

Gender and Age



n Tunis, the capital of Tunisia, on Africa's northern coast, I met some U.S. college students and spent a couple of days with them. They wanted to see the city's red light district, but I wondered whether it would be

worth the trip. I already had seen other red light districts, including the unusual one in Amsterdam where the state licenses the women, requires that they have medical checkups (certificates must be

In front of each open door stood a young woman. I could see . . . a well-worn bed.

posted so that customers can check them), sets their prices, and pays them social security benefits upon retirement. The prostitutes sit behind lighted picture windows while customers stroll along the canal side streets and browse from the outside.

I decided to go with them. We ended up on a wharf that extended into the Mediterranean. Each side was lined with a row of one-room wooden shacks, crowded one against the next. In front of each open door stood a young woman. Peering from outside into the dark interiors, I could see that each door led to a tiny room with a well-worn bed.

The wharf was crowded with men who were eyeing the women. Many of the men wore sailor uniforms from countries that I couldn't identify.

As I looked more closely, I could see that some of the women had runny sores on their legs. Incredibly, with such visible evidence of their disease, customers still sought them out. Evidently, the \$2 price was too low to resist.

With a sick feeling in my stomach and the desire to vomit, I kept a good distance between the beckoning women and myself. One tour of the two-block area was more than sufficient.

Somewhere nearby, out of sight, I knew that there were men whose wealth derived from exploiting these women, who were condemned to live short lives punctuated by fear and misery.

GENDER AND AGE

In the previous chapter, we considered how race—ethnicity affects people's well-being and their position in society. In this chapter, we examine **gender stratification**—males' and females' unequal access to property, power, and prestige. We also explore the prejudice and discrimination directed toward people because of their age.

Gender and age are especially significant because, like race—ethnicity, they are *master statuses*; that is, they cut across *all* aspects of social life. *We all are labeled male or female and are assigned an age category.* These labels are powerful, because they convey images and expectations about how we should act and serve as a basis of power and privilege.

INEQUALITIES OF GENDER

Let's begin by considering the distinctions between sex and gender.

Issues of Sex and Gender

When we consider how females and males differ, the first thing that usually comes to mind is **sex**, the *biological characteristics* that distinguish males and females. *Primary sex characteristics* consist of a vagina or a penis and other organs related to reproduction. *Secondary sex characteristics* are the physical distinctions between males and females that are not directly connected with reproduction. These characteristics become clearly evident at puberty when males develop more muscles and a lower voice and gain more body hair and height, while females develop breasts and form more fatty tissue and broader hips.

Gender, in contrast, is a *social*, not a biological characteristic. **Gender** consists of whatever behaviors and attitudes a group considers proper for its males and females. Consequently, gender varies from one society to another. *Sex* refers to male or female, but *gender* refers to masculinity or femininity. In short, you inherit your sex, but you learn your gender as you are socialized into the behaviors and attitudes your culture asserts are appropriate for your sex. As the photo montage on the next page illustrates, the expectations associated with gender differ around the world.

The sociological significance of gender is that it is a device by which society controls its members. Gender sorts us, on the basis of sex, into different life experiences. It opens and closes doors to property, power, and even prestige. Like social class, gender is a structural feature of society. Before examining inequalities of gender, let's consider why the behaviors of men and women differ.

Gender Differences in Behavior: Biology or Culture?

Why are most males more aggressive than most females? Why do women enter "nurturing" occupations such as teaching young children and nursing in far greater numbers than men? To answer such questions, many people respond with some variation of "They're just born that way."

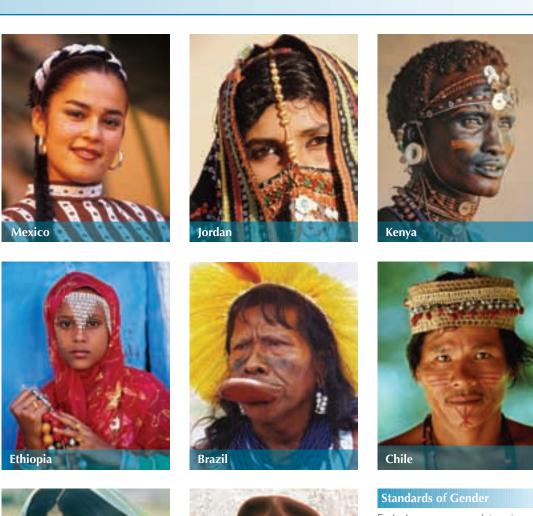
Is this the correct answer? Certainly biology plays a significant role in our lives. Each of us begins as a fertilized egg. The egg, or ovum, is contributed by our mother, the sperm that fertilizes the egg by our father. At the very instant the egg is fertilized, our sex is determined. Each of us receives twenty-three pairs of chromosomes from the ovum and twenty-three pairs from the sperm. The egg has an X chromosome. If the sperm that fertilizes the egg also has an X chromosome, we become a girl (XX). If the sperm has a Y chromosome, we become a boy (XY).

That's the biology. Now, the sociological question is, Does this biological difference control our behavior? Does it, for example, make females more nurturing and submissive and males more aggressive and domineering? Almost all sociologists take the side of "nurture" in this "nature versus nurture" controversy, but a few do not. The dominant position in sociology is that social factors, not biology, are the reasons we behave the way we do. Our visible differences of sex do not come with meanings built into them. Rather, each human group makes its own interpretation of these physical differences and, on this basis, assigns males and females to separate groups. In these groups, people learn what is expected of them and are given different access to their society's privileges.

Most sociologists find compelling the argument that if biology were the principal factor in human behavior, all around the world we would find women behaving in one way and men in another. In fact, however, ideas of gender vary greatly from one culture to another—and, as a result, so do male–female behaviors.

Opening the Door to Biology

The matter of "nature" versus "nurture" is not so easily settled, however, and some sociologists acknowledge that biological factors are involved in some human behavior other than reproduction and childbearing (Udry 2000). Alice Rossi, a feminist sociologist and former president of the American Sociological Association, has suggested that







Each human group determines its ideas of "maleness" and "femaleness." As you can see from these photos of four women and four men, standards of gender are arbitrary and vary from one culture to another. Yet, in its ethnocentrism, each group thinks that its preferences reflect what gender "really" is. As indicated here, around the world men and women try to make themselves appealing by aspiring to their group's standards of gender.

women are better prepared biologically for "mothering" than are men. Rossi (1977, 1984) says that women are more sensitive to the infant's soft skin and to their nonverbal communications. She stresses that the issue is not either biology or society. Instead, nature provides biological predispositions, which are then overlaid with culture.

To see why the door to biology is opening just slightly in sociology, let's consider a medical accident and a study of Vietnam veterans.

A Medical Accident The drama began in 1963, when 7-month-old identical twin boys were taken to a doctor for a routine circumcision (Money and Ehrhardt 1972). The inept physician, who was using a heated needle, turned the electric current too high and accidentally burned off the penis of one of the boys. You can imagine the parents' disbelief—and then their horror—as the truth sank in.

What can be done in a situation like this? The damage was irreversible. The parents were told that their boy could never have sexual relations. After months of soul-searching and tearful consultations with experts, the parents decided that their son should have a sex-change operation. When he was 22 months old, surgeons castrated the boy, using the skin to construct a vagina. The parents then gave the child a new name, Brenda, dressed him in frilly clothing, let his hair grow long, and began to treat him as a girl. Later, physicians gave Brenda female steroids to promote female pubertal growth (Colapinto 2001).

At first, the results were promising. When the twins were 4 years old, the mother said (remember that the children are biologically identical):

One thing that really amazes me is that she is so feminine. I've never seen a little girl so neat and tidy. . . . She likes for me to wipe her face. She doesn't like to be dirty, and yet my son is quite different. I can't wash his face for anything. . . . She is very proud of herself, when she puts on a new dress, or I set her hair. . . . She seems to be daintier. (Money and Ehrhardt 1972)

About a year later, the mother described how their daughter imitated her while their son copied his father:

I found that my son, he chose very masculine things like a fireman or a policeman. . . . He wanted to do what daddy does, work where daddy does, and carry a lunch kit. . . . [My daughter] didn't want any of those things. She wants to be a doctor or a teacher. . . . But none of the things that she ever wanted to be were like a policeman or a fireman, and that sort of thing never appealed to her. (Money and Ehrhardt 1972)

If the matter were this clear-cut, we could use this case to conclude that gender is entirely up to nurture. Seldom are things in life so simple, however, and a twist occurs in this story. Despite this promising start and her parents' coaching, Brenda did not adapt well to femininity. She preferred to mimic her father shaving, rather than her mother putting on makeup. She rejected dolls, favoring guns and her brother's toys, and liked rough-and-tumble games. She also insisted on standing up when she urinated. Classmates teased her and called her a "cavewoman" because she walked like a boy. At age 14, she was expelled from school for beating up a girl who teased her. Despite estrogen treatment, she was not attracted to boys, and at age 14, in despair over her inner turmoil, she was thinking of suicide. In a tearful confrontation, her father told her about the accident and her sex change.

"All of a sudden everything clicked. For the first time, things made sense, and I understood who and what I was," the twin said of this revelation. David (his new name) then had testosterone shots and, later, surgery to partially reconstruct a penis. At age 25, he married a woman and adopted her children (Diamond and Sigmundson 1997; Colapinto 2001). There is an unfortunate end to this story, however. In 2004, David committed suicide.

The Vietnam Veterans Study Time after time, researchers have found that boys and men who have higher levels of testosterone tend to be more aggressive. In one study, researchers compared the testosterone levels of college men in a "rowdy" fraternity with those of men in a fraternity that had a reputation for academic achievement and social responsibility. Men in the "rowdy" fraternity had higher levels of testosterone (Dabbs et al. 1996). In another study, researchers found that prisoners who had committed sex crimes and acts of violence against people had higher levels of testosterone than those who had committed property crimes (Dabbs et al. 1995). The samples that the researchers used were small, however, leaving the nagging uncertainty that these findings might be due to chance.

Then in 1985, the U.S. government began a health study of Vietnam veterans. To be certain that the study was representative, the researchers chose a random sample of 4,462 men. Among the data they collected was a measurement of testosterone. This gave sociologists a large random sample to analyze, one that is still providing surprising clues about human behavior.

This sample supports earlier studies showing that men who have higher levels of testosterone tend to be more aggressive and to have more problems as a consequence. When the veterans with higher testosterone levels were boys, they were more likely to get in trouble with parents



and teachers and to become delinquents. As adults, they were more likely to use hard drugs, to get into fights, to end up in lower-status jobs, and to have more sexual partners. Knowing this, you probably won't be surprised to learn that they also were less likely to marry—certainly their low-paying jobs and trouble with the police made them less appealing candidates for marriage. Those who did marry were more likely to have affairs, to hit their wives, and, it follows, to get divorced (Dabbs and Morris 1990; Booth and Dabbs 1993).

Fortunately, the Vietnam veterans study does not leave us sociologists with biology as the sole basis for behavior. Not all men with high testosterone get in trouble with the law, do poorly in school, or mistreat their wives. A chief difference, in fact, is social class. High-testosterone men from higher social classes are less likely to be involved in antisocial behaviors than are high-testosterone men from lower social classes (Dabbs and Morris 1990). Social factors such as socialization, life goals, and self-definitions, then, also play a part. The matter becomes even more complicated, for in some instances men with higher testosterone have better marriages (Booth et al. 2004). Discovering how social factors work in combination with testosterone level is of great interest to sociologists.

In Sum: The findings are preliminary, but significant and provocative. They indicate that human behavior is not a matter of either nature or nurture, but of the two working together. Some behavior that we sociologists usually assume to be due entirely to socialization is apparently influenced by biology. In the years to come, this should prove to be an exciting—and controversial—area of soci-

Sociologists stress the social factors that underlie human behavior, the experiences that mold us, funneling us into different directions in life. The study of Vietnam veterans discussed in the text is one indication of how the sociological door is opening slowly to also consider biological factors in human behavior. This February 14, 1966, photo shows orderlies rushing a wounded soldier to an evacuation helicopter.

ological research. One level of research will be to determine whether any behaviors are due only to biology. The second level will be to discover the ways that social factors modify biology. The third level will be, in sociologist Janet Chafetz's (1990:30) phrase, to determine how "different" becomes translated into "unequal."

"Nature or nurture?" The matter continues to be controversial. In the Down-to-Earth Sociology box on page 268, we see that gender differences have even become the focus of national attention.

How Females Became a Minority Group

Around the world, gender is *the* primary division between people. To catch a glimpse of how remarkably gender expectations differ with culture, look at the photo essay on pages 266–267.

Every society has barriers that, on the basis of sex, prevent equal access to property, power, and prestige. The barriers *always* favor men-as-a-group. After reviewing the historical record, historian and feminist Gerda Lerner (1986) concluded that "there is not a single society known where women-as-a-group have decision-making power over men (as a group)." Consequently, sociologists classify females as a *minority group*. Because females outnumber males, you may find this strange. The term *minority group* applies, however, because it refers to people who are discriminated against on the basis of physical or cultural characteristics, regardless of their numbers (Hacker 1951). For an overview of gender discrimination in a changing society, see the Cultural Diversity box on page 269.

Have females always been a minority group? Some analysts speculate that in hunting and gathering societies, women and men were social equals (Leacock 1981; Hendrix 1994) and that horticultural societies also had less gender discrimination than is common today (Collins et al. 1993). In these societies, women may have contributed about 60 percent of the group's total food. Yet, around the world, gender is the basis for discrimination.

THROUGH THE AUTHOR'S I FNS

Work and Gender

Women at Work in India

raveling through India was both a pleasant and an eyeopening experience. The country is incredibly diverse, the
people friendly, and the land culturally rich. For this photo
essay, wherever I went—whether city, village, or
countryside—I took photos of women at work.

From these photos, you can see that Indian women work in a wide variety of occupations. Some of their jobs

match traditional Western expectations, and some diverge sharply from our gender stereotypes. Although women in India remain subservient to men—with the women's movement hardly able to break the cultural surface—women's occupations are hardly limited to the home. I was surprised at some of the hard, heavy labor that Indian women do.



Women also take care of livestock. It looks as though this woman dressed up and posed for her photo, but this is what she was wearing and doing when I saw her in the field and stopped to talk to her. While the sheep are feeding, her job is primarily to "be" there, to make certain the sheep don't wander off or that no one steals them.

Indian women are highly visible in public places. A storekeeper is as likely to be a woman as a man. This woman is selling glasses of water at a beach on the Bay of Bengal. The structure on which her glasses rest is built of sand.





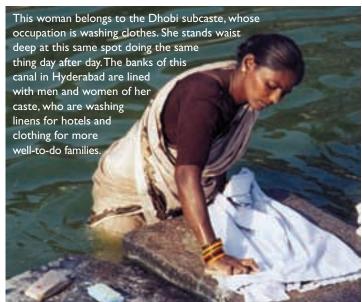
Sweeping the house is traditional work for Western women. So it is in India, but the sweeping has been extended to areas outside the home. These women are sweeping a major intersection in Chennai. When the traffic light changes here, the women will continue sweeping, with the drivers swerving around them. This was one of the few occupations that seems to be limited to women.



As in the West, food preparation in India is traditional women's work. Here, however, food preparation takes an unexpected twist. Having poured rice from the 60-pound sack onto the floor, these women in Chittoor search for pebbles or other foreign objects that might be in the rice.



When I saw this unusual sight, I had to stop and talk to the workers. From historical pictures, I knew that belt-driven machines were common on U.S. farms 100 years ago. This one in Tamil Nadu processes sugar cane. The woman feeds sugar cane into the machine, which disgorges the stalks on one side and sugar cane juice on the other.





I visited quarries in different parts of India, where I found men. women, and children hard at work in the tropical sun. This woman works $8\frac{1}{2}$ hours a day, six days a week. She earns 40 rupees a day (about ninety cents). Men make 60 rupees a day (about \$1.35). Like many quarry workers, this woman is a bonded laborer. She must give half of her wages to her master.



A common sight in India is women working on construction crews. As they work on buildings and on highways, they mix cement, unload trucks, carry rubble, and, following Indian culture, carry loads of bricks atop their heads. This photo was taken in Raipur, Chhattisgarh.

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Down-to-Earth Sociology

The Gender Gap in Math and Science: A National Debate

verwhelmingly, engineers and scientists are men. Why? A national debate erupted in 2005 when Larry Summers, then the president of Harvard University, suggested that the reason might be innate differences between men and women. In essence, he was suggesting that women's inborn characteristics might make them less qualified to succeed in these endeavors.

Harvard's Arts and Sciences faculty, which was already upset over what they called Summers' authoritarian manner, took his statement as a "last straw." The faculty called an emergency meeting and gave Summers a vote of "no confidence," the equivalent of saying that he should resign. This was the first such repudiation of a president since Harvard was founded in 1636 (Finer 2005). In the face of such opposition, Summers resigned from the presidency of Harvard.

Summers' suggestion that biology *might* be the reason why men dominate science and engineering indicated that he had touched a sore spot in academia. Among the many who weighed in with replies to Summers was the Council of the American Sociological Association ("ASA Council..." 2005). The council replied that research gives us clear and compelling evidence that social factors, not genetics, are the reason that women have not done as well as men in science and engineering. To support its position, the council made this compelling argument:

Gender differences in test results in math and science abilities have changed over time. There are now hardly any dif-



ferences in test scores among male and female U.S. students. In Great Britain, girls now outperform boys on these tests. Biology didn't change—but social factors did: more access to courses in school, changed attitudes of school counselors, and more role models for women.

The council added that women's interests change as opportunities open to them. This, too, is social, not biological. As a result, we can expect many more women to enter the fields of science and engineering. These women, unfortunately, will have to struggle against negative stereotypes about their abilities, as their predecessors have.

For Your Consideration

Why do you think that Summers' statement made national news—and was the official basis for his rejection as president of Harvard—when such statements used to be routine? Do you think that Summers simply made the mistake of being "politically incorrect," or that the reaction to what he said indicates some fundamental social change?

How, then, did it happen that women became a minority group? Let's consider the primary theory that has been proposed.

The Origins of Patriarchy

The major theory of the origin of **patriarchy**—men dominating society—points to social consequences of human reproduction (Lerner 1986; Friedl 1990). In early human history, life was short. To balance the high death rate and maintain the population, women had to give

birth to many children. And to survive, an infant needed a nursing mother. With a child at her breast or in her uterus, or one carried on her hip or on her back, women were physically encumbered. Consequently, around the world women assumed tasks that were associated with the home and child care, while men took over the hunting of large animals and other tasks that required both greater speed and longer absences from the base camp (Huber 1990).

As a result, men became dominant. It was the men who left camp to hunt animals, who made contact with other

Cultural Diversity around the World

"Pssst. You Wanna Buy a Bride?" China in Transition

guyen Thi Hoan, age 22, thanked her lucky stars. A Vietnamese country girl, she had just arrived in Hanoi to look for work, and while she was still at the bus station, a woman offered her a job in a candy factory.

It was a trap. After Nguyen had loaded a few sacks of sugar, the woman took her into the country to "get supplies." There some men took her to China, which was only 100 miles away. Nguyen was put up for auction, along with a 16-year-old Vietnamese girl. Each brought \$350. Nguyen was traded from one bride dealer to another until she was taken to a Chinese village. There she was introduced to her new husband, who had paid \$700 for her (Marshall 1999).

Why are thousands of women kidnapped and sold as brides in China each year (Rosenthal 2001; Yardley 2007)?

First, parts of China have a centuries-old tradition of bride selling. Second, China has a shortage of women. The government enforces a "one couple—one child" policy. Since sons are preferred, female infanticide has become common. The result is a huge imbalance: For every 100 girl babies there are about 120 baby boys (Kurlantzick 2007). As you can anticipate, this leaves a

shortage of women of marriageable age. Yet all the men are expected to marry and produce heirs.

Actually, Nguyen was lucky. Some kidnapped women are sold as prostitutes.

Bride selling and forced prostitution are ancient practices. But China is also entering a new era, which is bring-

ing with it new pressures for Chinese women. Ideas of beauty are changing, and blonde, blue-eyed women are becoming a fetish. As a consequence, Chinese women feel a pressure to "Westernize" their bodies. Surgeons promise to give them bigger breasts and Western-looking eyes. A Western style of advertising is gaining ground, too: Ads now show scantily clad women perched on top of sports cars (Chen 1995; Johansson 1999; Yat-ming Sin and Hon-ming Yau 2001).

China in transition . . . It is continuing the old—bride selling—while moving toward new, Western ideas of beauty and advertising. In both the old and new, women are commodities for the consumption of men.



What do you think Chinese authorities should do about bride selling? Do you think different penalties are appropriate for those who kidnap the women, those who sell them to the men, and those who buy them? If so, what penalties? Finally, how can the status of women in China be raised?

tribes, who traded with these other groups, and who quarreled and waged war with them. It was also the men who made and controlled the instruments of death, the weapons that were used for hunting and warfare. It was they who accumulated possessions in trade and gained prestige by returning to the camp triumphantly, leading captured prisoners or bringing large animals they had killed to feed the tribe. In contrast, little prestige was given to the routine, taken-for-granted activities of women—who were not perceived as risking their lives for the group. Eventually, men took over society. Their sources of power were their weapons, items of trade, and knowledge gained

from contact with other groups. Women became secondclass citizens, subject to men's decisions.

Is this theory correct? Remember that the answer lies buried in human history, and there is no way of testing it. Male dominance may be the result of some entirely different cause. For example, anthropologist Marvin Harris (1977) proposed that because most men are stronger than most women and hand-to-hand combat was necessary in tribal groups, men became the warriors, and women became the reward that enticed men to risk their lives in battle. Frederick Engels proposed that patriarchy came with the development of private property (Lerner 1986;



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Mezentseva 2001). He could not explain why private property should have produced male dominance, however. Gerda Lerner (1986) suggests that patriarchy may even have had different origins in different places.

Whatever its origins, a circular system of thought evolved. Men came to think of themselves as inherently superior—based on the evidence that they dominated society. They shrouded many of their activities with secrecy, and constructed elaborate rules and rituals to avoid "contamination" by females, whom they openly deemed inferior by that time. Even today, patriarchy is always accompanied by cultural supports designed to justify male dominance—such as designating certain activities as "not appropriate" for women.

As tribal societies developed into larger groups, men, who enjoyed their power and privileges, maintained their dominance. Long after hunting and hand-to-hand combat ceased to be routine, and even after large numbers of children were no longer needed to maintain the population, men held on to their power. Male dominance in contemporary societies, then, is a continuation of a millennia-old pattern whose origin is lost in history.

Global Violence Against Women

A global human rights issue is violence against women. Historical examples are foot binding in China, witch burning in Europe, and *suttee* (burning the living widow with the body of her dead husband) in India. Today we have rape, wife beating, female infanticide, and the bride selling discussed on page 279. There is also forced prostitution, which was probably the case in our opening vignette. Another notorious example is female circumcision, the topic of the Cultural Diversity box on the next page.





A theory of how patriarchy originated centers on childbirth. Because only women give birth, they assumed tasks associated with home and child care, while men hunted and performed other survival tasks that required greater strength, speed, and absence from home. This woman farmer in Myanmar (Burma), also takes care of her child—just as her female ancestors have done for centuries.

Another form of violence against women is "honor killings." In some societies, such as Pakistan, Jordan, and Kurdistan, a woman who is thought to have brought disgrace on her family is killed by a male relative—usually a brother or husband, but sometimes her father or uncles. What threat to the family's honor can be so severe that the men kill a daughter, wife, or sister? The usual reason is sex outside of marriage. Even a woman who has been raped is in danger of becoming the victim of an honor killing (Zoepf 2007). Killing the girl or woman removes the "stain" she has brought to the family and restores its honor in the community. Sharing this perspective, the police in these countries generally ignore honor killings, viewing them as private family matters.

In Sum: Gender inequality is not some accidental, hitor-miss affair. Rather, each society's institutions work together to maintain the group's particular forms of inequality. Customs, often venerated throughout history, both justify and maintain these arrangements. In some cases, the prejudice and discrimination directed at females are so extreme they result in their enslavement and death.

Foot binding was practiced in China until about 1900. Tiny feet were a status symbol. Making it difficult for a woman to walk, small feet indicated that a woman's husband did not need his wife's labor. To make the feet even smaller, sometimes the baby's feet were broken and wrapped tightly. Some baby's toes were cut off. This photo was taken in Hubei Province, China. The woman getting the pedicure is reportedly 105 years old.

Cultural Diversity around the World

Female Circumcision

"Lie down there," the excisor suddenly said to me [when I was 12], pointing to a mat on the ground. No sooner had I laid down than I felt my frail, thin legs grasped by heavy hands and pulled wide apart....Two women on each side

of me pinned me to the ground....I underwent the ablation of the labia minor and then of the clitoris. The operation seemed to go on forever. I was in the throes of agony, torn apart both physically and psychologically. It was the rule that girls of my age did not weep in this situation. I broke the rule. I cried and screamed with pain...!

Afterwards they forced me, not only to walk back to join the other girls who had already been excised, but to dance with them. I was doing my best, but then I fainted.... It was a month before I was completely healed. When I was better, everyone mocked me, as I hadn't been brave, they said. (Walker and Parmar 1993:107–108)

Worldwide, between 100 million and 200 million females have been circumcised, mostly in Muslim Africa and in some parts of Malaysia and Indonesia. In

Egypt, 97 percent of the women have been circumcised (Boyle et al. 2001; Douglas 2005). In some cultures, the surgery occurs seven to ten days after birth, but in others it is not performed until girls reach adolescence. Among most groups, it takes place between the ages of 4 and 8. Because the surgery is usually done without anesthesia, the pain is so excruciating that adults hold the girl down. In urban areas, physicians sometimes perform the operation; in rural areas, a neighborhood woman usually does it.

In some cultures, only the girl's clitoris is cut off; in others, more is removed. In Sudan, the Nubia cut away most of the girl's genitalia, then sew together the remaining outer edges. They bind the girl's legs from her ankles to her waist for several weeks while scar tissue closes up the vagina. They leave a small opening the diameter of a pencil for the passage of urine and menstrual fluids.

When a woman marries, the opening is cut wider to permit sexual intercourse. Before a woman gives birth, the opening is enlarged further. After birth, the vagina is again sutured shut; this cycle of surgically closing and opening begins anew with each birth.

What are the reasons for this custom? Some groups believe that it reduces female sexual desire, making it more likely that a woman will be a virgin at marriage and, afterward, remain faithful to her husband. Others think that women can't bear children if they aren't circumcised.

The surgery has strong support among many women. Some mothers and grandmothers even insist that the custom continue. Their concern is that their daughters marry well, and in some of these societies uncircumcised women are considered impure and are not allowed to marry.

Feminists respond that female circumcision is a form of ritual torture to control female sexuality. They point out that men dominate the societies that practice it.



This poster is used in Sudan to try to get parents to stop circumcising their daughters.

For Your Consideration

Do you think that the United States should try to make other nations stop this custom? Or would this be ethnocentric, the imposition of Western values on other cultures? As one Somali woman said, "The Somali woman doesn't need an alien woman telling her how to treat her private parts." Do you think that it is ever legitimate for members of one culture to interfere with another?

How would you respond to those who oppose male circumcision, also a growing movement? How would you respond to those who point out that female circumcision was a custom of Victorian England (Silverman 2004)?

Sources: As cited, and Lightfoot-Klein 1989; Merwine 1993; Chalkley 1997; Collymore 2000; "Ethiopia" 2005; Tuhus-Dubrow 2007.

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Gender Inequality in the United States

Gender inequality used to be a central characteristic of U.S. society, so let's begin by taking a brief look at how change in this vital area of social life came about.

Fighting Back: The Rise of Feminism

In the nation's early history, the second-class status of U.S. women was taken for granted. A husband and wife were legally one person—him (Chafetz and Dworkin 1986). Women could not vote, buy property in their own name, make legal contracts, or serve on juries. How could things have changed so much in the last hundred years that these examples sound like fiction?

A central lesson of conflict theory is that power yields privilege; like a magnet, power draws society's best resources to the elite. Because men tenaciously held onto their privileges and used social institutions to maintain their position, basic rights for women came only through prolonged and bitter struggle.

Feminism—the view that biology is not destiny and that stratification by gender is wrong and should be resisted—met with strong opposition, both by men who had privilege to lose and by women who accepted their status as morally correct. In 1894, for example, Jeannette Gilder said that women should not have the right to vote because "Politics is too public, too wearing, and too unfitted to the nature of women" (Crossen 2003).



Feminists, then known as suffragists, struggled against such views. In 1916, they founded the National Woman's Party, and in 1917 they began to picket the White House. After picketing for six months, the women were arrested. Hundreds were sent to prison, including Lucy Burns, a leader of the National Woman's Party. The extent to which these women had threatened male privilege is demonstrated by how they were treated in prison.

Two men brought in Dorothy Day [the editor of a periodical that promoted women's rights], twisting her arms above her head. Suddenly they lifted her and brought her body down twice over the back of an iron bench. . . . They had been there a few minutes when Mrs. Lewis, all doubled over like a sack of flour, was thrown in. Her head struck the iron bed and she fell to the floor senseless. As for Lucy Burns, they handcuffed her wrists and fastened the handcuffs over [her] head to the cell door. (Cowley 1969)

This *first wave* of the women's movement had a radical branch that wanted to reform all the institutions of society and a conservative branch whose concern was to win the vote for women (Freedman 2001). The conservative branch dominated, and after the right to vote was won in 1920, the movement basically dissolved.

The second wave began in the 1960s. Sociologist Janet Chafetz (1990) points out that up to this time most women thought of work as a temporary activity intended to fill the time between completing school and getting married. To see how children's books reinforced such thinking, see Figure 10.1 on the next page. As more women took jobs and began to regard them as careers, however, they began to compare their working conditions with those of men. This shift in their reference group changed the way women viewed their conditions at work. The result was a second wave of protest against gender inequalities. The goals of this second wave (which continues today) are broad, ranging from raising women's pay to changing policies on violence against women.

A *third wave* of feminism has emerged. Three main aspects are apparent. The first is a greater focus on the problems of women in the Least Industrialized Nations (Spivak 2000; Hamid 2006). Some of them are fighting battles against conditions long since overcome by women in the Most Industrialized Nations. The second is a criticism of the

The struggle for equal rights for women has been long and hard. Shown here is a 1919 photo from the first wave of the U.S. women's movement. Only against enormous opposition from men did U.S. women win the right to vote. They first voted in national elections in 1920.

FIGURE 10.1 Teaching Gender



The "Dick and Jane" readers were the top selling readers in the United States in the 1940s and 1950s. In addition to reading, they taught "gender messages." What gender message do you see here?



Housework is "women's work," and girls should learn this lesson early in life.



What does this page teach students other than how to read "Father"? (Look left to see what Jane and Mother are doing.)



Besides learning words like "pigs" (relevant at that historical period), boys and girls also learned that rough outside work was for men.

Source: From Dick and Jane: Fun with Our Family, illustrations © copyright 1951, 1979, and Dick and Jane: We Play Outside, copyright © 1965, 1979 Pearson Education, Inc., published by Scott, Foresman and Company. Used with permission.

values that dominate work and society. Some feminists argue that competition, toughness, calloused emotions, and independence represent "male" qualities and need to be replaced with cooperation, connection, openness, and interdependence (England 2000). A third aspect is the removal of impediments to women's love and sexual pleasure (Gilligan 2002). As this third wave develops, we can assume that it, too, will have its liberal and conservative branches.

Although U.S. women enjoy fundamental rights today, gender inequality continues to play a central role in social life. Let's look at gender relations in health care, education, the world of work, violence, and politics.

Gender Inequality in Health Care

Medical researchers were perplexed. Reports were coming in from all over the country: Women were twice as likely as men to die after coronary bypass surgery. Researchers at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles checked their own records. They found that of 2,300 coronary bypass patients, 4.6 percent of the women died as a result of the surgery, compared with 2.6 percent of the men.

These findings presented a sociological puzzle. To solve it, researchers first turned to biology (Bishop 1990).

In coronary bypass surgery, a blood vessel is taken from one part of the body and stitched to an artery on the surface of the heart. Perhaps this operation was more difficult to perform on women because they have smaller arteries. To find out, researchers measured the amount of time that surgeons kept patients on the heart-lung machine while they operated. They were surprised to learn that women spent *less* time on the machine than men. This indicated that the operation was not more difficult to perform on women.

As the researchers probed, a surprising answer unfolded: unintended sexual discrimination. Physicians had not taken the chest pains of their female patients as seriously as they took the complaints of their male patients. The physicians were *ten* times more likely to give men exercise stress tests and radioactive heart scans. They also sent men to surgery on the basis of abnormal stress tests but waited until women showed clear-cut symptoms of heart disease before sending them to surgery. Patients who have surgery after the disease is more advanced are less likely to survive.

As more women become physicians, perhaps such subconscious discrimination will change. Women doctors are more likely to order Pap smears and mammograms (Lurie et al. 1993). There are also indications that they offer more encouragement to their patients and engage them

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more in making decisions about their care. If this turns out to be true—and the conclusion is tentative—they likely will be more responsive to the health problems of women (Levinson and Lurie 2004).

In contrast to the heart surgery we just discussed, there is a type of surgery that is a blatant form of discrimination against women. This is the focus of the Down-to-Earth Sociology box below.

Gender Inequality in Education

Gender inequality in U.S. education is not readily apparent. From a minority of students a generation ago, women now attend college in such large numbers that 57 percent

of all college students are women. Women also earn 57 percent of all bachelor's degrees and 59 percent of all master's degrees (*Statistical Abstract* 2007:Table 288). Look at Figure 10.2, which shows how women have increased their share of professional degrees. The greatest change is in dentistry: In 1970, across the entire United States, only 34 women earned degrees in dentistry. Today, 1,900 women become dentists each year. As you can also see, almost as many women as men now graduate from U.S. medical and law schools. With the change so extensive and established, I anticipate that women will soon outnumber men in earning these professional degrees.

So where is there inequality for women? If we probe beneath the surface, we still find *gender tracking*; that is, degrees tend to follow gender, which reinforces male–female

Down-to-Earth Sociology Surgical Sexism: Cold-Hearted Surgeons and Their Women Victims

ociologist Sue Fisher (1986), who did participant observation in a hospital, was surprised to hear surgeons recommend total hysterectomy (removal of both the uterus and the ovaries) when no cancer was present. When she asked why, the male doctors explained that the uterus and ovaries are "potentially disease producing." They also said that these organs are unnecessary after the childbearing years, so why not remove them? Doctors who reviewed hysterectomies confirmed this bias: They found that three out of four of these surgeries were, in their term, inappropriate (Broder et al. 2000).

Greed is a powerful motivator in life, and it certainly shows up in surgical sexism. Surgeons perform hysterectomies to make money, but since women, to understate the matter, are reluctant to part with these organs, surgeons have to "sell" this operation. As you read how one resident explained the "hard sell" to sociologist Diana Scully (1994), you might think of a used car salesperson:

You have to look for your surgical procedures; you have to go after patients. Because no one is crazy enough to come and say, "Hey, here I am. I want you to operate on me." You have to sometimes convince the patient that she is really sick—if she is, of course [laughs], and that she is better off with a surgical procedure.

The surgeon can wield a powerful weapon that used car salespeople would love to have:To "convince" a

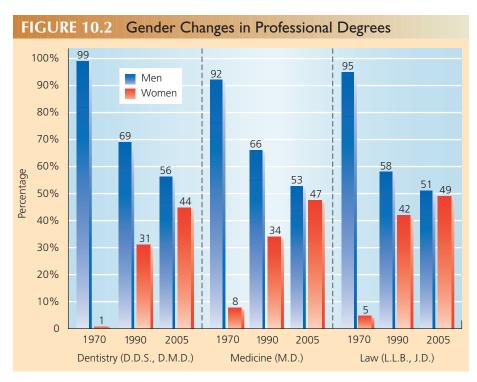


woman to have this surgery, the doctor puts on a serious face and tells her that the examination has turned up fibroids in her uterus—and they *might* turn into cancer. This statement is often sufficient, for it frightens women, who picture themselves lying at death's door, their sorrowful family gathered at their death bed. To clinch the sale, the surgeon withholds the rest of the truth—that fibroids are common, that they most likely will *not* turn into cancer, and that the patient has several nonsurgical alternatives.

I wonder how men would feel if surgeons systematically suggested that they be castrated when they get older—since "that organ is no longer necessary, and it might cause disease."

For Your Consideration

Hysterectomies have become so common that one of three U.S. women eventually has her uterus surgically removed (Elson 2004). Why do you think that surgeons are so quick to operate? How can women find nonsurgical alternatives?



Source: Digest of Education Statistics 2007: Table 262.

distinctions. Here are two extremes: Men earn 94 percent of the associate degrees in the "masculine" field of construction trades, while women are awarded 89 percent of the associate degrees in the "feminine" field of library science (*Statistical Abstract* 2007:Table 290). Because gender socialization gives men and women different orientations to life, they enter college with gender-linked aspirations. It is their socialization—not some presumed innate characteristics—that channels men and women into different educational paths.

If we follow students into graduate school, we see that with each passing year the proportion of women drops. Table 10.1 gives us a snapshot of doctoral programs in the sciences. Note how aspirations (enrollment) and accomplishments (doctorates earned) are sex linked. In five of these doctoral programs, men outnumber women, and in three, women outnumber men. In all of them, however, women are less likely to complete the doctorate.

If we follow those who earn doctoral degrees to their teaching careers at colleges and universities, we find gender stratification in rank and pay. Throughout the United States, women are less likely to become full professors, the highest-paying and most prestigious rank. In both private and public colleges, professors average more than twice the salary of instructors (*Statistical Abstract* 2007:Table 284). Even when women

do become full professors, their average pay is less than that of men who are full professors (AAUP 2007:Table 5).

Gender Inequality in the Workplace

To examine the work setting is to make visible basic relations between men and women. I just mentioned the differences in what male and female professors are paid, which takes us to one of the most remarkable areas of gender inequality at work, the pay gap.

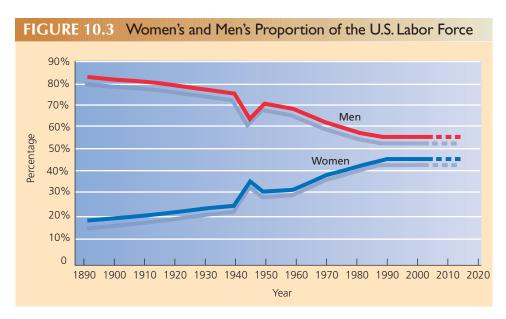
Doctorates in Science, By Sex

	Students Enrolled		Doctorates Conferred		Completion Ratio ¹ (Higher or Lower Than Expected)	
Field	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
Mathematics Computer Sciences Social Sciences Biological Sciences Agriculture Physical Sciences Engineering Psychology	36% 27% 53% 55% 45% 31% 21% 74%	64% 73% 47% 45% 55% 69% 79% 26%	28% 21% 44% 46% 38% 26% 18% 67%	72% 79% 56% 54% 62% 74% 82% 33%	-22 -22 -17 -16 -16 -16 -14 -9	+13 +8 +19 +20 +13 +7 +4 +27

¹The formula for the completion ratio is X minus Y divided by Y, where X is the doctorates conferred and Y is the proportion enrolled in a program.

Source: By the author, Based on Statistical Abstract 2007: Tables 785, 789.

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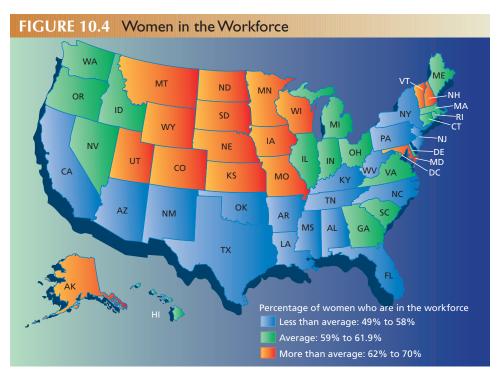


Note: Pre-1940 totals include women 14 and over: totals for 1940 and after are for women 16 and over. Broken lines are the author's projections.

Sources: By the author. Based on 1969 Handbook on Women Workers, 1969:10; Manpower Report to the President, 1971:203, 205; Mills and Palumbo, 1980:6, 45; Statistical Abstract 2007:Table 574.

The Pay Gap One of the chief characteristics of the U.S. workforce is a steady growth in the numbers of women who work for wages outside the home. Figure 10.3 shows that in 1890 about one of every five paid workers was a woman. By 1940, this ratio had grown to one of four; by 1960 to one of three; and today it is almost one of two. As shown on this figure, the projections are that the ratio will remain 55 percent men and 45 percent women for the next few years.

Women who work for wages are not distributed evenly throughout the United States. From the Social Map below, you can see that where a woman lives makes a difference in how likely she is to work outside the home. Why is there such a clustering among the states? The geographical patterns evident in this map reflect regional-subcultural differences about which we currently have little understanding.



Note: At 49.1%, West Virginia has the lowest rate of women in the workforce, while South Dakota, at 69.4%, has the highest.

Source: By the author. Based on Statistical Abstract 2007: Table 579.

After college, you might like to take a few years off, travel around Europe, sail the oceans, or maybe sit on a beach in some South American paradise and drink piña coladas. But chances are, you are going to go to work instead. Since you have to work, how would you like to earn an extra \$1,300,000 on your job? If this sounds appealing, read on. I'm going to reveal how you can make an extra \$2,700 a month between the ages of 25 and 65.

Is this hard to do? Actually, it is simple for some, but impossible for others. As Figure 10.5 shows, all you have to do is be born a male and graduate from college. If we compare full-time workers, based on current differences in earnings, this is how much more money the *average male* college graduate can expect to earn over the course of his career. Hardly any single factor pinpoints gender discrimination better than this total. As you can see, the pay gap shows up at *all* levels of education.

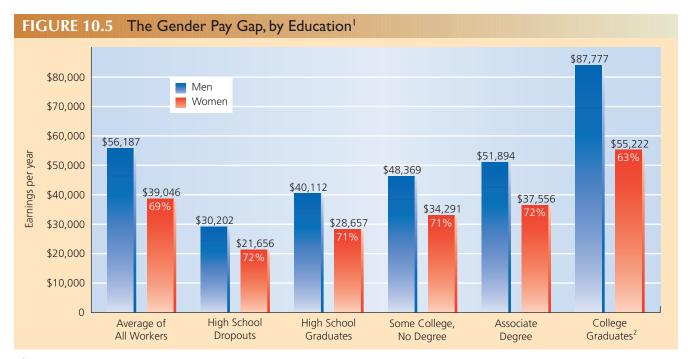
The pay gap is so great that U.S. women who work full time average *only 69 percent* of what men are paid. As you can see from Figure 10.6 on the next page, the pay gap used to be even worse. The gender gap in pay occurs not only in the United States but also in *all* industrialized nations.

If \$1,300,000 additional earnings aren't enough, how would you like to make another \$166,000 extra at work? If so, just make sure that you are not only a man but also a *tall* man. Over their lifetimes, men who are over 6 feet

tall average \$166,000 more than men who are 5 feet 5 inches or less (Judge and Cable 2004). Taller women also make more than shorter women. But even when it comes to height, the gender pay gap persists, and tall men make more than tall women.

What logic can underlie the gender pay gap? As we just saw, college degrees are gender linked, so perhaps this gap is due to career choices. Maybe women are more likely to choose lower-paying jobs, such as teaching grade school, while men are more likely to go into better-paying fields, such as business and engineering. Actually, this is true, and researchers have found that about *half* of the gender pay gap is due to such factors. And the balance? It consists of a combination of gender discrimination (Jacobs 2003; Roth 2003) and what is called the "child penalty"—women missing out on work experience and opportunities while they care for children (Hundley 2001; Chaker and Stout 2004).

For college students, the gender gap in pay begins with the first job after graduation. You might know of a particular woman who was offered a higher salary than most men in her class, but she would be an exception. On average, men enjoy a "testosterone bonus," and employers start them out at higher salaries than women (Fuller and Schoenberger 1991; Harris et al. 2005). Depending on your sex, then, you will either benefit from the pay gap or be victimized by it.

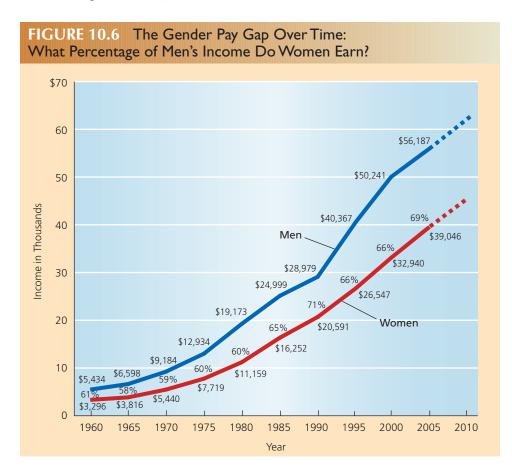


Full-time workers in all fields.

Source: By the author. Based on Statistical Abstract 2008: Table 681.

²Bachelor's and all higher degrees, including professional degrees.

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Source: By the author. Based on Statistical Abstract 2008: Table 681, and earlier years.

As a final indication of the extent of the U.S. gender pay gap, consider this. Of the nation's top 500 corporations (the so-called "Fortune 500"), only 10 are headed by women (Fuhrmans and Hymowitz 2007). And 10 is a recordbreaking number! I examined the names of the CEOs of the 350 largest U.S. corporations, and I found that your best chance to reach the top is to be named (in this order) John, Robert, James, William, or Charles. Edward, Lawrence, and Richard are also advantageous names. Amber, Katherine, Leticia, and Maria, however, apparently draw a severe penalty. Naming your baby girl John or Robert might seem a little severe, but it could help her reach the top. (I say this only slightly tongue-in-cheek. One of the few women to head a Fortune 500 company—before she was fired and given \$21 million severance pay—had a man's first name: Carleton Fiorina of Hewlett-Packard. Carleton's first name was actually Cara, but knowing what she was facing in the highly competitive business world, she dropped this feminine name to go by her masculine middle name.)

The Cracking Glass Ceiling What keeps women from breaking through the **glass ceiling,** the mostly invisible barrier that prevents women from reaching the executive

suite? The "pipelines" that lead to the top are the marketing, sales, and production positions that directly affect the corporate bottom line (Hymowitz 2004; DeCrow 2005). Men, who dominate the executive suite, stereotype women as being less capable of leadership but good at "support" (Belkin 2007). They steer women into human resources or public relations. There, successful projects are not appreciated in the same way as those that bring corporate profits—and bonuses for their managers.

Another reason the glass ceiling is so powerful is that women lack mentors—successful executives who take an interest in them and teach them the ropes. Lack of a mentor is no trivial matter, for mentors can provide opportunities to develop leadership skills that open the door to the executive suite (Heilman 2001; Hymowitz 2007).

The glass ceiling is cracking, however (Solomon 2000; Hymowitz 2004). A look at women who have broken through reveals highly motivated individuals with a fierce competitive spirit who are willing to give up sleep and recreation for the sake of career advancement. They also learn to play by "men's rules," developing a style that makes men comfortable. Most of these women also have

Dilbert







One of the frustrations felt by many women in the labor force is that no matter what they do, they hit a glass ceiling. Another is that to succeed they feel forced to abandon characteristics they feel are essential to their self.

supportive husbands who share household duties and adapt their careers to accommodate the needs of their executive wives (Lublin 1996). In addition, women who began their careers twenty to thirty years ago are now running many major divisions within the largest companies (Hymowitz 2004). With this background, some of these women have begun to emerge as the new CEOs.

Then there is the *glass escalator*. Sociologist Christine Williams (1995) interviewed men and women who worked in traditionally female jobs—as nurses, elementary school teachers, librarians, and social workers. Instead of bumping their heads against a glass ceiling, the men in these occupations found themselves aboard a **glass escalator**. They were given higher-level positions, more desirable work assignments, and higher salaries. The motor that drives the glass escalator is gender—the stereotype that because someone is male he is more capable.

Sexual Harassment—and Worse

Sexual harassment—unwelcome sexual attention at work or at school, which may affect a person's job or school performance or create a hostile environment—was not recognized as a problem until the 1970s. Before this, women considered unwanted sexual comments, touches, looks, and pressure to have sex to be a personal matter.

With the prodding of feminists, women began to perceive unwanted sexual advances at work and school as part of a *structural* problem. That is, they began to realize that the issue was more than a man here or there doing obnoxious things because he was attracted to a woman; rather, men were using their positions of authority to pressure women to have sex. Now that women have moved into positions of authority, they, too, have become sexual harassers (Wayne et al. 2001). With most authority still vested in men, however, most of the sexual harassers are men.

As symbolic interactionists stress, labels affect our perception. Because we have the term *sexual harassment*, we perceive actions in a different light than did our predecessors. The meaning of sexual harassment is vague and shifting, however, and court cases constantly change what this term does and does not include. Originally, sexual desire was an element of sexual harassment, but it no longer is. This changed when the U.S. Supreme Court considered the lawsuit of a homosexual who had been tormented by his supervisors and fellow workers. The Court ruled that sexual desire is not necessary—that sexual harassment laws also apply to homosexuals who are harassed by heterosexuals while on the job (Felsenthal 1998). By extension, the law applies to heterosexuals who are sexually harassed by homosexuals.

Gender and Violence

Around the world, one of the consistent characteristics of violence is its gender inequality. That is, females are more likely to be the victims of males, not the other way around. Let's see how this almost-one-way street in gender violence applies to the United States.

Forcible Rape Being raped is a common fear of U.S. women, a fear that is far from groundless. As high as the official rate of rape is, the real rate is even higher. We know this from the National Crime Victimization Survey, an annual survey of 135,000 people. Only 41 percent of rapes are reported to the police. If we eliminate males from this report, since male victims are the exception, each year about 22 of every 10,000 females age 12 and older are raped (Rand and Catalano 2007). Despite these high numbers, women are safer now than they were ten and twenty years ago, as the rape rate has declined.

Women's most common fear seems to be that of strangers—who, appearing as though from nowhere,

abduct and beat and rape them. Contrary to the stereotypes that underlie these fears, most victims know their attacker. As you can see from Table 10.2, about one of three rapes is committed by strangers.

An aspect of rape that is usually overlooked is the rape of men in prison. With prison officials reluctant to let the public know about the horrible conditions behind bars, our studies are far from perfect. Those we have, however, indicate that about 15 to 20 percent of men in prison are raped. From court cases, we know that some guards even punish prisoners by placing them in cells with sexual predators (Donaldson 1993; Lewin 2001).

Date (Acquaintance) Rape What has shocked so many about date rape (also known as *acquaintance rape*) are studies showing that it does not consist of a few isolated events (Collymore 2000; Goode 2001). Some researchers even report that most women students experience unwanted, forced, or coerced sex (Kalof 2000). Others report much smaller numbers. Researchers who used a representative sample of courses to survey the students at Marietta College, a private school in Ohio, found that 2.5 percent of the women had been physically forced to have sex (Felton et al. 2001). About as many men (23 percent) as women (24 percent) had given in to pressure to have sex when they didn't want to, but—and this is no surprise—none of the men had been physically forced to have sex.

Most date rapes go unreported. A primary reason is that the victim feels partially responsible because she knows the person and was with him voluntarily. However, as a physician who treats victims of date rape said, "Would you feel responsible if someone hit you over the head with a shovel—just because you knew the person?" (Carpenito 1999).

Murder All over the world, men are more likely than women to be killers. Figure 10.7 illustrates this gender pattern in U.S. murders. Note that although females make up about 51 percent of the U.S. population, they don't even come close to making up 51 percent of the nation's killers. As you can see from this figure, when women are murdered, about 8 or 9 times out of 10 the killer is a man.

Violence in the Home Women are also the typical victims of family violence. Spouse battering, marital rape, and incest are discussed in Chapter 12, pages 354–355. A particular form of violence against women, genital circumcision, is the focus of the Cultural Diversity box on page 271.

Feminism and Gendered Violence Feminist sociologists have been especially effective in bringing violence against women to the public's attention. Some use symbolic interactionism, pointing out that to associate strength and

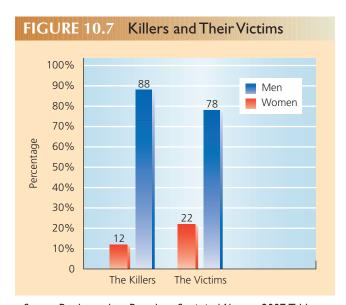
TABLE 10.2 Relationship of Rapists to Their Victims					
Relationship	Percentage				
Knows her attacker Knows well Casual acquaintance A relative A stranger Not reported	56.8% 27.1% 26.1% 3.6% 33.5% 9.7%				

Source: By the author: Based on Statistical Abstract 2007: Table 315

virility with violence—as is done in many cultures—is to promote violence. Others use conflict theory. They argue that men are losing power and that some men turn violently against women as a way to reassert their declining power and status (Reiser 1999; Meltzer 2002).

Solutions There is no magic bullet for this problem of gendered violence, but to be effective, any solution must break the connection between violence and masculinity. This would require an educational program that encompasses schools, churches, homes, and the media. Given the gun-slinging heroes of the Wild West and other American icons, as well as the violent messages that are so prevalent in the mass media, it is difficult to be optimistic that a change will come any time soon.

Our next topic, women in politics, however, gives us much more reason for optimism.



Source: By the author. Based on Statistical Abstract 2007: Tables 300, 317.

The Changing Face of Politics

Women could take over the United States! Think about it. Eight million more women than men are of voting age, and more women than men vote in U.S. national elections. As Table 10.3 shows, however, men greatly outnumber women in political office. Despite the gains women have made in recent elections, since 1789 over 1,800 men have served in the U.S. Senate, but only 35 women have served, including 16 current senators. Not until 1992 was the first African American woman (Carol Moseley-Braun) elected to the U.S. Senate. No Latina or Asian American woman has yet been elected to the Senate (National Women's Political Caucus 1998; Statistical Abstract 2007:Table 395).

Why are women underrepresented in U.S. politics? First, women are still underrepresented in law and business, the careers from which most politicians emerge. Most women also find that the irregular hours kept by those who run for office are incompatible with their role as mother. Fathers, in contrast, whose traditional roles are more likely to take them away from home, are less likely to feel this conflict. Women are also not as likely to have a supportive spouse who is willing to play an unassuming background role while providing solace, encouragement, child care, and voter appeal. Finally, preferring to hold on to their positions of power, men have been reluctant to incorporate women into centers of decision making or to present them as viable candidates.

These conditions are changing. Watershed events occurred when Nancy Pelosi was elected by her colleagues in 2002 as the first woman minority leader, and then in 2007 as the first woman Speaker of the House. These posts made her the most powerful woman ever in the House of Representatives. In 2008, Hillary Clinton became the first



 TABLE 10.3
 U.S. Women in Political Office
 Percentage of Offices Number of Offices Held by Women Held by Women **National Office** U.S. Senate 16% 16 U.S. House of 71 Representatives 16% **State Office** 18% Governors 22% Lt. Governors П 8% Attorneys General Secretaries of State 24% 12 **Treasurers** 22% П State Auditors 12% 6 State Legislators 24% 1,734

Source: Center for American Women and Politics 2007

woman to win a presidential primary, in New Hampshire. We can also note that more women are becoming corporate executives, and, as indicated in Figure 10.2 (on page 274), more women are also becoming lawyers. In these positions, women are doing more traveling and making statewide and national contacts. Another change is that child care is increasingly seen as a responsibility of both mother and father. This generation, then, is likely to mark a fundamental change in women's political participation, and it is only a matter of time until a woman occupies the Oval Office.

Glimpsing the Future—with Hope

Women's fuller participation in the decision-making processes of our social institutions has shattered stereotypes that tended to limit females to "feminine" activities and to push males into "masculine" ones. As structural barriers and stereotypes continue to fall, both males and females will have greater freedom to pursue their interests, capacities, and potential. Distinctions between the sexes will not disappear, but there is no reason for biological differences to be translated into social inequalities. If current trends continue, we may see a growing appreciation of sexual differences coupled with greater equality of opportunity—which has the potential of transforming society (Gilman 1911/1971; Offen 1990). If this happens, as sociologist Alison Jaggar (1990) observed, gender equality can become less a goal than a background condition for living in society.

Hillary Clinton broke through the glass ceiling in politics when she was elected senator from New York: She also came within a hair of becoming the Democratic nominee for president.

GENDER AND AGE

INEQUALITIES OF AGING

In 1928, Charles Hart, who was working on his Ph.D. in anthropology, did fieldwork with the Tiwi who live on an island off the northern coast of Australia. Because every Tiwi belongs to a clan, they assigned Hart to the bird (Jabijabui) clan and told him that a particular woman was his mother. Hart described the woman as "toothless, almost blind, withered." He added that she was "physically quite revolting and mentally rather senile." He then recounted this remarkable event:

Toward the end of my time on the islands an incident occurred that surprised me because it suggested that some of them had been taking my presence in the kinship system much more seriously than I had thought. I was approached by a group of about eight or nine senior men. . . . They were the senior members of the Jabijabui clan and they had decided among themselves that the time had come to get rid of the decrepit old woman who had first called me son and whom I now called mother. . . . As I knew, they said, it was Tiwi custom, when an old woman became too feeble to look after herself, to "cover her up." This could only be done by her sons and brothers and all of them had to agree beforehand, since once it was done, they did not want any dissension among the brothers or clansmen, as that might lead to a feud. My "mother" was now completely blind, she was constantly falling over logs or into fires, and they, her senior clansmen, were in agreement that she would be better out

I already knew about "covering up." The Tiwi, like many other hunting and gathering peoples, sometimes got rid of their ancient and decrepit females. The method was to dig a hole in the ground in some lonely place, put the old woman in the hole and fill it in with earth until only her head was showing. Everybody went away for a day or two and then went back to the hole to discover to their great surprise, that the old woman was dead, having been too feeble to raise her arms from the earth. Nobody had "killed" her; her death in Tiwi eyes was a natural one. She had been alive when her relatives last saw her. I had never seen it done, though I knew

of the way. Did I agree?

it was the custom, so I asked my brothers if it was necessary for me to attend the "covering up."

They said no and that they would do it, but only after they had my agreement. Of course I agreed, and a week or two later we heard in our camp that my "mother" was dead, and we all wailed and put on the trimmings of mourning. (C. W. M. Hart in Hart and Pilling 1979:125–126)

Aging in Global Perspective

We won't deal with the question of whether it was moral or ethical for Hart to agree that the old woman should be "covered up." What is of interest for our purposes is how the Tiwi treated their frail elderly—or, more specifically, their frail *female* elderly. You probably noticed that the Tiwi "covered up" only old women. As was noted earlier, females are discriminated against throughout the world. As this case makes evident, in some places that discrimination extends even to death.

Every society must deal with the problem of people growing old and of some becoming frail. Although few societies choose to bury old people alive, all societies

must decide how to allocate limited resources among their citizens. With the percentage of the population that is old increasing in many nations, these decisions are generating tensions between the generations.

The Social Construction of Aging

The way the Tiwi treated frail elderly women reflects one extreme of how societies cope with aging. Another extreme, one that reflects an entirely different attitude, is illustrated by the Abkhasians, an agricultural people who live in a mountainous region of Georgia, a republic

The man riding the horse is Temir Tarba, who was 100 years old when the photo was taken. As discussed in the text, the Abkhasians have an extraordinarily large number of elderly, but due to a lack of records, there are questions about their exact age.

of the former Soviet Union. The Abkhasians pay their elderly high respect and look to them for guidance. They would no more dispense with their elderly by "covering them up" than we would "cover up" a sick child in our culture.

The Abkhasians may be the longest-lived people on earth. Many claim to live past 100—some beyond 120 and even 130 (Benet 1971; Robbins 2006). Although it is difficult to document the accuracy of these claims, government records indicate that an extraordinary number of Abkhasians do live to a very old age.

Three main factors appear to account for their long lives. The first is their diet, which consists of little meat, much fresh fruit, vegetables, garlic, goat cheese, cornmeal, buttermilk, and wine. The second is their lifelong physical activity. They do slow down after age 80, but even after the age of 100 they still work about four hours a day. The third factor—a highly developed sense of community—lies at the very heart of the Abkhasian culture. From childhood, each individual is integrated into a primary group and remains so throughout life. There is no such thing as a nursing home, nor do the elderly live alone. Because they continue to work and contribute to the group's welfare, the elderly aren't a burden to anyone.

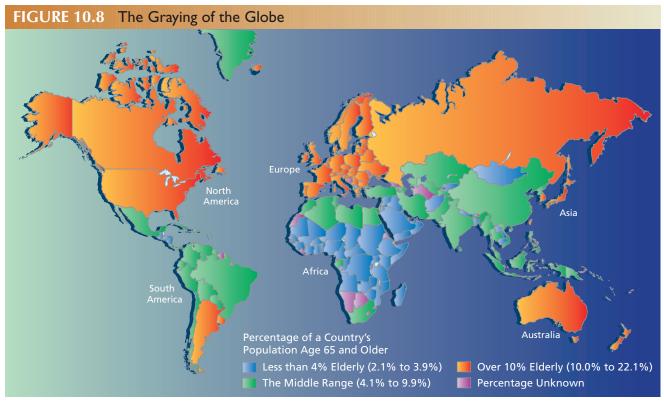
They don't vegetate, nor do they feel the need to "fill time" with bingo and shuffleboard. In short, the elderly feel no sudden rupture between what they "were" and what they "are."

The examples of the Tiwi and the Abkhasians reveal an important sociological principle: *Like gender, aging is socially constructed.* That is, nothing in the nature of aging summons forth any particular viewpoint. Rather, attitudes toward the aged are rooted in society and, therefore, differ from one social group to another.

Industrialization and the Graying of the Globe

As noted in previous chapters, industrialization is a world-wide trend. The higher standard of living that industrialization brings includes more food, a purer water supply, and more effective ways of fighting the diseases that kill children. Consequently, when a country industrializes, more of its people live longer and reach older ages. The Social Map below illustrates this principle.

From this global map, you can see that the industrialized countries have the highest percentage of elderly. The range among nations is broad, from just 1 of 48 citizens



Source: By the author. Based on Statistical Abstract 2007: Table 1309.

in nonindustrialized Uganda to ten times higher than this, almost 1 of 4.5, in postindustrial Japan (Statistical Abstract 2007: Table 1309). In just two decades, half the population of Italy and Japan will be older than 50 (Kinsella and Phillips 2005). The graying of the globe is so new that two-thirds of all people who have ever passed age 50 in the history of the world are alive today (Zaslow 2003).

As a nation's elderly population increases, so, too, does the bill its younger citizens pay to provide for their needs. This expense has become a major social issue. Although Americans complain that Social Security taxes are too high, the U.S. rate of 15.3 percent is comparatively low. Polish workers are hit the hardest; they pay 37 percent of their wages into social security. Only a percentage or two less is paid by workers in Austria, France, Greece, Holland, and Hungary (*Statistical Abstract* 2007:Tables 531, 1335). Workers in the Least Industrialized Nations pay no social security taxes. There, families are expected to take care of their own elderly, with no help from the government.

As the numbers of elderly continue to grow, analysts have become alarmed about future liabilities for their care. This issue is especially troubling in western Europe, which has the largest percentage of citizens over the age of 60. The basic issue is, How can nations provide high-quality care for their growing numbers of elderly without burdening future generations with impossible taxes? No one has found a solution yet, and more and more nations around the world are confronting this issue.

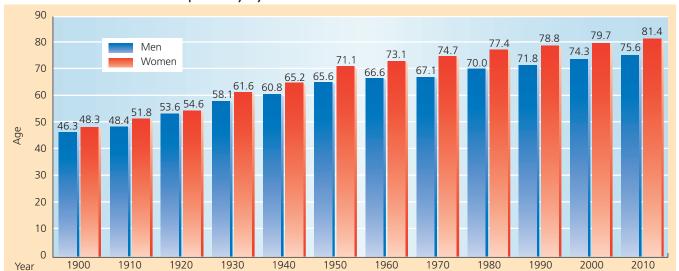
The Graying of America

As Figure 10.9 illustrates, the United States is part of this global trend. This figure shows how U.S. **life expectancy**, the number of years people can expect to live, has increased since 1900. To me, and perhaps to you, it is startling to realize that a hundred years ago the average American could not even expect to see age 50. Since then, we've added about *30* years to our life expectancy, and Americans born today can expect to live into their 70s or 80s.

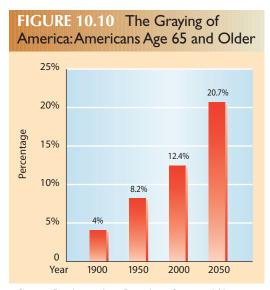
The term **graying of America** refers to this increasing percentage of older people in the U.S. population. Look at Figure 10.10 on the next page. In 1900 only 4 percent of Americans were age 65 and older. Today about 13 percent are. The average 65-year-old can expect to live another eighteen years (*Statistical Abstract* 2007:Table 100). U.S. society has become so "gray" that, as Figure 10.11 shows, the median age has almost *doubled* since 1850. Today, there are 7 million *more* elderly Americans than there are teenagers (*Statistical Abstract* 2007:Table 11). Despite this vast change, on a global scale Americans rank 10th in life expectancy. With its overall average of 82, Japan holds the record for the longest life expectancy.

As anyone who has ever visited Florida has noticed, the elderly population is not evenly distributed around the country. (As Jerry Seinfeld sardonically noted, "There's a law that when you get old, you've got to move to Florida.") The Social Map on the next page shows how uneven this distribution is.

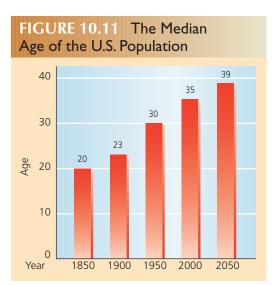




Sources: By the author. Based on Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970, Bicentennial Edition, Part I, Series B, 107–115; Statistical Abstract 2007: Table 98.



Source: By the author. Based on Statistical Abstract 2007: Tables 11 and 12, and earlier years.

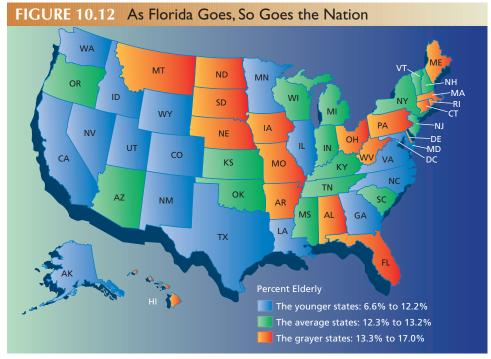


Source: By the author. Based on Statistical Abstract 2007: Tables 11 and 12, and earlier years.

Although more people are living to old age, the maximum length of life possible, the **life span**, has not increased. No one knows, however, just what the maximum is. We do know that it is at least 122, for this was the well-documented age of Jeanne Louise Calment of France at her death in 1997. If the reports on the

Abkhasians are correct (a matter of controversy), the human life span may exceed even this number by a comfortable margin. It is also likely that advances in genetics will extend the human life span.

Let's see the different pictures of aging that emerge when we apply the three theoretical perspectives.



Source: By the author. Based on Statistical Abstract 2007: Table 21.

GENDER AND AGE

The Symbolic Interactionist Perspective

To apply symbolic interactionism, let's consider ageism and how negative stereotypes of the elderly developed.

At first, the audience sat quietly as the developers explained their plans to build a high-rise apartment building. After a while, people began to shift uncomfortably in their seats. Then they began to show open hostility.

"That's too much money to spend on those people," said one.

"You even want them to have a swimming pool?" asked another incredulously.

Finally, one young woman put their attitudes in a nutshell when she asked, "Who wants all those old people around?"

When physician Robert Butler (1975, 1980) heard these complaints about plans to build apartments for senior citizens, he began to realize how deeply antagonistic feelings toward the elderly can run. He coined the term **ageism** to refer to prejudice, discrimination, and hostility directed against people because of their age. Let's see how ageism developed in U.S. society.

Shifting Meanings of Growing Old

As we have seen, there is nothing inherent in old age to produce any particular attitude, negative or not. Old age may even have been regarded positively in early U.S. society (Cottin 1979; Kart 1990; Clair et al. 1993). In colonial times, growing old was seen as an accomplishment because so few people made it to old age. With no pensions, the elderly continued to work at jobs that changed little over time. They were viewed as storehouses of knowledge about work skills and sources of wisdom about how to live a long life.

When does old age begin? And what activities are appropriate for the elderly? From this photo that I took of Munimah, a 65-year-old bonded laborer in Chennai, India, you can see how culturally relative these questions are. No one in Chennai thinks it is extraordinary that this woman makes her living by carrying heavy rocks all day in the burning, tropical sun.

The coming of industrialization eroded these bases of respect. With better sanitation and medical care, more people reached old age. No longer was being elderly an honorable distinction. The new forms of mass production made young workers as productive as the elderly. Coupled with mass education, this stripped away the elderly's superior knowledge (Cowgill 1974; Hunt 2005).

A basic principle of symbolic interactionism is that people perceive both themselves and others according to the symbols of their culture. Following this principle, as the meaning of old age was transformed—when it changed from an asset to a liability—not only did younger people come to view the elderly differently but the elderly also began to perceive themselves in a new light. This shift in meaning is demonstrated in the way people lie about their age: They used to claim that they were older than they were, but now they say that they are younger than they are (Clair et al. 1993).



Stereotypes, which play such a profound role in social life, are a basic area of sociological investigation. In contemporary society, the mass media are a major source of stereotypes.

The meaning of old age is shifting once again. Today, most U.S. elderly can take care of themselves financially, and many are well-off. In addition, members of the baby boom generation are now in their late 50s. With their vast numbers, better health, and financial strength, they also are destined to positively affect our images of the elderly. The next step in this symbolic shift, now in process, is to celebrate old age as a time of renewal—not simply as a period that precedes death, but, rather, as a new stage of growth.

Even in scholarly theories, perceptions of the elderly have become more positive. A theory that goes by the mouthful *gerotranscendence* was developed by Swedish sociologist Lars Tornstam. The thrust of this theory is that as people grow old they

transcend their more limited views of life. They begin to feel more at one with the universe and come to see things as less black and white. As they develop more subtle ways of viewing right and wrong, they tolerate more ambiguity (Manheimer 2005). This theory is not likely to be universal. I have seen some elderly people grow softer and more spiritual, but I have also seen others grow bitter, close up, and become even more judgmental of life. The theory's limitations should become apparent shortly.

The Influence of the Mass Media

In Chapter 3 (pages 71–73), we noted that the mass media help to shape our ideas about both gender and relationships between men and women. As a powerful source of symbols, the media also influence our ideas of the elderly, the topic of the Mass Media box on the next page.

The Functionalist Perspective

Functionalists analyze how the parts of society work together. Among the components of society are **age co-horts**—people who were born at roughly the same time









PEANUTS® by Charles M. Schulz

and who pass through the life course together. Although not visible to us, our age cohort has major effects on our lives. For example, if the age cohort nearing retirement is large (a "baby boom" generation), many jobs open up at roughly the same time. In contrast, if it is a small group (a "baby bust" generation), fewer jobs open up. Let's look at theories that focus on how people adjust to retirement.

Disengagement Theory

Elaine Cumming and William Henry (1961) analyzed how society prevents disruption when the elderly leave their positions of responsibility. In what is called **disengagement theory**, they explained how it would be disruptive if the elderly left their positions only when they died or became incompetent. To avoid this, pensions are offered to entice the elderly to hand over their positions to younger people. Retirement (or disengagement), then, is a mutually beneficial arrangement between two parts of society. It helps to smooth the transition between the generations.

Cumming (1976) also examined disengagement from the individual's perspective. She pointed out that people start to disengage during middle age, long before retirement. This happens when they sense that the

GENDER AND AGE

MASS MEDIA in SOCIAL LIFE

Shaping Our Perceptions of the Elderly

he mass media profoundly influence our lives. What we hear and see on television and in the movies, the songs we listen to, the books and magazines we read—all become part of our world view. Without our knowing it, the media shape our images of people. They influence how we view minorities and dominant groups; men, women, and children; people with disabilities; people from other cultures—and the elderly.

The shaping of our images and perception of the elderly is subtle, so much so that it usually occurs without our awareness. The elderly, for example, are underrepresented on television and in most popular magazines. This leaves a covert message—that the elderly are of little consequence and can be safely ignored.

The media also reflect and reinforce stereotypes of gender age. Older male news anchors are likely to be retained, while female anchors who turn the same age are more likely to be transferred to less visible positions. Similarly, in movies older men are more likely to play romantic leads—and to play them opposite much younger rising stars.

Although usually subtle, the message is not lost. The more television that people watch, the more they perceive the elderly in negative terms. The elderly, too, internalize these negative images, which, in turn, affects the way they view themselves. These images are so powerful that they affect the elderly's health, even the way they walk (Donlon et al. 2005).

We become fearful of growing old, and we go to great lengths to deny that this is happening to us. Fear and denial play into the hands of advertisers, of course, who exploit our concerns about losing our youth. They help us deny this biological reality by selling us hair dyes, skin creams, and other products that are designed to conceal even the appearance of old age. For these same reasons, Americans visit plastic surgeons to remove telltale signs of aging.



Age is more than biology. In some cultures, Demi Moore, 46, would be considered elderly. Moore is shown here with her husband, Ashton Kutcher, 30. Almost inevitably, when there is a large age gap between a husband and wife, it is the husband who is the older one. The marriage of Kutcher and Moore is a reversal of the typical pattern.

The elderly's growing numbers and affluence translate into economic clout and political power. It is inevitable, then, that the media's images of the elderly will change. An indication of that change is shown in the photo above.

For Your Consideration

What other examples of fear and denial of growing old are you familiar with? What examples of older males playing romantic leads with younger costars can you give? Of older females and younger males? Why do you think we have gender age?

end of life is closer than its start. Realizing that their time is limited, they gradually begin to assign priority to goals and tasks. Disengagement begins in earnest when their children leave home and increases with retirement and eventually widowhood.

Evaluation of the Theory Disengagement theory came under attack almost as soon as the ink dried on the theorists' paper. One of the main criticisms is that this theory contains an implicit bias against older people—assumptions that the elderly disengage from productive social roles and then slink into oblivion (Manheimer

2005). Instead of disengaging, say the critics, the elderly exchange one set of roles for another (Jerrome 1992). The elderly find new roles, which often center on friendship, no less satisfying than their earlier roles. These new roles are less visible to researchers, however, who tend to have a youthful orientation—and who show their bias by assuming that productivity is the measure of self-worth.

Changing technology is also changing what it means to "disengage." Computers, the Internet, and new types of work have blurred the dividing line between work and retirement. Less and less does retirement mean to abruptly stop working. Many workers just slow down. Some continue at their jobs, but put in fewer hours. Others work as occasional consultants. Some switch careers, even though they are in their 60s or, in some instances, even in their 70s. Many never "retire"—at least not in the sense of sinking into a recliner or being forever on the golf course. If disengagement theory is ever resurrected, it must come to grips with this fundamental change.

Activity Theory

Are retired people more satisfied with life? Are intimate activities more satisfying than formal ones? Such questions are the focus of **activity theory**, which assumes that the more activities elderly people engage in, the more they find life satisfying. Although we could consider this theory from other perspectives, we are examining it from the functionalist perspective because its focus is how disengagement is functional or dysfunctional.

Evaluation of the Theory The results are mixed. In general, researchers have found that more active people are more satisfied. But not always. A study of retired people in France found that some people are happier when they are more active, but others when they are less involved (Keith 1982). Similarly, most people find informal, intimate activities, such as spending time with friends, to be more satisfying than formal activities. But not everyone does. In one study, 2,000 retired U.S. men reported formal activities to be as important as informal ones. Even solitary activities, such as doing home repairs, had about the same impact as intimate activities on these men's life satisfaction (Beck and Page 1988). It is the same for spending time with adult children. "Often enough" for some parents is "not enough" or even "too much" for others. In short, researchers have discovered the obvious: What makes life satisfying for one person doesn't work for another.

Continuity Theory

Another theory of how people adjust to growing old is **continuity theory.** As its name implies, the focus of this theory is how people adjust to old age by maintaining ties with their past (Kinsella and Phillips 2005). When they

As the numbers of U.S. elderly grow, researchers are exploring their mental and social development, as well as the causes of physical and emotional well-being. As research progresses, do you think we will reach the point where the average old person will be in this couple's physical condition?

retire, many people take on new roles that are similar to the ones they gave up. For example, a former CEO might serve as a consultant, a retired electrician might do small electrical repairs, or a pensioned banker might volunteer to direct the finances of her church. Researchers have found that people who are active in multiple roles (wife, author, mother, intimate friend, church member, etc.) are better equipped to handle the changes that growing old entails. They have also found that with their greater resources to meet the challenges of old age, people from higher social classes adjust better to aging.

Evaluation of the Theory The basic criticism of continuity theory is that it is too broad (Hatch 2000). We all have anchor points based on our particular experiences in life, and we all rely on them to make adjustments to the changes we encounter. This applies to people of all ages beyond infancy. This theory is really a collection of loosely connected ideas, with no specific application to the elderly.

In Sum: The *broader* perspective of the functionalists is how society's parts work together to keep society running smoothly. Although it is inevitable that younger workers replace the elderly, this transition could be disruptive. To entice the elderly out of their positions so that younger people can take over, the elderly are offered pensions. Functionalists also use a *narrower* perspective, focusing on how individuals adjust to their retirement. The findings of this narrower perspective are too mixed to be of much value—except that people who have better resources and are active in multiple roles adjust better to old age (Crosnoe and Elder 2002).

Because workers do not have to retire by any certain age, a major thrust of theory should be people's decision making. How do people choose to retire or to keep working? Especially important is how people reconstruct their identities and come to terms with the new life they choose. As the United States grows even grayer, this should prove a productive area of sociological theory and research.



GENDER AND AGE

The Conflict Perspective

As you know, the conflict perspective's guiding principle of social life is the struggle of social groups for power and resources. How does this apply to society's age groups? Regardless of whether the young and old recognize it, say conflict theorists, they are opponents in a struggle that threatens to throw society into turmoil. The passage of Social Security legislation is an example of this struggle.

Social Security Legislation

In the 1920s, before Social Security provided an income for the aged, two-thirds of all citizens over 65 had no savings and could not support themselves (Holtzman 1963; Crossen 2004a). The fate of workers sank even deeper during the Great Depression, and in 1930 Francis Townsend, a physician, started a movement to rally older citizens. He soon had one-third of all Americans over age 65 enrolled in

his Townsend Clubs. They demanded that the federal government impose a national sales tax of 2 percent to provide \$200 a month for every person over 65 (\$2,100 a month in today's money). In 1934, the Townsend Plan went before Congress. Because it called for such high payments and many were afraid that it would destroy people's incentive to save for the future, members of Congress looked for a way to reject the plan without appearing to oppose the elderly. When President Roosevelt announced his more modest Social Security plan in 1934, Congress embraced it (Schottland 1963; Amenta 2006).

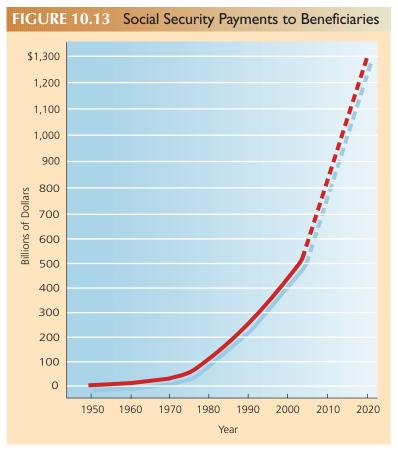
To provide jobs for younger people, the new Social Security law required that workers retire at age 65. It did not matter how well people did their work or how much they needed the pay. For decades, the elderly protested. Finally, in 1986, Congress eliminated mandatory retirement. Today, almost 90 percent of Americans retire by age 65, but most do so voluntarily. No longer can they be forced out of their jobs simply because of their age.

Conflict theorists point out that Social Security did not come about because the members of Congress had generous hearts. Rather, Social Security emerged from a struggle between competing interest groups. As conflict theorists stress, when competing groups are in equilibrium, it is only a temporary balancing of oppositional forces, one that can be upset at any time. Perhaps more direct conflict may emerge. Let's consider this possibility.

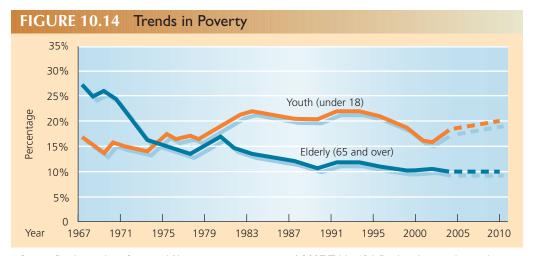
Intergenerational Conflict

Will the future bring conflict between the elderly and the young? Although violence is not likely, if you listen closely, you can hear ripples of grumbling—complaints that the elderly are getting more than their fair share of society's resources. The huge costs of Social Security and Medicare have become a national concern. These two programs alone account for *one of every three* (31 percent) tax dollars (*Statistical Abstract* 2007:Table 462). As Figure 10.13 shows, Social Security payments were \$781 million in 1950; now they run more than 700 times higher.

As the government transferred resources to the elderly, their condition improved. On Figure 10.14 on the next page, you can trace their declining rate of poverty. As you do so, look at how the poverty rate of U.S. children increased from 1967 until the early 1990s, fell during the 1990s, and is again on the rise. When some analysts suggested that the decline in the elderly's rate of poverty



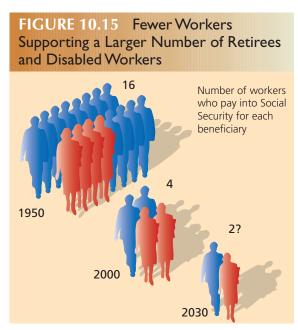
Source: By the author. Based on Statistical Abstract 1997:Table 518; 2007:Table 462. Broken line indicates the author's projections.



Source: By the author. Statistical Abstract, various years, and 2007: Table 694. Broken lines indicate the author's projections.

came at the expense of the nation's children, conflict sociologists Meredith Minkler and Ann Robertson (1991) pointed out how misleading this comparison is. Would anyone say that the money the government gives to flood victims comes from the children? Or to build highways? Of course not. Politicians make choices about where to spend taxes, and, if they want to they can increase spending to relieve the poverty of both the elderly and children.

As conflict theorists point out, framing the issue as a case of money going to one group at the expense of an-



Source: By the author: Based on Social Security Administration; Statistical Abstract 2007: Tables 531 and 533.

other group can divide the working class. To get workingclass people to think that they must choose between pathetic children and suffering old folks can splinter them into opposing groups, breaking their power to work together to improve society.

Some form of conflict seems inevitable. The graying of the United States leaves fewer workers to pay for the benefits received by the increasing millions who collect Social Security. The shift in the **dependency ratio**—the number of people who collect Social Security compared with the number of workers who contribute to it—is especially troubling. As Figure 10.15 shows, sixteen workers used to support each person who was collecting Social Security. Now the dependency ratio has dropped to four to one. In another generation, it could hit two to one. If it does, how will younger workers be able to pay the huge sums it will take to support the older generation? How will they be able to pay for the soaring costs of health care shown in Figure 10.16 on the next page?

Gender Roles Among the Elderly

As I stressed at the beginning of this chapter, gender roles are a master status. We learn them early, we refine them during youth, and we play them during the rest of our lives. Even in old age, our gender roles remain a part of us. I think you will enjoy the Down-to-Earth Sociology box with which we close this chapter.

Down-to-Earth Sociology

Feisty to the End: Gender Roles Among the Elderly

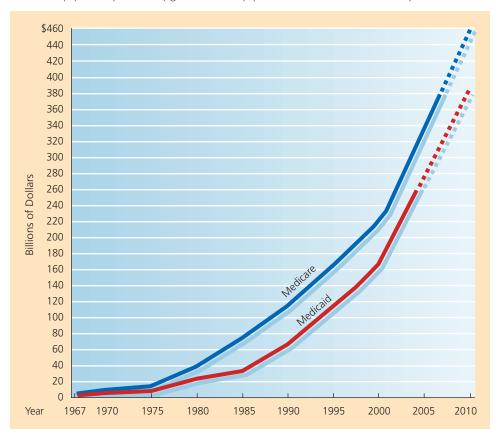
his image of my father always makes me smile—not because he was arrested as an old man, but, rather, because of the events that led to his arrest. My dad had always been a colorful character, ready with endless, ribald jokes and a hearty laugh. He carried these characteristics into his old age.



During their elderly years, men and women continue to exhibit aspects of the gender roles that they learned and played in their younger years.

FIGURE 10.16 Health Care Costs for the Elderly and Disabled

Medicare is intended for the elderly and disabled, Medicaid for the poor. About 24 percent of Medicaid payments (\$55 billion) go to the elderly (*Statistical Abstract* 2007:Table 138).



Note: Broken lines indicate the author's projections.

Source: By the author. Based on Statistical Abstract, various years, and 2008: Tables 134, 140.

My dad, in his late 70s, was living in a small apartment in a complex for the elderly in Minnesota. The adjacent building was a nursing home, the next destination for the residents of these apartments. None of them liked to think about this "home," because no one survived it—yet they all knew what was in store for them. Under the watchful eye of these elderly neighbors, care in the nursing home was fairly good. Until they were transferred to this unwelcome last stopping-place, life went on "as usual" in the complex for the elderly.

According to the police report and my dad's account, here is what happened:

Dad was sitting in the downstairs lounge with other residents, waiting for the mail to arrive, a daily ritual that the residents looked forward to. For some reason known only to my dad, he hooked his cane under the dress of an elderly woman, lifted up her skirt, and laughed. Understandably, this upset her, as well as her husband, who was standing next to her. Angry, the man moved toward my father, threatening him.

I say "moved," rather than "lunged," because this man was using a walker. My dad started to run away from this threat. Actually, "run" isn't quite the right word. "Hobbled" would be a better term.

My dad fled as fast as he could using his cane, while this other man pursued him as fast as he could using his walker. Wheezing, puffing, and panting as they went from

the lounge into the long adjoining hall, the two paused to catch their breath now and then. Tiring the most, the other man gave up the pursuit. He then called the police.

When the police officer arrived, he said, "Uncle Marv, I'm sorry, but I'm going to have to arrest you." (This event occurred in a small town, and the officer assigned this case turned out to be Dad's nephew.)

Dad went before a judge, who could hardly keep a straight face. He gave Dad a small fine and warned him to behave himself. The apartment manager also gave Dad a warning: One more incident, and he would have to move out of the complex.

Dad's wife wasn't too happy about the situation, either.

This event was brought to mind by a newspaper account of a fight that broke out at the food bar of a retirement home ("Melee Breaks ..." 2004). It seems that one elderly man criticized the way another man was picking through the salad. When a fight broke out between the two, several elderly people were hurt as they tried either to intervene or to flee.

For Your Consideration

People carry their personalities, values, and other traits into old age. Among these characteristics are their gender roles. What examples of gender roles do you see in the events related here? Are you familiar with how old people continue to show their femininity or masculinity?

SUMMARY and REVIEW

Issues of Sex and Gender

What is gender stratification?

The term **gender stratification** refers to unequal access to property, power, and prestige on the basis of sex. Each society establishes a structure that, on the basis of sex and gender, opens and closes doors to its privileges. P. 262.

How do sex and gender differ?

Sex refers to biological distinctions between males and females. It consists of both primary and secondary sex characteristics. **Gender**, in contrast, is what a society considers proper behaviors and attitudes for its male and female members. *Sex* physically distinguishes males from females;

gender refers to what people call "masculine" and "feminine." P. 262.

Why do the behaviors of males and females differ?

The "nature versus nurture" debate refers to whether differences in the behaviors of males and females are caused by inherited (biological) or learned (cultural) characteristics. Almost all sociologists take the side of nurture. In recent years, however, sociologists have begun to cautiously open the door to biology. Pp. 262–265.

How Females Became a Minority Group

Patriarchy, or male dominance, appears to be universal. The origin of discrimination against females is lost in history, but the primary theory of how females became a minority group in their own societies focuses on the physical limitations imposed by childbirth. Pp. 265–270.

What are some forms of global violence against females?

The major forms discussed here are honor killing, bride selling, and female circumcision. Pp. 270–272.

Gender Inequality in the United States

Is the feminist movement new?

In what is called the "first wave," feminists made political demands for change in the early 1900s—and were met with hostility, and even violence. The "second wave" began in the 1960s and continues today. A "third wave" has emerged. Pp. 272–273.

What forms do gender inequality in health care and education take?

Physicians don't take women's health complaints as seriously as those of men, and they exploit women's fears, performing unnecessary hysterectomies. More women than men attend college, but each tends to select fields that are categorized as "feminine" or "masculine." Women are less likely to complete the doctoral programs in science. Pp. 273–275.

How does gender inequality show up in the workplace?

All occupations show a gender gap in pay. For college graduates, the lifetime pay gap runs well over a million dollars in favor of men. **Sexual harassment** also continues to be a reality of the workplace. Pp. 275–279.

What is the relationship between gender and violence?

Overwhelmingly, the victims of rape and murder are females. Conflict theorists point out that men use violence to maintain their power and privilege. Pp. 279–280.

What is the trend in gender inequality in politics?

A traditional division of gender roles—women as child care providers and homemakers, men as workers outside the home—used to keep women out of politics. Women continue to be underrepresented in politics, but the trend toward greater political equality is firmly in place. Pp. 281–282.

Aging in Global Perspective

How are the elderly treated around the world?

No single set of attitudes, beliefs, or policies regarding the aged characterizes the world's nations. Rather, they vary from exclusion and killing to integration and honor. The global trend is for more people to live longer. Pp. 282–285.

The Symbolic Interactionist Perspective

What does the social construction of aging mean?

Nothing in the nature of aging produces any particular set of attitudes. Rather, attitudes toward the elderly are rooted in society and differ from one social group to another. Pp. 285–287.

The Functionalist Perspective

How is retirement functional for society?

Functionalists focus on how the withdrawal of the elderly from positions of responsibility benefits society. **Disengagement theory** examines retirement as a device for ensuring that a society's positions of responsibility will be passed smoothly from one generation to the next. **Activity theory** examines how people adjust when they disengage from productive roles. **Continuity theory** focuses on how people adjust to growing old by maintaining their roles and coping techniques. Pp. 287–290.

The Conflict Perspective

Is there conflict among different age groups?

Social Security legislation is an example of one generation making demands on another generation for limited resources. As the number of retired people grows, there are relatively fewer workers to support them. Pp. 290–291.

Gender Roles Among the Elderly

Do the elderly give up their gender roles?

Gender roles are master traits, and people don't discard them as they age. As with their values and other orientations to life, people carry their gender roles into old age. Pp. 291–293.

THINKING CRITICALLY about Chapter 10

- 1. What is your position on the "nature versus nurture" (biology or culture) debate? What materials in this chapter support your position?
- 2. Why do you think that the gender gap in pay exists all over the world?
- 3. How does culture influence our ideas about the elderly?

BY THE NUMBERS: Changes Over Time

- Percentage of medical school graduates who were women in 1970: 8
- Percentage of medical school graduates today who are women: 44
- Number of men who have served in the U.S. Senate since 1789: 1,800
- Number of women who have served in the Senate: 33
- Percentage of men's salary earned by women in 1970: 59
- Percentage of men's salary earned by women today: 69
- Median age in the United States in 1900: 23
- Median age in the United States today: 35
- Number of workers for each person who received Social Security in 1950: **16**
- Number of workers for each person who receives Social Security today: 4

- Amount of Social Security payments in 1950: \$781 million
- Amount of Social Security payments today: \$550 billion
- Cost of Medicare in 1975: \$17 billion
- Cost of Medicare today: \$380 billion
- Percentage of U.S. children in poverty in 1970: 25%
- Percentage of U.S. children in poverty today: 17%
- Percentage of U.S. elderly in poverty in 1970: 25%
- Percentage of U.S. elderly in poverty today: 10%
- Percentage of Americans who were elderly in 1900: 4%
- Percentage of Americans who are elderly today: 13%
- U.S. life expectancy in 1900: 47 years
- U.S. life expectancy today: 78 years
- Women's percentage of the U.S. labor force in 1900: 20%
- Women's percentage of the U.S. labor force today: 45%

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

What can you find in MySocLab? mysoclass



www.mysoclab.com

- Complete Ebook
- Practice Tests and Video and Audio activities
- Mapping and Data Analysis exercises

- Sociology in the News
- Classic Readings in Sociology
- Research and Writing advice

Where Can I Read More on This Topic?

Suggested readings for this chapter are listed at the back of this book.