

Gender and Gender Stratification

by Sophia Tutorial



WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial will cover the topic of gender, through the definition and discussion of:

1. Gender
2. Margaret Mead
3. George Murdock
4. Gender Stratification

1. GENDER

There's nothing 'natural' about the roles people play, by being male or being female--these roles are socially constructed. **Gender** is the socially constructed attributes--i.e., the statuses and roles--that are associated with being a male or a female in society. Gender is different from biological sex, which is male or female. Society and culture structure the roles of masculinity and the roles of femininity, such that in society, males do certain things and females do certain things, because of socially constructed reasons.



TERM TO KNOW

Gender

The socially constructed identity (statuses and roles) associated with being male or female.

2. MARGARET MEAD

Not every society does this the same way. If every society did this the same way, then you could assume that this is biologically maleness and femaleness, but that's not the case. Cultural anthropologist **Margaret Mead** proved that gender is socially constructed.

In Margaret Mead's time, in the early 1900's, it was common for anthropologists to immerse themselves in a particular location, in a different culture and society. They studied the way that culture was systemic and holistic, and how culture structured the lives of the people within the society. Afterwards, the anthropologists could return home and theorize about culture in general. By studying different cultures, they could learn about themselves, which was a forte of anthropology at that time.

IN CONTEXT

Mead studied three different societies in New Guinea in the early 1900s. She found that in each of these societies, they constructed notions of gender differently. Notions of femininity and masculinity were different in these three societies, therefore gender could not be something biological--rather, it was cultural.

In the first society, Mead found that both sexes displayed attitudes and behaviors that were typically feminine--that is, cooperative, sensitive, caring, and emotional; both sexes displayed these traits.

In the second society, Mead found that both sexes displayed traits that were typically masculine. This was a cannibalistic society, and everyone was dominant, aggressive, and selfish, traits typically associated with masculinity in American society.

Finally, in the third society, which was more like ours, Mead found that both masculine and feminine elements were present, but that the categories were inverted. Men were typically female by American standards, and females were typically masculine. Therefore, Mead's research showed that culture plays a strong part in determining gender roles--these roles are socially constructed.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Margaret Mead

An American cultural anthropologist whose work focused on gender.

3. GEORGE MURDOCK

In addition to work of anthropologist Margaret Mead, a similar study was done by anthropologist **George Murdock**, with a more 'zoomed-out' viewpoint. He looked at over 200 societies and found some consistency within them with respect to the social construction of gender roles. Murdock found that tasks such as hunting and warfare typically fell to men, and that tasks such as cooking and caring for children, which are typically regarded as feminine characteristics, fell to females.

The consistency that Murdock found in those 200+ societies suggested that there was some biological basis to gender roles. However, Murdock's results were mixed. Beyond the dominant patterns, women were found to contribute more or less equally to agricultural pursuits, as well as to the construction of houses and dwellings, tasks that might be typically more masculine. Therefore, it is difficult to make a definitive conclusion.



BIG IDEA

Based on the two studies of Margaret Mead and George Murdock, it must be concluded that gender is complex and defies a simple, biological reduction.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

George Murdock

4. GENDER STRATIFICATION

Despite the complexity of gender roles, societies still erect stratification systems based upon perceived, socially constructed gender differences. Because males have been dominant in society throughout history, for centuries, they've tried to control the behavior of women. A degree of gender inequality has resulted, or **gender stratification**, in society today.

🔗 **EXAMPLE** Think of stratification like layers of soil. In the same way that layers of soil get deposited in strata--top soil, a layer of soil in the middle, and clay at the bottom--society structures itself in this fashion as well.

Stereotypically, in most societies because of patriarchy and male dominance, you will find men at the top and women at the bottom. This layering is called gender stratification, the differential ordering of males and females in society in terms of wealth, power and prestige.

IN CONTEXT

Gender stratification has its consequences in society. Males enjoy more of the wealth, power and prestige, based upon their elevated position in the social structure, or stratified hierarchy. For instance, males earn more money than females, earning \$1 to each \$0.78 that a female earns.

Similarly, through culture, females are dissuaded from going into occupations that are stereotypically male. They've been relegated to the home, while males have enjoyed more outside, public space privilege than females have in the past, demonstrating that gender stratification in American society does exist.

Despite the existence of gender stratification in the United States, gender roles are relatively equal in terms of gender stratification compared to other societies.



THINK ABOUT IT

Think about Iran, Saudi Arabia or Pakistan. What rights do women typically have in these countries? Women have a multitude of rules governing their conduct in public space. They have to cover up--they can't show their skin. Men are much more controlling in these societies.



DID YOU KNOW

In Pakistan, even today, fathers can decide who their daughters will marry. This seems preposterous by American standards, because women in American society have the right to choose who they want to marry. However, in other societies, this might not necessarily be the case.

Gender stratification exists in all societies to a greater or lesser degree, which is why it is of interest to sociologists.



TERM TO KNOW

Gender Stratification

The ranking of groups based on perceived differences in the status of group members, in this case between men and women.



SUMMARY

Today you learned about **gender** and its social construction, through the exploration of studies done by anthropologists **Margaret Mead** and **George Murdock**. You also learned about **gender stratification** in society.

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Zach Lamb.



TERMS TO KNOW

Gender

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Gender Stratification

The ranking of groups based on perceived differences in the status of group members, in this case between men and women.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

George Murdock

An American anthropologist who studied cross-cultural comparisons of preindustrial societies.

Margaret Mead

An American cultural anthropologist whose work focused on gender.