

Gender and Power (Official and Unofficial)

by Sophia Tutorial



WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, we'll discuss how cultures can differ in their views of power, and how it should be distributed in a society. The particular areas of focus include:

1. Types of Power
 - a. Official Power
 - b. Unofficial Power
2. Gender and Power in Conflict

1. Types of Power

Cultural views of gender are often related to views of power in terms of how power is ascribed to men and to women.

There are two types of power that someone can hold:

- Official power
- Unofficial power

1a. Official Power

Official power in government or in business would be those roles that are formally recognized as executive with decision-making, leadership, and authority responsibilities.

In general, the bias in most cultures has been towards men holding the roles of official power.



TERM TO KNOW

Official Power

Decision-making and acting authority in the major roles governing a culture, or executive roles involving leadership or control in general.

1b. Unofficial Power

Unofficial power would be roles that also involve decision-making and authority but are considered less

important.

Many times, these roles provide support to those with official power, and broadly speaking, most cultures would ascribe unofficial power to women.

Unofficial power could also come spontaneously from the loyalty and affection that people feel towards someone.

This could happen in the workplace, or it could happen politically; this loyalty and affection is another way that people can gain unofficial power.



Unofficial Power

Decision-making and acting authority positions considered "less important" by the culture and providing support to official power holders.

2. Gender and Power in Conflict

In general, official power is seen as male, and unofficial power is seen as female.

Thus, when someone of a particular gender moves into a role that is typically prescribed to the other gender, this is sometimes considered **gender inappropriate behavior**, and could produce negative perceptions or assumptions.

➦ **EXAMPLE** If a woman moved up the corporate ladder into a position of authority over a lot of men, the men might show a lack of respect, and perhaps doubt the woman's authority and ability.

Similar situations can happen in a variety of cultures in which the bias is towards men holding the roles of official power.

This is because of a concept called **cultural gender appropriateness**, or what is considered correct for someone of a particular gender in their culture.

If the above example took place in a culture that traditionally considered it inappropriate for a woman to be holding that position of power, then a conflict could arise based on lack of respect and doubt about her ability to hold a position of authority.

Oftentimes, a woman in this position can feel that she needs to take on some of the behaviors and traits of men (e.g., assertiveness, decisiveness) who hold similar roles in order to compete equally or to gain the authority that she needs.

Even non-verbal gestures, such as solid eye contact, leaning forward, or talking loudly, may be behaviors that a woman feels she needs to mimic in order to gain respect.

When a person begins to take on behaviors or traits that are considered acceptable for the other gender, this may be perceived as gender inappropriate behavior.

➦ **EXAMPLE** When a woman steps into a role of official power and begins exhibiting authoritative traits that are traditionally viewed as inappropriate for her gender, this can lead to negative assumptions (e.g., that the woman is overly pushy).

Of course, there are exceptions to this, and culture does have the ability to change over time. But in general, culture does not change, and these culturally reinforced ideas or biases about who should hold power remain in place unless they're challenged.



DID YOU KNOW

Until the Women's Movement and the rise of feminism in the United States, women were not allowed to vote, much less hold positions of authority in government. These movements challenged a lot of gender inequalities in society and ultimately gained women the right to vote.

IN CONTEXT

In the United States today, it is becoming more culturally acceptable for women to hold positions of power, and there is much more equality than there used to be.

However, there are still many cultures in which it is considered a display of cultural gender appropriateness for men to hold the positions of official power, and women to hold positions of unofficial power.



TERMS TO KNOW

Gender-Inappropriate Behavior

Behavior displaying traits or assuming roles considered "not-normal or proper correct" for one's gender.

Cultural Gender Appropriateness

Behavior considered "right, proper, or correct" for a member of a given gender within his or her culture.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned that a culture's views on gender are often related to its views on power. There are two **types of power**: official power, which is traditionally held by men, and unofficial power, which is traditionally held by women. You now understand that this relationship between **gender and power can manifest itself in conflict** when someone of a particular gender steps into a role of power that is traditionally held by someone of the other gender. While cultural views can change over time, there are still many cultures that adhere to this gendered view of power. Good luck!

Source: Adapted from Sophia tutorial by Marlene Johnson.



TERMS TO KNOW

Cultural Gender Appropriateness

Behavior considered "right, proper, or correct" for a member of a given gender within his or her culture.

Gender-Inappropriate Behavior

Behavior displaying traits or assuming roles considered "not normal or proper" for one's gender.

Official Power

Decision-making and acting authority in the major roles governing a culture, or executive roles involving leadership or control in general.

Unofficial Power

Decision-making and acting authority positions considered "less important" by the culture and providing support to official power holders.