

## **Gender Socialization in Men**

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines gender as the behavioral, cultural, or psychological traits associated with one's sex. Early gender theorists posited that men and women had innate psychological differences that contributed to their respective, and distinct gender roles. These characterizations are still sometimes used today. However, the concept of fixed gender roles has been widely criticized, and the current study of gender roles largely follows a constructionist perspective. That is, men and women learn what appropriate thoughts and behaviors are based on their social environment. Additionally, what is considered masculine differs across cultures and throughout time. For example, some cultures have considered homosexual relationships to be the antithesis of true masculinity, while others have viewed such relationships as a prerequisite to being considered a "true man." Societal expectations about what is considered masculine are evident from the earliest stages of human development. A 2009 study by Edwards and Jones consisting of 10 college-aged men found that none of them could remember a time where they were not conscious of how men are supposed to be.

## **Gender Expectations for Men**

Research conducted in the United States has suggested that men are expected to conform and often do conform to the stereotypes of what it means to be a man. Boys and men are inundated with messages of an ideal masculinity at home, at school, and by images of stereotypical behavior in various media outlets. Socially valued gender roles for men often require men to be: tough, powerful, intimidating, rugged, independent, hypersexual, and in control. Simply put, to be masculine is to be the opposite of feminine, which is traditionally stereotyped in sexist ways, such as the view that to be feminine is to be weak, subservient, and controlled by emotions. Any man who behaves in ways that are not traditionally masculine runs

the risk of being labeled in heterosexist and sexist ways (e.g., called gay or a girl), further perpetuating rigid gender roles.

One study examined how gender roles impact men over time. In Edwards and Jones 2009 study on college-aged men, these researchers found several distinct phases. The first was described as the feeling of a need to put on a mask. This symbolic mask was meant to portray an image of masculinity and to cover-up parts of oneself that does not conform to societal expectations. This is done both consciously and unconsciously. Phase two involved “wearing” the mask. This included behaviors typical of college-aged men such as frequent partying. Additionally, this served to reduce social disapproval for behaviors that are not considered masculine. An example of this would be crying around a group of male friends then later laughing it off or making a joke about it. This phase also helped men with marginalized identities that experienced racism, classism, or homophobia to maintain a sense of masculinity. Eventually, these men often realized there was a consequence to wearing the mask, which was the third phase. This included limited relationships with other men, demeaning attitudes and relationships with women, and a loss of authenticity and humanity. An awareness of these personal and social consequences lead to a slow change in behavior for each participant. As a result, these men were able to behave in ways that felt more authentic, such as being more emotionally expressive and choosing not to engage in risky behavior.

Although conforming to certain gender role expectations comes at a significant cost, many men are unable to behave in more authentic ways. According to the Gender Role Conflict Model, personal and institutional sexism, and the fear of femininity for men is directly related to masculine ideology and men’s gender role socialization. Frequent areas of gender role conflict in men are conflicts between work and family relations; success, power, and competition issues;

and restrictive emotionality. For example, a 2008 study by O'Neil describes how a man's tendency to remain calm in crisis situations might often be a benefit, but this same behavior could also prevent deeper emotional connections in relationships. Some scholars have suggested that conforming to these stereotypes can have significant psychological consequences. For example, it is widely noted that men are much less likely to seek out mental health services, preferring instead to "tough it out," despite data that suggests men are more likely to experience substance abuse problems and commit suicide. Indeed, research has suggested that a greater endorsement of dominant masculine beliefs is significantly related to lower help seeking behaviors in men. Scholars have suggested that an adherence to traditional views of masculinity also comes at a significant physical cost. Some researchers have speculated that one reason women live on average seven years longer than men is because of healthier beliefs and health practices that are directly related to gender roles, such as going to the doctor more frequently and engaging in less risky behaviors.

### **Gender and Intersectionality**

Research on men has increasingly moved towards a more nuanced examination of gender roles and masculinity. Driven by feminist theories, intersectionality, which has been defined as the study of intersections between forms of oppression and discrimination, has helped to move the focus towards the experience of understudied and marginalized groups. For example, gender scholars note that one's understanding of gender will be significantly influenced by factors such as race, social class, and sexual orientation, and the study of gender using samples of predominately white college students is not sufficient. According to some research, Black men in the United States often have a more expressive communication style, and may be more likely to display emotion. This is in contrast to other racial groups. Latino men who value to cultural

expectation of machismo may feel greater levels of shame for emotional expression, similar to Asian and White men, whose cultural values often include restraint and stoicism. One's social class standing impacts behavioral expressions of masculinity. For the middle and upper middle class, researchers note that masculinity is often organized around dominance and expertise, with an emphasis on leadership and professionalism. Scholars have noted that gay men's expressions of masculinity are strongly influenced by their sexual orientations. That is, researchers have found that the gay community often values appearing masculine, while many gay men find traditional gender roles, such as emotional restraint around other men, to be incompatible with their sexual identity. While there are gender roles that are reinforced at a societal level, it is important to continue to examine how these beliefs are influenced by one's social identities.

### **Feminism & Gender Socialization in Men**

Men's gender socialization has also been affected by strides in feminist theory and action, as well as men's involvement in feminist social movements. Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, men have involved themselves in feminist writing and political organizing, primarily as "allies:" men who harnessed their relative social power to support goals of women's liberation. Men became more active throughout the 'second wave' (early 1960s through the late 1980s) and 'third wave' (early 1990s to the early 2000s) of feminist organizing. Although many early feminist scholars perceived women's liberation to be the core objective of feminism, third wave or 'post-wave' feminists argued that men's liberation was as crucial as the liberation of women to the objectives of feminism. For example, Black feminist author bell hooks stresses the importance of including men in the movement for gender equality. She argues not only that men are obligated to join the struggle, but also that men, particularly men of color and sexual minority men, should be freed from harmful restrictions imposed on them in terms of how they should think, feel, and behave.

The push for inclusion of men's liberation within feminism led to enormous debate. Many women posed a challenging question: What, exactly, did men need to be liberated from? Largely in response, men's studies (also referred to as men and masculinities studies) emerged as an interdisciplinary academic field in the 1970s and throughout the 1980s. Scholars began to integrate feminist critiques of patriarchy into discussions of issues faced by men, including depression and anxiety, shame around gender-nonconforming behavior, and the impossibility of meeting a 'masculine ideal.' In particular, they began to agree that the manner in which boys are socialized leads to a cohort of adult men who are emotionally immature, violent, and have maladaptive strategies for coping with psychological distress. Alongside this emerging academic field, a men's liberation movement began to grow, arguing for a restructuring of gender norms and social expectations in order to liberate men from the traps of masculinity.

In 1982, sociologist R.W. Connell introduced the notion of *hegemonic masculinity*: a set of practices that promote the dominant social position of men over women. Connell argued that Western culture idealizes a particular form of maleness and masculinity: strong, muscular, and emotionless. Hegemonic masculinity both subordinates women *and* restricts the emotional expressiveness of men. It isolates men from women and other men by disallowing them to form close bonds or express vulnerability. As a consequence, men whose behavior or gender presentations do not align with typical masculine ideals (e.g., men of color, gender-nonconforming men, and sexual minority men) are punished, ridiculed, and marginalized. Connell and others have since argued that, as a result, men are afraid to admit emotional weakness, and instead turn to psychologically damaging strategies of relief, such as drinking excessively, engaging in violence, and committing suicide at disproportionate rates. Men who conform to more traditional gender roles also tend to present with higher rates of psychological

issues, including intimacy issues, depression and anxiety, substance abuse, lower self-esteem, and greater overall distress.

In the late 1990s through the early 2000s, men's scholars began to propose new forms of masculinity and new ways of socializing boys and men. Educator and activist Michael Kaufman, for example, wrote in 1994 that men have *contradictory experiences of power*. As individuals, men hold enormous capacities to exert control in their lives and lives of others. Along with the benefits of such privileges, however, men also face significant negative psychosocial consequences, including pain, isolation, and alienation: a sort of distancing from oneself and denial of one's complexity due to restrictive gendered expectations. This state is contradictory in that men are socialized into power, yet this power can also result in social isolation, violence, and restrictive gender norms. Kaufman writes that the privileges and power men would lose by involving themselves in feminism would be worth the loss of fear, pain, and violence men experience as a result of the sheer impossibility of living up to masculine ideals. He also presents new notions of what it may mean to be a man: soft, caring, and engaged in gender equality.

In recent years, more men have begun to identify as feminists, viewing feminism as a critical social movement with the potential to radicalize how women *and men* are socialized. They have proposed new ways for men to learn how to embody their gender: as caring, strong, empathetic people. In contemporary academia, male feminists lead much of the men's studies and pro-feminist scholarship. Critical race theorists have also called for a deeper cross-cultural analysis of the relevance of feminism within the lives of men of color.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

The study of men's gender socialization has come a long way in recent decades. The conceptualization of fluid and socially constructed gender roles, rather than static, biologically

determined roles behaviors has allowed for a better understanding of the complex factors that impact men. However, there is much work to be done, as evident in continued avoidance of help-seeking behavior for psychological distress and higher instances of physical maladies. Future research would benefit from situating gender socialization in men within a multicultural framework, with increased emphasis on how social identities and marginalized statuses impact men. Studies have unequivocally shown how multicultural factors influence well being much can still be done to fill the existing gaps in the literature.

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**See also:** Feminism in Men, Femininity, Men's Studies

**Further Readings:**

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