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The Acculturation of Gender Roles

In the twentieth century, gender roles evolved at an unforeseen rate for both men and women. For instance, in the early 1900s, only a small percentage of the labor force consisted of women, whereas, by the 21st century that number had more than doubled. In addition, society in the early 20th century would have been less likely to accept a stay at home father as a respectable gender role, because child rearing at the time was considered strictly a mother’s role. By definition, a gender role is a set of social and behavioral norms that are generally considered appropriate for either a man or woman in a social or interpersonal relationship. In sociologist Aaron Devor’s essay, “Becoming Members of Society: Learning the Social Meaning of Gender,” he acknowledges that, “[m]embers of both genders are believed to share many of the same human characteristics” (531). In other words, Devor believes that both males and females are equipped with masculine and feminine tendencies. For instance, young children will play with dolls and trucks without realizing whether the toy is typical for a boy or a girl. Gender roles become more defined for children as they begin to observe the gender-specific expectations of society. In addition, society tends to classify attributes according to gender, placing behaviors into one category or another to be considered either acceptable or unacceptable depending on gender. In discussing gender roles, Jamaica Kincaid, professor at Harvard University and author of the story “Girl,” urges the reader to understand the influence parents have on their children and also to consider why parents feel the need to educate their children in blunt fashion to get the child’s attention. As societies evolve, one’s socially accepted idea of gender roles broadens, making genders roles, and what was once viewed as suitable and unsuitable, more neutralized. Suitable categories used to be strictly defined according to men’s and women’s roles in everyday life and, if one crossed the line into the other gender’s role, the behavior they displayed was considered unsuitable. Gender identity, the personal conception of oneself as male or female, begins at a young age with acquired characteristics from the culture one is surrounded by. One’s culture usually consists of family, friends, or educators at school. The identity one associates with, either male or female, has changed in recent years to include masculine and feminine traits that may not be as rigidly defined as gender roles once were in the 1900s. Through acculturation, the process of adopting the cultural traits or social patterns of another group, strict gender roles have become blurred over time and are not as specific as the evolutionized traits that previously defined these strict roles.

Historically, gender identities were taught so that girls learned culturally appropriate female behaviors from their mothers. Similarly, boys were educated on traditional male roles by their fathers and male role models. These gender role divisions were more defined in the 19th century. A large majority of children were brought up in families with two parents, one in which the mother stayed home with the children while the father went off to work for the day. Granted, children in these traditional families watched their mother typically doing all the cooking, cleaning, and other household chores and therefore assigned such responsibilities to their generalized idea of a female gender role. These same children viewed their father’s role as providing a source of income and also as being responsible for outdoor chores. Devor insists that children acquire their ideas about specific gender roles from the individuals who surround them most frequently, such as family and friends. Such gender roles are absorbed unconsciously and then applied to one’s personal concept of an appropriate gender role. As a prominent speaker on gender roles, Devor states, “[v]ery young children learn from their culture’s social definitions of gender and gender identity at the same time that they learn what gender behaviors are appropriate for them”(529). Basically, Devor believes that children learn that certain roles or behaviors are closely linked with either being male or female in a very simplistic way. Specifically, these roles begin being defined primarily by which parent does the cooking and cleaning, and which parent mows the lawn and fixes the car. Likewise, as children mature, they begin to identify appropriate or suitable behaviors linked to specific gender roles. By extension, as life becomes more complicated, the child’s education on gender roles must include acceptable sexual conduct. Kincaid emphasizes that mothers raising their children in the 1950s through the 1960s, in Antigua, felt it was their responsibility to educate their daughters on the importance of gender roles and what precisely ones’ behaviors should include. Devor agrees with Kincaid and suggests that gender identity is learned by observing which parent practices a specific gender role on a daily basis. In support of Devor’s claim, Kincaid provides a list of acceptable behaviors she learned from her mother stating, “this is how to behave in the presence of men who you don’t know very well, and this way they won’t recognize immediately the slut I have warned you against becoming” (525-526). In other words, inappropriate behavior around men one doesn’t know, such as walking like a tramp instead of like a lady, or refraining from squatting instead of bending over like a lady, is unacceptable and gives the wrong impression of the values one embraces. Kincaid’s recitation of what her mother taught her urges us to recognize that discussing such topics as a woman’s behavior concerning the opposite sex sometimes requires shock value to get one’s point across. Furthermore, Kincaid’s story demonstrates that, while the household chores of cooking and cleaning have become a job for both males and females, her mother’s advice regarding appropriate female behavior, such as ladylike ways of walking and squatting, still apply today. Parenting in the mid-20th century was much more defined by rigid gender roles and appropriate behaviors as compared to the loosely defined gender roles of the 21st century; however, some ideas concerning gender roles remain unchanged.

Gender identities of the past were typically influenced by one’s cultural myths, a set of stories and beliefs that characterize a culture, or popular beliefs about specific gender roles. In contrast, today, these dualistic genders have become more of a blending of masculine and feminine traits within an individual. For example, in the early 1900s it was considered unacceptable for women to wear pants because pants were worn to identify the male gender exclusively, whereas women were relegated to dresses or skirts. Conversely, in the 21st century, most women typically wear pants or shorts daily due to the assimilation of gender roles, particularly appropriate attire. Furthermore, this acculturation, or process of adopting cultural traits or social patterns of another group, broadens one’s idea of appropriate behaviors categorically linked to one’s gender. Devor’s perception of this process of acculturation is that identity is linked to behaviors, which translate into learned gender roles. Devor states,”[g]ender identities act as cognitive filtering devices guiding people to attend to and learn gender role behaviors appropriate to their status”(527). In other words, the classification of the gender one recognizes themselves to be a part of directs the manner in which one conducts themselves. To take a case in point, a young boy raised in a family where a large majority of the male figures have long hair perceives long hair on males to be a socially acceptable norm. However, as the boy grows older and begins his schooling, his social surroundings expand, thus exposing him to new ideas about what appropriate gender roles involve. In the 19th century, long hair was considered a feminine trait. However, as the century progressed, long hair became more acceptable, neither belonging exclusively to male or female gender roles. As a prominent proponent of being open to new ideas and not limited by learned behaviors, sociologist Gary Colombo, author of the essay “Thinking Critically, Challenging Cultural Myths,” believes that, as children mature, they adopt a set way of thinking influenced by their surroundings. Devor concurs that gender identities are filtered by people who influence the child’s maturation. As a result, the children’s behaviors are then specific to the culture they’re surrounded by throughout life. Colombo insists that, “[a]s we grow up, we accept ways of looking at the world, ways of thinking and being that might be best characterized as cultural frames of reference or cultural myths”(3). As a child matures, the culture one associates with and learns from becomes the guide to appropriate behavior. Ultimately, cultural myths and the influence of people surrounding the individual shape the development of a child’s gender identity. Specifically, gender roles are acquired by observing acceptable behaviors displayed by significant individuals in a child’s life. Throughout history, as with hair length, gender role behaviors have shifted from strict gender demarcation and have evolved to the point where the line between specific gender roles is more obscure, thus creating a new societal norm.

By the mid twentieth century, gender roles began to evolve dramatically. As a result, gender traits became more influential in one’s professional workplace. To take a case in point, ideas concerning women’s roles in the business environment have shifted from strictly secretarial work, to an assistant, and sequentially, to running a business. Ascension up the business ladder often required traditional masculine traits such as aggressiveness, assertiveness, and influential tactics, which women suppressed until expressing masculine traits as a female became socially acceptable. Devor acknowledges that assertive persons, no matter what their gender, display masculine traits. By contrast, feminine traits are typically considered to be adjuvant or nurturing. Devor states, “many aspects of masculinity and femininity are the result, rather than the cause, of status inequalities” (531). By way of explanation, the dissimilarities concerning the position of one’s learned gender roles have led to changes in the masculine and feminine traits observed in society. The masculine traits of dominance and egoism have seen numerous changes, as can be observed with high self-esteemed business women. Advancement in careers must be driven, and as the woman rises in status, usually her ego rises in a parallel manner. Likewise, the typical feminine traits of cooperation and collaboration have crossed into the male gender role, as men have evolved into nurturing fathers and equal partners in relationships, making life easier for all. There is no question that children observe such role changes and make decisions about accepting the new feminine or masculine traits or rejecting them. Colombo expands on this thought process describing it as critical thinking, the reflective reasoning about beliefs and actions, to demonstrate the thought processes children utilize. Colombo insists, “[l]earning to recognize contradictions lies at the very heart of critical thinking, for intellectual conflict inevitably generates questions” (6). The essence of Colombo’s statement is that careful analysis, either consciously or unconsciously, is needed to interpret role blending, which typically causes a struggle for inquiring youth. Similarly, adults encounter conflicts about gender role expectations as they enter the business world and observe the transition necessary to ascend the ladder of success. Thus, gender roles have become blurred and men and women’s roles less rigidly defined due to the acculturation of gender identities.

In short, at the turn of the twentieth century, female and male gender roles were strictly defined and those who chose to go against their culture’s norm were degraded by society. Children gained an understanding of appropriate gender roles by observing important figures within their surrounding culture. As one’s social surrounding expanded to include school and other new environments, their perception of proper gender roles continued to evolve too. This evolution of gender roles lead to a more open minded society; one having a mind receptive to new ideas and less gender specific ideas to which to adhere. For instance, what would have once been a forbidden breach of traditional gender roles, has overtime advanced as with so many other aspects of cultural life. In other words, the demarcation of gender roles has become much less formalized and stern. Since women began working, men assumed numerous household chores that formerly had strictly been a woman’s role to fulfill. In the same way, men became more accepting of these roles, predominantly as a necessity for family cohesion. Consequently, as the roles of each gender have become less strictly defined, so too have ideas about masculine and feminine characteristics.

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