

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

NORTH AMERICAN GENDER RELATIONS

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Overview Gender roles are social constructs and so it should not be very surprising that they change over time, and also that there may be multiple ideas of what men and women do in society. There is a clear relationship between religion and gender roles, and when societies develop into industrial nations and later into ones that have strong media presences, there are often more opportunities for self-actualization and invention of gender to the point that there is a convergence of fantasy and reality.

PreHistory

Clovis culture (18,000 – 8,000 BC):Based on the nature of the artifacts, it is clear that there were clear roles, which had to do with hunter, fisherman, process or captured prey, and then later of religious or shamanistic ceremonies. It's not clear if there were true gender differentiations, although we tend to think of men as hunters and women as the guardians of hearth and home.

Classical

Southwest Pueblo (1200 BCE – 1300 AC): Gender ambiguity is the dominant characteristic of the pre-colonial Pueblo civilization. The gender-neutral Kokopeli and the trickster were perhaps the most defining element. The rites and rituals related to rain, moon phases, and corn were not necessarily gendered.

Eastern Woodlands (1000 BCE – 1500 AD):Women were important in the Eastern Woodland tribal cultures because they provided clear evidence of genealogy, particularly in a culture that did not necessarily recognize monogamy. The matriarchal culture allowed an understanding of family relationships, but it did not mean that the women held all the power. In fact, men also held positions of power; they just did not preside as head person in a family.

Colonial (Early Modern)

Puritan Gender Roles: Patriarchal, with man as head of household. Women considered the heads of home-making and child-rearing. Fear of women breaking out of traditional roles as evidenced by witchcraft ..

Planter / Plantation Gender Roles: Much depended on social status. Plantation owners: lord / lady equivalents. Servants similar to England. Sharecroppers and poor planters: shared roles (farming, etc.). Slaves – depended if field workers or house workers. Field: no gender roles – all worked alike. In the house, women in kitchen and cleaning, men in labor / repair roles. Taking care of animals.

Pioneer Gender Roles: Long absences from home (hunting, employment as guides, trading trips, going back East, etc.) resulted in a great deal of independence for women. Women home-schooled as well as maintained house and farm. They trained the children to be part of the home labor force; children were important for farm labor. Unpaid.

Native American Kidnappings:There were unusual gender risks in colonial times in the form of kidnappings of girls and young women by Native American tribes. Child kidnappings happened primarily in the northern part of the U.S. during the seven-year French Indian war in the 1750s. The most publicized, Mary Jemison, was kidnapped near the Pennsylvania / New York border, and she wrote an autobiographical account. She, like many others, chose the Indian way rather than to return. Now, we may think of it as Stockholm Syndrome, but others viewed it as a genuine preference for the Indian philosophy and way of life.

Revolutionary War Gender Roles: Young soldiers, often as young as 12 years of age. Andrew Jackson was such a young boy forced into the armed conflict when British soldiers attacked his home and killed his mother and father in front of him. Women played important support roles, such as laundry, uniform repair, and more.

Shakers: celibate with gender apartheid (although visiting a preservation garden in the Shaker village near Albany, New York revealed many medicinal herbs targeted to induce miscarriages (!))

Nineteenth Century

Utopian Communities: Free love / open marriages. Nashoba, founded by Frances Wright in 1825 in Tennessee was an abolitionist, free-love community. Oneida, by John Noyes, was established in Oneida, New York, in 1848. The Free Lovers ad Davis House, was established by Francis Barry in 1854 in Ohio.

Westward Expansion: Men as explorers and artists – solitary travelers. Women supported in towns; Native women were often cultural bridges = Sacajawea (guide for Lewis and Clark). Roles were ambiguous, and accomplishments were admired, especially as they related to survival in the tough frontier, and it made little difference if one were a man or a woman.

Women in the Frontier: Teachers, farmers, small business owners The freedom afforded women in the frontier was clear in situations where survival was a key concern, and in situations where women had both financial and physical freedom to participate and contribute as equals. In some situations, the American West was the most gender-equitable place on Planet Earth as individuals had to team together to survive, regardless of their sex. However, when circumstances were not so dire, and there was more discretionary income and potential, then typical gender relations prevailed and men dominated women.

Women Entrepreneurs: Necessity is the mother of equality. Where there is a shortage of men, women can thrive. In the nineteenth century, it was possible for women to enter industries, especially when they could serve other women. Dressmakers, milliners, general store owners, even mill and dairy owners thrived, often after husband died (or disappeared after long travel).

Women Activists: Temperance movement – Carrie Nations; also Women’s suffrage movement

Cowboy Characters: Super macho; European and Mexican influences in the culture the equipment, and practices. Roundups, cattle drives, ranching.

Manufactured Male Identities: Showman, Spectacle, Con Artist: There were a number of traveling shows / spectacles that featured the “exotic” and captivated small towns. They traveled along the new railroads, and the towns that had train stations were the primary markets. Buffalo Bill Wild West Show; Pawnee Bill Wild West Show; also Barnum & Bailey Circus. Women were often acrobats and sharpshooters; many different nationalities represented. There were also notorious grifter types, many described by Mark Twain (Huckleberry Finn and also Life on the Mississippi), and also by Herman Melville - The Confidence Man.

Twentieth Century

Traditional Nuclear Family Roles: For the middle class, traditional patriarchal model, with the male as breadwinner and working outside the home, and the mother staying at home to tend to children and the house. For working class, many women worked in other women’s homes during the day, or in factories and offices (especially after WWII), with a resulting rise in demand for daycare and longer school hours. At the beginning of the century, women’s skirts were long, hairstyles required elaborate preparation, and women generally did not operate machinery or drive. They also did not smoke or drink alcohol (although tipping opiate drinks with laudanum was common and acceptable for women in the beginning of the twentieth century).

Women in WWI: Women entered health care (nurses) and education (teachers), and also in different types of factories during WWI, due to labor shortages and the demands of the war effort.

Flappers: Women’s roles changed a great deal after WWI, and the “flappers” of the 1920s were the “new woman,” with bobbed hair, short skirts, who listened to jazz, drove cars, smoked cigarettes, and embarked on careers in previously male-dominated fields. The flappers were a bit scandalizing and not every woman embraced “Flapper” values.

Working Women / WWII: Rosie the Riveter was the emblem; propaganda campaign; 5 million women entered the workplace, and of those, 350,000 women working in factories, also WASPs (Women's Airforce Service Pilots) and minority women.

Women in the Universities: All-women colleges: Bryn Mawr, Smith, Barnard, Mount Holyoke, Wellesley are just a few. Many became co-ed in the 1970s, but before that time, were an important place for women "bluestockings" to

Women's Suffrage: Women lost the right to vote in 1787 and did not regain it on a national basis until the 19th Amendment, passed in 1920. Women activists such as Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton worked state by state.

Macho: A hyper-masculine stance often depicted in films, literature, comics, and graphic novels, specifically for Westerns and action-adventure genres.

Gender Ambiguity: Characterized many roles in the 20th century, especially in the 1960s when longer hair was in vogue for men, and a cross-over / sharing of roles began.

Marriage Arrangements: During the 20th century, political pressure to allow marriage between divorced men and women, and then later, between homosexual couples. The question for the future is whether or not there will be marriage between humans and non-humans (animals or robots), and while the question seems highly offensive and dehumanizing to a traditional philosophical vantage point, futurists believe that the human-machine / human-alter-biological boundaries are problematic. Marriage arrangements in this situation are about preservation of patrimony (inheritance) and not about sexual desire.

Discussion/Questions

1. In early traditions, women and men were assigned gender based on their ability to give birth. Lineage and family relations were considered to be most logically traced to the mother, since paternity could always be called into question. One would think that tracing family lineage through the mother would necessitate parallel power structures, but that was not necessarily the case. Discuss the role of gender and cultural power in early societies.
2. When the Europeans arrived in the Americas, there was a gender gap and males far outnumbered females. This imbalance was particularly the case in the frontier. What were some of the social implications of the gender imbalance?
3. In the 19th century, the roles for women and men expanded dramatically, and there were many opportunities for identity self-invention. Describe a few of the possible gendered identities available for both men and women, and discuss their relationship with social mobility (upward mobility).
4. The 20th century witnessed reversals of gender roles, as well as various seemingly retrograde movements as traditional gender roles were reinforced in very conservative groups. At the same time, new technology and new products made it possible for men and women to interact in new ways. Describe some of the changes in women's roles that corresponded to the advent of new technology and also socio-political events such as wars. How were men's roles impacted as well?

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