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Summary Article: **Gender Roles**

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Gender roles consist of shared expectations that apply to individuals on the basis of their socially identified sex. The sharing of gender roles refers to the tendency of expectations associated with men and women to be consensual in society. At an implicit or explicit level, most people endorse expected behaviors as appropriate for men or for women. Therefore, as Eagly's social role theory argues, membership in the female or male social category subjects people to social expectations that affect social interaction in group situations and influence the intergroup behavior that transpires between women and men. This entry defines gender roles and discusses the consequences of deviation from them, their effect on self-concepts, theories about their origin, and their impact on individuals and society.

Concept of Gender Roles

The definition of gender roles derives from the concept of social role, which refers to the shared expectations that apply to people who occupy a certain social position or are members of a particular social category. At an individual level, roles are schemas, or abstract knowledge structures, pertaining to a group of people. To the extent that role schemas are shared among members of a society, they are important structures at the societal level as well as the individual level. Roles are thus aspects of social structure, which consists of persisting and bounded patterns of behavior and social interaction.

Social roles foster characteristic ways of behaving among people who have the same social position within a social structure or who are classified in the same general societal category (e.g., as men, as elderly). Encouragement to act in particular ways arises from the shared role schemas that people in a society hold. For example, people who have a particular occupational role (e.g., as an accountant or a plumber) are subjected to a set of expectations concerning the work they should do and the manner in which they should do it.

Gender roles apply to people in the extremely general social categories of male and female. These roles, like roles based on qualities such as age, social class, and race/ethnicity, have great scope because they apply to all aspects of people's daily lives. In contrast, more specific roles based on factors such as family relationships (e.g., father, daughter) and occupation (e.g., nurse, police officer) are mainly relevant to behavior in a particular social context—at work, for example, in the case of occupational roles. This general applicability of gender roles means that they influence behavior, even though specific roles simultaneously constrain behavior. For example, because gender roles are present in the workplace, people have somewhat different expectations for female and male occupants of the same workplace role.

On Stereotypes

The importance of gender roles is revealed in research on gender stereotypes, which documents the differing beliefs that people hold about the typical behaviors of women and men. The content of many of these beliefs can be summarized by differences on two dimensions, which are frequently labeled *communal* and *agentic*. Women, more than men, are thought to be communal—that is, friendly, unselfish, concerned with others, and emotionally expressive. Men, more than women, are thought to be agentic—that is, masterful, assertive, competitive, and instrumentally competent.

Gender stereotypes also encompass beliefs about other personal attributes, including physical characteristics, typical roles, specific skills, and emotional dispositions. Research on gender stereotypes has shown that merely classifying a person as male or female automatically evokes these expectations, or mental associations, about the characteristics that are typical of men or women. These associations are pervasive and influential even when people are unaware of them.

Beliefs about the typical characteristics of women and men are not sufficient to demonstrate gender roles because roles are composed not merely of expectations about how people *do* behave, but also of expectations about how they *should* behave. Social roles are thus prescriptive (or injunctive) as well as descriptive. Research has demonstrated the prescriptive quality of gender roles by showing that stereotypical ways of behaving are perceived as generally desirable for people of each sex—at least insofar as researchers have examined the evaluatively positive aspects of gender stereotypes.

To identify desirable behaviors for women and men, some studies have investigated beliefs about ideal women and men. These beliefs about ideal behavior tend to parallel beliefs about typical behaviors of women and men. Such findings show that people tend to think that women and men ought to differ in many of the ways that they are perceived to differ. This oughtness transforms gender stereotypes into gender roles. And these descriptive and prescriptive beliefs define what is considered masculine and feminine in a given society.

The descriptive aspect of gender roles specifies what is considered normal or typical for each sex and thus provides guidance concerning what behaviors are likely to be effective in a situation. People refer to others of their own sex to find out what sorts of behaviors are usual for individuals of their sex in a particular situation. They tend to imitate these sex-typical behaviors, especially if a situation is ambiguous or confusing. The prescriptive aspect of gender roles describes what is desirable and admirable for each sex, providing guidance concerning what behaviors are likely to elicit approval from others. People thus refer to what is desirable for persons of their sex when they endeavor to build and maintain social relationships. In summary, the power of gender roles to induce role-consistent behavior derives from these roles' descriptions of what is typical of men and women and what is desirable for them.

The idea that expectations about male and female behavior are shared implies a social consensus about typical and appropriate behaviors as well as people's awareness of this consensus. This consensus is evident in stereotype research, which has shown generally similar gender beliefs among people who differ in attributes such as sex, age, ethnicity, social class, and others. Moreover, social cognitive researchers have maintained that virtually everyone acquires the stereotypical beliefs that are associated with important social categories such as sex, race, and age. In addition, awareness of the society's apparent consensus about the characteristics of men and women is demonstrated by respondents' ability to report on the stereotypes held in their own cultures.

In summary, the power of gender roles to affect behavior derives not only from their description of typical and desirable behavior of women and men but also from their tendency to be relatively consensual and for people to be aware of this consensus. People thus believe that the typical other person holds these beliefs and consequently would react favorably to role-consistent behavior and unfavorably to inconsistent behavior. Therefore, social approval and a smoothly functioning social interaction in group settings generally follow from behavior consistent with gender roles. Consequently, it is not surprising that, following from social psychological concepts such as normative influence and

self-fulfilling prophecy, research on the behavioral confirmation of gender stereotypes has shown that, under many circumstances, men and women act to confirm the stereotypical expectations that others hold about their behavior.

Deviation From Gender Roles

A key assumption of a gender role analysis is that behavior inconsistent with gender roles is often negatively sanctioned and tends to disrupt social interaction. The sanctions for role-inconsistent behavior may be overt (e.g., losing a job) or subtle (e.g., being ignored).

Social psychologists have produced many demonstrations of negative reactions to deviations from gender roles. For example, in one study, men who behaved passively and women who behaved assertively were rated less favorably than men who behaved assertively and women who behaved passively. Also, in small group interaction, women's competent, task-oriented contributions are more likely to be ignored and to elicit negative reactions than identical contributions from men. Moreover, women tend to lose likability and influence over others when they behave in a dominant style by expressing clear-cut disagreement with another person, using direct speech, or displaying assertive or extremely competent actions. Group members thus elicit conformity to gender-role norms by dispensing rewards such as liking and cooperation in return for conformity to these norms and by dispensing social punishments such as rejection and neglect in return for nonconformity.

In general, gender roles regulate social interaction because people judge the value and appropriateness of others' behavior according to its conformity with gender roles. Because people often sanction behavior that is inconsistent with gender roles, these roles have a generally conservative impact by exacting costs from people who deviate from norms concerning male and female behavior. Weighing these negative outcomes in a cost-benefit analysis, people do not deviate from their gender role unless nonconformity produces benefits that outweigh the costs. Part of these perceived benefits for women, as members of a subordinate group in society, may be having some chance to gain access to rewards and opportunities formerly reserved for men.

Gender Roles and Selfconcept

Gender roles can produce differences in males' and females' behavior not only by affecting the rewards and punishments received from others but also by affecting the selfconcepts of women and men. Psychologists have often focused on the extent to which individuals define themselves by the attributes that are associated with being male or female. These self-definitions constitute an internalization of societal gender roles. The term *gender identity* refers to these self-definitions in terms of masculinity and femininity. Individuals of each sex differ in their gender identity, and men and women differ on the average. Gender identity is only one of many possible social identities, with each identity representing the individual's psychological relationship to a particular social category (e.g., race, social class, religion).

Studies of gender identity have shown that women, more than men, ascribe communal qualities to themselves, and men, more than women, ascribe agentic qualities to themselves. In addition, women's construals of themselves are oriented toward interdependence, in that their representations of others, especially those to whom they are linked in close relationships, are treated as part of themselves. In contrast, men's construals of themselves are oriented toward separation and dominance, albeit incorporating a collective focus on membership in larger groups such as teams and organizations.

The internalization of gender-stereotypical qualities results in people adopting these qualities as personal standards for judging their own behavior. They tend to evaluate themselves favorably to the extent that they conform to these personal standards and to evaluate themselves unfavorably to the extent that they deviate from these standards. One study found that to the extent that gender role norms were personally relevant to participants, experiences that were congruent with gender norms (i.e., involving dominance for men and communion for women) yielded positive feelings about the self and brought participants' actual self-concepts closer to their desired self-concepts. However, despite evidence of gender roles acting as self-standards, people raised in culturally atypical environments may not internalize conventional versions of gender roles and thus may have atypical gender identities. Research has thus shown that people who have self-concepts that differ from those that are typical of people of their sex are less likely to show traditionally sex-typed behavior.

Origins of Gender Roles

Gender roles form an important part of the culture and social structure of every society. Although the ascription of agentic qualities to men and communal qualities to women is widely shared across world cultures, beliefs about the proper relationships between women and men vary widely. Traditional ideologies endorse the dominance of men over women, whereas modern ideologies endorse more egalitarian relationships. Gender ideology is generally more modern in more developed, urbanized nations.

According to Wood and Eagly's biosocial model, even though gender roles are products of the culture, they are not arbitrary cultural constructions but are rooted in a society's division of labor between the sexes. The differing distributions of men and women into social roles form the basis for gender roles. Thus, the typical division of labor in industrialized nations assigns a disproportionate share of domestic activities to women and of other activities to men. Mainly women occupy the domestic role, somewhat more men than women occupy the employee role, and women are more likely than men to be part-time employees. Although most women are employed in the paid labor force in the United States and many other industrialized nations, women and men tend to be employed in different occupations in a somewhat sex-segregated labor force.

The link between gender roles and the male-female division of labor follows from the principle that men and women are expected to have attributes that equip them for their sex-typical roles. People are expected to accommodate to their family and employment roles by acquiring role-related skills, such as women learning domestic skills and men learning skills that are useful in paid occupations, particularly in male-dominated occupations. Also, women's association with the domestic role and female-dominated occupations favors interpersonally facilitative and friendly (i.e., communal) behaviors. In particular, the assignment of the majority of childrearing to women leads people to expect and prefer nurturing behaviors from women.

In contrast, men's association with the employment role, especially male-dominated occupations, leads people to expect more assertive and confident (i.e., agentic) behaviors from them. In addition, expectations about the personal qualities of each sex appear to be shaped by their typical paid occupations. In support of this idea, research has shown that to the extent that occupations are male dominated, success in them is perceived to follow from agentic personal qualities, whereas to the extent that occupations are female dominated, success in them is perceived to follow from communal personal qualities.

Roles that entail the greatest amount of power and status remain male dominated. Thus status differences between the sexes foster expectations that men are assertive and directive and that women are supportive and cooperative. These expectations arise from people's observations of inequalities between the sexes. Traditionally, men have interacted with women who have lower status than they do—for example, male executives interacting with female secretaries. Until relatively recently, it was unusual for men to interact with women who are equal or superior to them in income and prestige—for example, male executives interacting with female executives.

The inequalities that individual men and women experience are transformed into widely shared beliefs not merely in men's greater status and power, but also in their greater ability and worthiness. It follows that men more readily exercise influence over women in new encounters, even outside of workplaces, and women more readily accept this influence. The expectations that flow from men's higher status shape interactions even when a man and a woman are objectively equal in status. Nevertheless, relatively recent changes in the status of women have moderated this aspect of gender roles in many contemporary societies.

Impact on Individuals and Society

Gender roles can have powerful effects on individuals who take these roles into account as they strive to reach important goals, enhance their self-esteem, and gain approval from others. Even without conscious awareness of gender roles, people have mental associations about men and women that guide their thoughts and behaviors and help maintain traditional arrangements. Because masculine and feminine associations are elicited automatically by cues related to gender, these associations influence virtually all social interaction.

In all social settings, people must negotiate social interactions as men or women and therefore must contend with their own and others' expectations concerning the behaviors that are typical and appropriate for individuals of their sex. Violating others' expectations about male or female behavior can bring negative reactions, whereas meeting their expectations can bring rewards of social approval and cooperation. In addition, living up to one's own personal gender identity can yield rewards of self-esteem and satisfaction. Yet, this view that conformity to gender roles yields social and personal rewards is overly simple in societies in which women's position in the social structure is changing and therefore gender roles are in flux. Although these changes can loosen the constraints of traditional norms about how men and women should behave and thus allow more behavioral flexibility, other consequences include ambiguity, confusion, and debates concerning the proper place of women and men in society.

See also

Gender and Behavior, Norms, Roles, Sexism, Status Characteristics/Expectation States Theory, Stereotyping

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