Gender in Culture

by Sophia Tutorial

In this lesson, we'll discuss how views on gender can vary between cultures and how this can sometimes lead to cross-cultural conflicts. In particular, we'll focus on:

1. Differences in Gender Appropriateness
2. Gender and Negative Assumptions

1. Differences in Gender Appropriateness

Cultures are going to differ in terms of how they see **culture gender appropriateness**, or what is considered appropriate for men and women in terms of behavior and roles in society. As mentioned in an earlier lesson, some cultures have third genders and challenge the idea of what is appropriate.

There are also going to be some commonalities among these views. In general, you could say that most cultures still see official power as something that is traditionally held by men, and unofficial power as something that is held by women.

Changes to this perception are gradually happening around the globe, but the changes are in pockets as opposed to being widespread. Many cultures still hold that traditional view of power.

There are, of course, other differences pertaining to gender, such as how conservative or how liberal people are in terms of gender equality in a particular culture.

Thus, you may be behaving in a way that you consider culturally gender appropriate based on your own culture without realizing that that same behavior is perceived differently in another culture.

> **IN CONTEXT**
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> You may run into these differences when you travel, but you actually don't even have to travel abroad to see these gender-based cultural variances.
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> With the amount of diversity that exists in the United States, it's possible to run into a variety of cultures here that are different from the one that you grew up in.

📄 **TERM TO KNOW**

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

2. Gender and Negative Assumptions

When a person from one culture interacts with someone from another culture, and the perceptions of gender appropriate behavior are different, they may form negative perceptions about each other's culture.

This can be based on the way cultures think it is appropriate for men and women to express themselves, whether through dress or communication style.

⤷ EXAMPLE A man wearing a dress could be considered very gender inappropriate in certain cultures.

⤷ EXAMPLE A businesswoman who may exhibit traits that are traditionally associated with men, such as being competitive, decisive, or direct, could be considered inappropriate, and thus leave very negative perceptions about not only her, but her culture as a whole.

By the same token, someone who has grown up in a culture where exhibiting those traits is considered gender appropriate may be interacting with someone from another culture who is behaving in a way that they may consider very offensive or inappropriate.

IN CONTEXT

You could have an American businesswoman doing business in a South American country in which it's considered appropriate rather than offensive for a man to act "chivalrous" toward a woman. It's seen as polite to make comments that might be more personal about a woman's appearance or treat her in ways that imply she is more dependent.

If this happens, she may form negative perceptions about both the culture and the person who treats her this way, even though it's considered completely appropriate in that culture.

Additionally, seeing someone behave in a way that differs from the established perception of that person's culture can cause cognitive dissonance.

⤷ EXAMPLE Seeing a woman pursuing education and equality in the workplace in a culture where it's considered proper for women to dress very conservatively and behave in a more reserved manner may cause some cognitive dissonance or a sense of not understanding how this could be true.

This occurs because we have generalized ideas that become stereotypes about how people in certain cultures act.

As you learned in an earlier lesson, a **stereotype** is a broad assumption or expectation about a culture's views on issues like gender appropriateness that is incorrectly applied to every individual from that culture.

Stereotyping can often come as a result of cultural misunderstanding.

📄 TERM TO KNOW

Stereotyping

Forming a belief that certain general trends or traits of a group (culture) apply equally strongly to all individual members of that group; perceiving people as simplistic representatives of abstract cultural traits rather than as individuals.

☆	BIG IDEA

Stereotypes, negative perceptions, and bias often result from interactions between individuals who have different perceptions of what is culturally appropriate for men and women. This is why recognizing and understanding those differences is so important in the conflict resolution process.

☑	SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned that **differences in gender appropriateness**, or what is considered appropriate in terms of behavior and roles for men and women, exist between cultures. You now understand that when people from cultures with different views interact, the issue of **gender appropriateness can lead to the formation of negative assumptions** about a particular culture. This type of cultural misunderstanding can also result in stereotyping, so it's important to recognize that different cultures have varying views on gender, but that you can't assume a culture's views are held by everyone within that culture. Good luck!

Source: Adapted from Sophia tutorial by Marlene Johnson.

🗎	TERMS TO KNOW

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Stereotyping
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