group or society through social interaction (Bell, n.d.). There are different types of socialization, and gender socialization is one of them. Gender socialization is also a lifelong learning process of the socially accepted attitudes, behaviors, and norms that are associated with sex (Bell, n.d.). The gender socialization process typically occurs through early education, family, social media, and peers (Bell, n.d.). The process of socialization normally begins before birth. For example, when parents select a name based on the sex of the fetus or by buying clothes that are gender specific. Through gender socialization, people begin to form what is known as their own gender identity. The gender identity in which they form helps shape how they think about themselves and others in their society (Crossman, 2018).

The three sociological perspectives have their own individual ways to look at gender. A sociologist from the functionalist perspective theory is someone who sees society as a complex system with parts that work together to maintain balance and stability (Lumen, n.d.). This sociologist would believe that the gender identities that have been created in our society serve a

purpose to maintain a stable environment. For example, the gender inequalities that many face in societies would be seen as a way to create an efficient division of labor (Lumen, n.d.). The next sociological perspective is conflict theory. With this theory, sociologists believe that there is a struggle for dominance, power, and resources among groups in society (Lumen, n.d.). From the conflict theory perspective, men are seen as the dominant group and women are seen as the lesser group. For the final sociological perspective, symbolic interactionism, this theory tries to understand the behavior of humans through the rules of symbols in interactions with one another (Lumen, n.d.). Many, if not all, symbols in regard to gender are created socially in our societies. For example, the word gay was once understood as happy, but in societies now this word is more understood as being homosexual (Lumen, n.d.).

With the idea of gender in mind, it is obvious that people are going to have thoughts and opinions about it, also known as gender attitudes. Throughout the years, the societal support for women's status and opportunities has been higher now than in the past. However, that progress toward equality in terms of gender has started to slow down in recent years. In one recent study, researchers were looking at attitudes toward women in politics, familial roles, and working motherhood from the year 1977 to 2018. They collected the data by using the General Social Survey (Meagher & Shu, 2019). The data that the researchers collected showed that support for gender equality decreased around the mid-1990s and then started to increase in the mid-2000 (Meagher & Shu, 2019). From the 2018 survey results, researchers can see that there has been a recent increase in the support for women in political aspects and dual family roles (Meagher & Shu, 2019). The increase in support specifically for women in politics and dual family roles is helping to narrow the gaps of gender inequalities (Meagher & Shu, 2019). Researchers believe

that these gender attitudes endorse equal rights for women in the public light (Meagher & Shu, 2019).

Adults in the United States aren't the only ones who form gender attitudes, children do as well. In one study about children and gender, researchers hypothesized that it is possible for children to link gender to social status (Mandalaywala, Tai, & Rhodes, 2020). While the data was mixed in terms of supporting the hypothesis, there is some interesting data. Researchers found that children, as young as three and four, use features associated with men to decide who is in charge (Mandalaywala, Tai, & Rhodes, 2020). Those features in the study were listed as physical strength and masculine characteristics (Mandalaywala, Tai, & Rhodes, 2020). In this particular study, there was also data that supported children as young as six used gender to establish masculine jobs were higher status than feminine jobs (Mandalaywala, Tai, & Rhodes, 2020).

When it comes to children and their minds, they absorb everything from their environment like a sponge. When it comes to gender, they are learning how to do gender in their everyday lives, but more specifically they learn a lot of gender stereotypes from the television shows that they watch. Many television shows and movies reinforce ideas that masculinity tends to be valued more than femininity (Children's Health Council, n.d.). Another gender stereotype that young girls can pick up on from media is that females should be concerned about how they look (Children's Health Council, n.d.). When children hit the adolescent age range, they are potentially being more exposed to sexual harassment through television shows (Children's Health Council, n.d.). By watching gender stereotypes through media channels, children learn the expected ways to act when in romantic or sexual relationships, and those learned behaviors are often strongly gendered (Children's Health Council, n.d.). Gender attitudes and stereotypes

can be detrimental to our society. That is why it is important to do what you can to prevent those negative stereotypes and attitudes. It is important to have open conversations to promote positive gender attitudes, especially starting at a young age. Encourage them to ask questions and let children know that they have a safe space to experience gender in their own ways.

References

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