

# Essay on families and gender roles within families

[Family](#), [Parents](#)



Psychology is a complex subject, often coinciding with constructs of sociology. Many psychologists have lent their theories to sociology in an effort to explain how units of people bind together and why people act the way they do. One unit in particular is a family, and the roles they fill are sometimes known as gender roles. Sigmund Freud has very precise views on gender roles, sexuality, and how it impacted the family unit. For example, Freud believed that women lived in constant envy of men. Erik Erikson also had theories on gender roles, beginning in childhood, involved role confusion. His theories involved stages that lasted the individual's entire life. Talcott Parson's is responsible for developing what we know as the nuclear family and the stereotypical gender roles we see most commonly today. Each psychologist offered their own unique way of looking at gender roles, as well as families.

Throughout his career, Sigmund Freud attempted to delve deeply into the human psyche, uncovering motivations behind our every desire. The most common answer to all of our motivations, according to Freud, was primal instincts such as sex. This appeared to impact how he viewed gender roles. For example, Freud explains in "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality" that women are sometimes motivated by something called "penis envy", the counterpart of the male "castration anxiety (14)." This happens, according to Freud, because during the phallic stage, young girls realize they do not have a penis and feel devalued because of it. They relate to their mothers, also without a penis, but immediately reject them, seeing them as valueless, as well. Mothers become the ones to blame for the lack of penis. As a result, young girls devote their attention and affection to their fathers,

never fully forgiving their mothers for their lack of a phallic member (17).

This is known as an Elektra Complex.

Conversely, Freud claimed in his three essays that boys experience a similar confrontation with gender. Between the ages of four and six a boy's love for his mother, according to Freud, secures sexual implications. The boy then becomes an opposing force, battling against his own father for his mother's love (24). A small boy's father is obviously bigger and more powerful, making the boy feel weak and threatened. This ultimately leaves the boy with a complex in which he must prove himself first as a man, and second as a worthy mate. In order to remove the threat, the boy must integrate features of his father that make him "desirable" to others (27). This is known as the Oedipus complex.

Essentially, Freud's gender roles were very controversial, but also very basic. The roles were rooted in childhood and based on the children's bodies.

Children saw that their mother and father were a man and a woman.

Identifying themselves as either a boy or a girl, they sought to fill their respective roles. Unable to do so, they integrated characteristics from their parents. This encourages parents to be good role models, suggesting that Freud understood even if the beginning motivation for children was about their sexual organs, in the end the primary objective was to learn how to be a member of a family. Freudian Theory suggested, according to "The Meaning of Difference: Gender Theory, Postmodernism, and Psychology" that a person's dependence on growing into a whole adult centered on each of their psychosexual stages being fulfilled (459). This and many of Freud's other notions were met with heavy scrutiny but he is still known one of the

most forthright psychoanalysts of our time.

Erik Erikson had a very different view of gender roles, as well as gender roles within the family, than Sigmund Freud. Erikson developed what he called the Stages of Psychosocial Development, listed in his book “ Childhood and Society (56).” Each stage describes how social experiences can impact our development as individuals. For example, Stage 1 forces use to choose between trust and mistrust. Based on our social experience we will either choose to form loving, trusting bonds with those around us, or become distrustful of those that attempt to care for us. According to Erikson, psychosocial stages five and six were the most important in when forming an individual’s gender roles (57).

Psychosocial stage five is identity versus confusion. During this stage the person may begin to ask themselves who they really are. This can apply to several contexts including gender and how they want to express that gender, whether it is traditionally or otherwise. Many times, this decision is based on the social experience that the individual’s social relationships have given them. Usually occurring between the ages of twelve and seventeen, or adolescence, teens attempt to begin developing an identity and a sense of self. Transitioning from childhood to adulthood may leave the teen feeling very insecure as they try to fit into society. Young men and women may not even understand how to fit into society; using their gender is an easy way to do that and fit in. Some teens do this while others experiment with different activities, behaviors, and roles to establish a sense of self. Erikson says this is important to developing a sense of direction (61). The goal of this stage is Identity Diffusion.

Psychosocial stage six presents the conflict of intimacy versus isolation, presenting the question: Will I be loved? Am I worthy of love? In this stage, individuals must confront relationships with other people, intimacy, the thought of being alone, and gender roles (63). If one enters this stage with a poor sense of self, via stage five, they risk not forming strong intimate bonds with others. Lacking this intimacy, as well as intimate relationships, puts the individual at risk of being unable to understand what they want for themselves in a gender role.

Erikson has understandable views on families, though they did not appear to be gender related. They were related to helping a child be successful in the first few stages of psychosocial development so that they may achieve their own gender identity and role later in life. The first stage, trust versus mistrust, makes it very important for the parents to be reliable and act as a support system for the child. As such, the child will choose to trust others and move on successfully to the next stage of development. During the second stage, according to Erikson, parents are to respect their child's growing independence as they try to attain autonomy by walking, grasping, and feeding themselves. Stage three demands that parents be gentle with the punishments, avoid making children feel guilty, and keep them on course, while stage four asks that parents encourage and affirm children's efforts. During stage five parents should encourage their child's self-exploration as they begin trying to affirm their identity. Fundamentally, Erikson did not appear to have a gender theory rooted within a familial structure, but understood that gender roles were something we should figure out for ourselves. He was insistent that parents helped children achieve this.

Talcott Parson's presented yet another view on gender roles, primarily rooted within familial structure. In "The Family: Its Function and Destiny," Talcott Parsons and Ruth Nanda Anshen explain that the Nuclear Family is how families were meant to exist (174). Parsons and Anshen define a Nuclear Family as a group of people consisting of a pair of adults, who are mates, and their children. The gender roles are clearly defined: Men are dominant, and boys are taught to take after their fathers in all aspects. Women are homemakers, passive, and nurturing. Young girls are taught these mannerisms in all aspects. Children are only to play with gender specific toys in order to further these concepts. For example, boys play with cars, toy tools, and doctor kits, while little girls play with dolls, shopping carts, toy ovens, and may assist boys as nurses (176). In Parson's ideal Nuclear Family, a hardworking husband will come home to a happy family, clean house, and an aproned wife preparing a drink at the end of each day. During the 1940's Parson's repeatedly postulated that the only way a family could be held together was by gender socialization, as well as pre-established gender roles. The gender roles would be left unspoken but agreed upon, and they would complement each other. The man, strong and mighty, would go to work and be the breadwinner. He would be in charge of the finances and ultimately be the head of the household. The economy would depend solely on men and, as such, men would effectively rule the land. Women, small and meek, would be responsible for bearing and raising children. They would cook, clean, and see to it that their family was happy. There was no need for women to work, or even seek higher education with men around. The goal was to marry, and begin having children. Parsons also

believed that children should be socialized to take on certain gender roles. Little girls should be encouraged to be sensitive to the needs of others, wear dresses, play with makeup and dolls, and express their emotional needs. Little boys, conversely, should be encouraged to become leaders, learn how to be independent, take care of women, and always be competing. Any signs of weakness or “girly” emotions would be discouraged in order to complete gender role socialization. Little girls would also be discouraged from roughhousing, competing, claiming independence, or attempting to take care of themselves (189). Parson’s gender role theory relied on complimentary gender roles in order to hold the family unit together.

Today it is criticized by sociologists and psychologists alike. The idea of such extreme, though complementary gender roles is laughable and highly unrealistic because the theory is from a different time. Women no longer rely on men in this manner and to assume they ever would again is insulting. Men do not see themselves as sole breadwinners anymore either. The gender roles presented by Parsons appeared to keep families together but only created unequal living circumstances for many people. Unskilled, financially dependent women were not proof that the Nuclear Family kept families together. It was only proof that women were unable to get jobs, therefore, unable to earn enough money to leave unhappy situations. Parson’s effectively created a situation that did not hold families together, but trapped them instead.

In sum, there are many different views presented by these three men. Sigmund Freud believed that our gender roles were derived from our psychosexual experiences in childhood. Based on the criticized Oedipus and

Elektra complexes, we begin to establish our roles as men and women in the world. We also begin to understand the importance of family. According to Erikson, our gender roles are up to us, depending on how we cope with the decisions presented to us at each psychosocial stage. Erikson's only hope for families was that parents would provide adequate support, comfort, and guidance from infancy through adolescence so individuals stood the best chance of developing healthily. Parson's view for family's and gender relied entirely on stereotypical views of whom and what men and women should be and do. Men should work while women should cook and clean. While each social scientist brings up their own viewpoints about gender and family, it seems that none are completely right or completely wrong. The mystery of gender roles with families will live on!

## **References**

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