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# Gender Roles and Society

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Additional structural conditions such as women with high levels of education and high income-earning potential might be necessary prerequisites for such families to exist (Risman 1998,101). Gay and lesbian couples also are less likely to organize their lives in gendered ways because they do not have the ease of creating gendered patterns of behavior on the basis of a person's sex category. Research has found that lesbian couples are more likely to share housework since obviously one person is not delegated to the housekeeper role on the basis of her sex (Baber and Allen 1992,207).

Gender is constructed in individual, interactional, and structural ways to create environmental constraints and opportunities that usually benefit men more than women. Gender does not, however, affect families' lives in isolation. More research is beginning to explore how gender interacts with other characteristics such as race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and social class to affect diverse family experiences (Coltrane 1998,8). For example, unlike European American middle-class women, working-class women and women of color historically have had much stronger ties to the workforce because of the necessity of their incomes to their families' economic well-being. Thus, their experiences as wives and partners may be different from their European American middle-class counterparts. Current research also finds that factors such as race and social class affect women's experiences of mothering (Walker 1999, 448). Since gender is constructed, these findings are what one would expect, and they serve to make more complete our understanding of all the factors that create gender.

Aine M. Humble

**See also:** Contemporary Men's Movement; Gay and Lesbian Studies; Gender Roles and Society; Sex-Role Stereotypes; Work and Families

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### Gender Roles and Society

Gender roles are based on the different expectations that individuals, groups, and societies have of individuals based on their sex and based on each society's values and beliefs about gender. Gender roles are the product of the interactions between individuals and their environments, and they give individuals cues about what sort of behavior is believed to be appropriate for what sex. Appropriate gender roles are defined according to a society's beliefs about differences between the sexes.

Understanding the term "gender roles" requires an understanding of the term "gender." "Gender" is a social term that is often confused with the term "sex." Sex and gender are different concepts. Sex is a biological concept, determined on the basis of individuals' primary sex characteristics. Gender, on the other hand, refers to the meanings, values, and characteristics that people ascribe to different sexes. Ann Oakley (1972) was one of the first social scientists to distinguish the concept of gender from the concept of sex. According to Oakley, gender parallels the biological division of sex into male and female, but it involves the division and social valuation of masculinity and femininity. In other words, gender is a concept that humans create socially, through their interactions with one another and their environments, yet it relies heavily upon biological differences between males and females. Because humans create the concept of gender socially, gender is referred to as a social construction. The social construction of gender is demonstrated by the fact that individuals, groups, and societies ascribe particular traits, statuses, or values to individuals purely because of their sex, yet these ascriptions differ across societies and cultures, and over time within the same society.

Gender roles are the roles that men and women are expected to occupy based on their sex. Traditionally, many Western societies have believed that women are more nurturing than men. Therefore, the traditional view of the feminine gender role prescribes that women should behave in ways that are nurturing. One way that a woman might engage in the traditional feminine gender role would be to nurture her family by working full-time within the home rather than taking employment outside of the home. Men, on the other hand, are presumed by traditional views of gender roles to be leaders. The traditional view of the masculine gender role, therefore, suggests that men should be the heads of their households by providing financially for the family and making important family decisions. While these views remain dominant in many spheres of society, alternative perspectives on traditional beliefs about gender roles have gained increasing support in the twenty-first century.

Different disciplines offer a range of perspectives on gender roles. An ecological perspective on gender roles suggests that gender roles are created by the interactions between individuals, communities, and their environments. That is, while individual people play a role in constructing gender roles, so too do the physical and social environments within which people operate. A biological perspective on gender roles suggests that women have a natural affinity toward the feminine gender role and that men have a natural affinity toward the masculine gender role. The biological perspective does not, however, suggest that one role holds any inherently greater value than another role. A sociological perspective toward gender roles suggests that masculine and feminine roles are learned and that masculine and feminine gender roles are not necessarily connected to males' and females' biological traits. Sociologists study the different meanings and values that masculine and feminine gender roles hold in society. Related to the sociological perspective, a feminist perspective on gender roles might assert that because gender roles are learned, they can also be unlearned, and that new and different roles can be created.

The feminist perspective points out that gender roles are not simply ideas about appropriate behavior for males and females but are also linked to the different levels of power that males and females hold in society. For example, maintaining economic control over themselves and their fami-

lies is one way that men experience greater power in society than women. Because men are expected to be the primary breadwinners for their families, women often find themselves to be in poverty if their marriages dissolve. In this example, a feminist perspective would assert that men tend to hold more power in their marriages than women since men are less likely to lose power or social status if their marriages dissolve.

Gender roles can be linked to expectations of males and females in realms outside of the family as well, such as work (Williams 1995). In the workplace, men and women are often expected to perform different tasks and occupy different roles based on their sex (Kanter 1977). Even in the early twenty-first century, many corporations operate from a perspective that favors traditional beliefs about gender roles by, for example, offering parental leave benefits only to mothers and denying such benefits to fathers. In addition, because the traditional perspective toward gender roles remains predominant in many corporations, the positions that women and men hold within corporations are often segregated by sex. Women are more likely to be expected to work as secretaries, and men are more likely to be expected to work as managers and executives. Also, men are presumed to be more ambitious and task-oriented in their work, while women are presumed to be more interested in and concerned about their relationships with others at work.

As these examples demonstrate, gender roles are sometimes created on the basis of stereotypes about gender. Gender stereotypes are oversimplified understandings of males and females and the differences between them. Individuals sometimes base their perceptions about appropriate gender roles upon gender stereotypes. Gender stereotypes tend to include exaggerated or erroneous assertions about the nature of males and females. For example, a common gender stereotype about males is that they are not emotional. Females, on the other hand, are commonly stereotyped as being irrational or overly emotional. Political movements such as the feminist movement continue to work to deconstruct gender stereotypes and offer alternative visions of gender roles that emphasize equality between women and men.

Finally, gender roles are often discussed in terms of an individual's gender role orientation, which is typically described as either traditional or

nontraditional. A traditional gender role orientation emphasizes differences between men and women and assumes that each sex has a natural affinity to particular behaviors. Those who maintain a traditional gender role orientation are likely to be influenced by the rules and rituals of the generations that came before them, by their parents and grandparents. Individuals with nontraditional gender role orientations are more likely to believe that an individual's behavior is not or should not be determined solely by her sex. Individuals with nontraditional gender role orientations are more likely to believe in the value of egalitarian relationships between men and women and in the power of individual human beings to determine what roles they wish to occupy and the extent to which those roles are or should be associated with their sex.

Amy Blackstone

**See also:** Contemporary Men's Movement; Gay and Lesbian Studies; Gender and Families; Sex-Role Stereotypes; Sexual Identity Development; Work and Families

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### Gesell, Arnold Lucius

Arnold Lucius Gesell, a noted American psychologist and pediatrician, was born on June 21, 1880, in Alama, Wisconsin, and died on May 29, 1961, in New Haven, Connecticut. Gesell studied, through the use of observation and innovative recording on film, the physical and mental development of children from birth to adolescence. His books in flu-

enced child rearing enormously in the United States, particularly in the 1940s and 1950s. He was the director of the Clinic of Child Development at Yale University (1911-1948), where he and his team collected a vast quantity of information and data on child development. The information he published had a huge influence on both parents and educators around the globe.

Gesell first studied psychology at Clark University, and was influenced by one of the earliest American psychologists, G. Stanley Hall (1844-1924). He received his Ph.D. in 1911, was appointed an assistant professor at Yale University, where he established the Clinic of Child Development, and served as the clinic's director between 1911 and 1948. He became convinced that medical training was essential in his studies of child development, therefore studied medicine and received his M.D. from Yale in 1915. Gesell's team studied large numbers of children (about 12,000), which led them to several conclusions, known collectively as Gesell's maturational theory. The findings of the research demonstrated that all development in babies, children, and adolescents was similar and consisted of orderly processes. Children must reach quite specific maturational stages in their development before their learning will influence their behavior. Both physical and psychological development of children occurs in a predictable and patterned manner, which was termed maturation. Maturation follows specific sequences (not necessarily linear). All children will go through these stages at their own pace, but the sequences remain the same. Behavior was regarded as a function of structure, whereas the role of the environment was viewed as a secondary influence.

Gesell was also very interested in retarded development, as he believed an understanding of normal child development was absolutely essential to understanding developmental abnormality. The results of the research were published as *Infancy and Human Growth* (1928) and contained developmental schedules, using 195 items of behavior in the areas of motor skills, adaptive behavior, language development, and self-help and social skills. Ten years later, the schedules were revised and were used widely to evaluate children as early as four weeks of age. The schedules and tests were widely used to determine school readiness. There was criticism of the schedules by some experts, but Gesell's influence had become substantial. His