

# Social Psychology

## Lecture 5: Genes, Culture and Gender

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How do we humans differ? How are we alike? In a world struggling with cultural differences, can we learn to accept our diversity, value our cultural identities, yet recognize our human kinship? We believe so. To understand how, we need to look at our history, how we evolved, the cultures we built, and the way our society works. By looking at these roots, we can better understand how men and women are both remarkably similar and distinctly different. These are the core inquiries we will address in this lesson. Specifically, we will talk about: Cultural Diversity, Cultural Similarity, How Males and Females are Alike, and Culture and Gender.

At the end of this lecture, you will be able to:

1. Explain how we are influenced by human nature and cultural diversity.
2. Outline the shared and unique attributes of males and females.
3. Analyze how social norms and cultural expectations shape the development of gender roles and identities
4. Evaluate the interaction between biological constraints and cultural adaptation.

### GENES, EVOLUTION AND BEHAVIOR

**Evolutionary psychology** – studies how natural selection predisposes not just physical traits suited to particular contexts but also psychological traits and social behaviors that enhance the preservation and spread of one's genes.

Humans across the globe share common instincts regarding:

- **Trust and Cooperation** – deciding who is an ally and who is a threat.
- **Social Hierarchy** – recognizing who is in charge and how to gain influence.
- **Reproduction** – finding and choosing the right mate.

- **Altruism** – determining when it is beneficial to help someone else.
- **Fear** – figuring out what is truly dangerous versus what just feels scary.

## **CULTURAL DIVERSITY**

### **1. Individual Choices**

- Individualistic cultures, which is common among Westerns, prioritize the individual self. People are generally encouraged to make their own choices regarding their careers, education, and personal lives with significant personal freedom.
- Collectivistic cultures, which is common among Easterns, prioritize "others and society." Individual choices are often secondary to the expectations and needs of the family or community.

### **2. Punctuality**

- In Monochronic cultures, such as those found in Germany, Switzerland, and North America, time is viewed as a precious, linear commodity that can be "spent," "saved," or even "wasted." Because time is seen as a finite resource, punctuality is highly valued as a definitive sign of both personal respect and professional efficiency. In these societies, schedules are remarkably rigid, driven by the guiding principle that "time is money," which necessitates strict adherence to agendas and deadlines.
- In Polychronic cultures, such as those in Latin America, the Middle East, and Africa, they view time as a fluid and circular concept rather than a rigid line. In these societies, maintaining personal relationships takes clear priority over adhering to strict schedules. Because human connection is valued so highly, it is often considered rude to abruptly end a meaningful conversation just to arrive "on time" for a subsequent appointment. Consequently, being "late" is not seen as a sign of disrespect, but is instead viewed as a positive trait reflecting one's flexibility and commitment to the people around them.

### **3. Rule-breaking**

- Tight cultures such as Korea, Japan and Singapore have very clear social norms and a low tolerance for deviation. "Rule-breaking" isn't just about breaking laws; it

includes unconventional personal choices (like diet or fashion) that make a person stand out from the group.

- Loose cultures such as United States, Netherlands and New Zealand have weaker social norms and a much higher tolerance for "doing your own thing." Deviating from the norm is often seen as an expression of individuality rather than a threat to the group.
- Many collectivistic cultures promote the belief that human suffering such as contracting a disease is caused by violating social norms.

#### **4. Personal Space**

- **Personal space** is a sort of portable bubble or buffer zone that we like to maintain between ourselves and others.
- Most Americans prefer a gap of at least 4 feet with strangers, though they allow friends to enter a much smaller "inner circle."
- For reasons unknown, cultures near the equator prefer less space and more touching and hugging. Thus, the British and the Scandinavians prefer more distance than the French and the Arabs; North Americans prefer more space than Latin Americans.

### **CULTURAL SIMILARITY**

#### **1. Universal Friendship Norms**

- Regardless of where you live, most people agree that a good friend should: respect the friend's privacy; make eye contact while talking; don't divulge things said in confidence.

#### **2. Universal Trait Dimensions**

- People everywhere generally categorize others using two to five core personality traits, commonly known as the Big Five proposed by McCrae & Costa in 2008. These traits are:
  - o **Openness to Experience** – this dimension reflects a person's intellectual curiosity, imagination, and willingness to try new things.

- **Conscientiousness** – this trait measures a person’s level of organization, dependability, and discipline.
- **Extraversion** – this indicates how much an individual draws energy from social interaction and the outside world.
- **Agreeableness** – this dimension measures social harmony and how a person treats others.
- **Neuroticism (Emotional Stability)** – this reflects a person’s emotional response to stress and negative stimuli.
- The most basic human judgment, evaluating whether someone is "good" or "bad", exists in almost every culture and language.

### 3. Universal Social Belief Dimensions

- Research by Leung and Bond (2004) identified five universal dimensions of social beliefs that people in nearly every culture use to navigate life. People’s adherence to these social beliefs appears to guide their living. Across 38 countries, people varied in:
  - **Cynicism** – the belief that the world is a competitive place, that people are untrustworthy, and that powerful institutions exploit others.
  - **Social Complexity** – the belief that there are no simple solutions to life's problems and that people must adapt their behavior depending on the situation.
  - **Reward for Application** – the conviction that hard work, planning, and effort will eventually pay off.
  - **Spirituality** – the belief in the existence of a supreme being or supernatural forces that influence human life.
  - **Fate Control** – the belief that life events are pre-determined by destiny, but can sometimes be influenced by specific actions or rituals.

### 4. Universal Status Norms

- People generally speak to those of higher status with the same formal respect they show strangers (e.g., using titles like "Dr." or "Professor"). Conversely, people

address those of lower status using familiar language and first names, mirroring the casual way they speak to friends or family.

- Advances in intimacy are usually suggested by the higher-status person. The person with the "most power" gets to decide when to stop being formal.
- Casual behaviors, such as touching someone on the shoulder or borrowing a personal item, are socially acceptable when directed toward subordinates or friends, but are considered inappropriate when directed toward a superior.

## **5. The Incest Taboo**

- The prohibition against incest (sexual relations between parents/children or siblings) is the most well-known universal norm, found in every society.
- Evolutionary psychologists believe this norm exists to prevent "inbreeding," which causes genetic disorders. Humans are naturally predisposed to avoid it for the survival of the species.

## **HOW ARE MALES AND FEMALES ALIKE AND DIFFERENT**

### **A. Gender and Genes**

- In terms of genetic makeup, out of 46 human chromosomes, 45 are "unisex." This means men and women are identical in the vast majority of their genetic makeup.
- In terms of developmental & psychological Milestones, boys and girls reach physical milestones (like walking) at similar ages and are virtually identical in vocabulary, creativity, intelligence, and overall happiness.
- Females have more body fat but less muscle, is typically shorter/lighter, is more sensitive to sensory input (smell/sound), and has higher rates of anxiety and depression.
- Males enters puberty later, has a shorter lifespan, is more likely to be diagnosed with ADHD, and is more likely to die by suicide or accidental causes (like lightning).
- While brains appear similar, men generally have more neurons, while women tend to have more neural connections.
- Research indicates that people generally have more favorable feelings toward women than toward men, a bias known as the "women are wonderful" effect.

## **B. Play**

- Girls talk more intimately and play less aggressively; they also play in smaller groups, often talking with one friend.
- Boys more often do larger group activities.

## **C. Friendship**

- Women spend more time on phone calls, texts, and social media; their talk aims for affiliation (bonding). Men, however, talk more overall when the goal is asserting opinions or providing information.
- Adult women in individualistic cultures are more likely than men to describe themselves in relational terms, welcome help, experience relationship-linked emotions, and be attuned to others' relationships.
- In conversation, men more often focus on tasks and on connections with large groups, whereas women focus on personal relationships.
- On average, women are more aware of how their actions affect other people.
- When in groups, women share more of their lives and offer more support.
- When facing stress, men tend to respond with "fight or flight"; often, their response to a threat is combat. Women, when under stress, more turn to friends and family for support.

## **D. Aggression**

- Men dominate in physical aggression globally. Men are far more likely to engage in hunting, fighting, and war. Statistically, men make up the vast majority of murder arrests, battlefield deaths, and death row inmates.
- Women are equal to or slightly more likely than men to engage in less physical forms of aggression, such as spreading gossip, verbal attacks, or throwing objects.
- The gender difference in physical aggression shrinks significantly when a person is provoked; however, men remain much more likely to cause actual physical injury.

## **E. Smiling**

- Across hundreds of studies and thousands of photos (including yearbooks and media), women are consistently found to smile significantly more than men.
- There is no gender difference in smiling during early childhood. Boys and girls smile at the same rate in elementary school photos. Apparently, boys learn not to smile by age 11.

## **F. Family Relations**

- Following their child's birth, women become more traditional in their gender-related attitudes and behaviors.
- Compared with men, women buy three times as many gifts and greeting cards, write two to four times as many personal letters, and make 10 to 20 percent more long-distance calls to friends and family.
- Among 500 randomly selected Facebook pages around the world, women displayed more family photos and expressed more emotion, and men were more likely to display status or risk taking activities.

## **G. Vocations**

- In general, women are more interested in jobs dealing with people (teachers, doctors), and men in jobs with things (truck driver, engineer).
- Females are less interested in math-intensive careers than are males, even among those with a talent for math.
- Men gravitate disproportionately to jobs that enhance inequalities (prosecuting attorney, corporate advertising); women gravitate to jobs that reduce inequalities (public defender, advertising work for a charity).
- Men value earnings, promotion, challenge, and power; women value good hours, personal relationships, and opportunities to help others.
- Among 500 randomly selected Facebook pages around the world, women displayed more family photos and expressed more emotion, and men were more likely to display status or risk taking activities.

## **H. Social Dominance**

- Men tend to excel in directive, task-focused leadership, often preferred during inter-group competition or war. Women more often excel in transformational or relational leadership, focusing on team spirit and social skills.
- Men often fear being identified as feminine and are statistically more likely to take risks or act impulsively to prove their status.
- Men tend to be more overconfident; for example, male stockbrokers trade 45% more frequently than women, often leading to poorer financial returns due to higher risk and costs.
- Men are more likely to talk assertively, interrupt, and smile less. Women's styles are often more indirect, polite, and qualified.

### **I. Sexuality**

- Men are more likely to initiate sex, fantasize more often, seek greater sexual variety, and are more responsive to visual stimuli (like pornography).
- Women generally prioritize emotional intimacy and commitment. In same-sex pairings, lesbians are twice as likely as gay men to be in committed relationships.
- Men typically offer resources (money, gifts, or commitment) in exchange for sexual engagement.

## **CULTURE AND GENDER**

**Gender role** – a set of behavior expectations (norms) for males and females.

### **Gender Roles Vary with Culture**

- In 21 of 22 countries surveyed, the majority of people believe life is more satisfying when both spouses share work and childcare responsibilities.
- Support for shared roles varies drastically by nation. For example, while Spain supports the dual-income model by a 13 to 1 margin, Pakistan opposes it by 4 to 1.
- In times of job scarcity, the "equal right to work" is viewed differently across borders. Only about 12% of people in the U.S. and Britain believe men should be prioritized for jobs, compared to 80% in Indonesia, Pakistan, and Nigeria.

## **Gender Roles Vary Over Time**

- In 1938, only 20% of Americans approved of married women working; by 1996, that number rose to 80%.
- Concerns regarding the negative impact of working mothers on preschoolers dropped from 59% in the 1970s to 21% by 2013.
- The use of male pronouns in books dropped from a 4:1 ratio to 2:1 over several decades.
- Harvard Business School went from zero female graduates in 1965 to a 41% female student body in 2016.
- Women now make up nearly half (47%) of medical and law students, up from single digits in the 1960s.
- In the 1960s, women did seven times more housework than men. Today, the gap is smaller, but women are still significantly more likely to engage in daily chores and childcare.
- Mothers are working for pay three times more than they did in 1965, yet they still log about half the paid hours that men do.

## **Peer-Transmitted Culture**

### **The Nurture Assumption**

- Proposed by Judith Rich Harris in 1998
- States that parental nurture, the way parents bring their children up, governs who their children become.

### **Limits of Parental Influence:**

- Research shows that siblings raised in the same home are often as different from one another as two random strangers.
- Studies on twins and adoptees indicate that genetics account for roughly 50% of personality traits, while shared home environments account for only 0–10%. The remaining variance is attributed to other factors, primarily peer groups.
- Parents do influence specific values such as religious faith and political affiliation but they have surprisingly little impact on a child's core personality.

### **Power of Peer Influence**

- Children are more likely to try new foods or start smoking if their peers do, regardless of parental encouragement or discouragement.
- Immigrant children almost always adopt the accent and norms of their peers rather than their parents.

### **How Cultures Persist and Change**

- Parents influence their children primarily by choosing their environment (neighborhoods, schools, and social circles), which in turn determines their peer groups.
- Cultural change typically moves from the young upward. New ideas in fashion, language, or social roles are usually sparked by youth and young adults, ensuring that while traditions continue, they are constantly evolving.

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