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Gender roles have been prevalent among society for as long as humans have been living on the Earth. They have played a substantial role in establishing and sustaining civilizations throughout history. Not only this, but they have also been essential for progression of societies around the globe. Traditionally, men and women had strict roles that were essential for survival. Often, the term hunters and gatherers is used to describe these custom roles. In other words, men were the providers, the masculine hunters, while women were the gatherers and caretakers of the home and family. This was generally true in all parts of the world at some point. Currently, some in society still live by these customs and this routine. However, perspectives on gender roles have shifted in society fairly recently, leading to a more relaxed approach to gender roles and/or responsibilities in households and relationships. The time period of this change is different around the world, however, the United States’ occurred throughout the twentieth century, predominantly the second half. This research project will explore the masculine side of these gender roles; what influenced male gender roles throughout time, how gender roles have shifted, and how these shifts continue to affect men.

In the United States of America, gender roles spiked in the 1950s during the post-World War II era. Strength and masculinity had been built up during the war, and once the war was over, society had changed. As men began returning home from war, they were eager to restart their lives. This meant settling down and starting a family to live out the rest of their lives. At the same time, the threat of the Cold War was on the horizon. Because of this threat, men in this era worked to ensure their homes were safe, whilst knowing that the rest of the world was not. Additionally, the fear of another Great Depression also led to the formation of stable economic families. This resulted in a wave of households called nuclear families. The nuclear family was comprised of a masculine father providing income and finances, a wife whose duty was to take care of the household, and one or more children. The duty of a man had changed, and it was now a race to secure a seemingly perfect family. A man was to be a workhorse in order to fit society’s standards. This desire to fit a certain mold or role as a man was passed down by generation to their children. At the same time, these societal expectations for men were being projected through many mediums to the population.

The first and most direct form was through politics. Politics had been shaping men for countless years; in fact, woman were not even permitted to vote until 1920, let alone be part of the political arena. During the war era, American politics focused on strong, Caucasian, military men. Teddy Roosevelt represented this ideal of masculinity at that time and preached this masculinity to the conservatives of America. This set the foundation of masculinity that persisted throughout the beginning of the 20th century. The second half of the 1900s was not much different. Political figures such as Winston Churchill and Arthur Schlesinger continued to exhibit these same masculine beliefs and ideals throughout the Age of Anxiety. Churchill represented this masculinity to the conservatives, while Schlesinger worked to restore these ideals to the liberal side.

With communism and the Cold War on the horizon, politics became even more polarized. The entire country took a stance against communism and politics committed to a split between the “hard and soft.” Hard referred to the courageous communism defying Americans, while soft referred to the hopeless and weak. To summarize, if one was not wholly and entirely against communism, they were no longer American. Politics portrayed this stance against communism through frequent demasculinizing humiliation. In his article “Politics in an Age of Anxiety”, K. A. Cuordileone states, “If the reader has yet to grasp the essential point about Communism: it ‘perverts politics into something secret, sweaty and furtive like nothing so much, in the phrase of one wise observer of modern Russia, as homosexuality in a boys' school; many practicing it, but all those caught to be caned by the headmaster.’ And here we come to the complete demasculinization and perversity-homosexuality-that sits directly opposite the "vital center" in Schlesinger's revamped circular model.” (Cuordileone, pg. 519) American politics painted the image that Americans were “hard” and communists were “soft.” This furthered the idea of American masculinity.

The film industry was another medium which contributed to the societal expectations of American masculinity. Consumers did not realize the power film and the film industry had in influencing society. However, the film industry knows this power well and uses it all the time. Much of human behavior can be studied through films. Many learn how to behave and live through film as they are exposed to a world beyond their own. In the Twentieth century, American masculinity was portrayed through endless avenues in film. Up until the 1980’s, movies were composed of a strong manly hero who was a model of what a man should be according to society. Many of these productions involved war stories and heroic actions which presented men as fierce and invulnerable characters. In the 1980’s filmmakers transitioned away from this blueprint and started creating more realistic characters in order to connect with society and portray a more reasonable expectation. However, they found that the audiences still wanted strong heroes. The solution was to turn to super heroic characters, or superheroes. The superheroes today are a result of this shift. These heroes could portray how to be strong and fierce while also being wildly unrealistic. Thus, men (and society) realized these characters were not real. It allowed men to still strive for masculinity, while not setting unrealistic standards. While masculinity was still flourishing, gender roles were evolving.

The rise of feminism in the late Twentieth century, contributed significantly to this change in gender roles. Women began fighting for equal treatment and opportunities in life. This fight for equality affected the dissolving of roles in the nuclear family. Gender roles began to change--they were much less concrete. Women were now pursuing goals in education, profession, and more. While this created cracks in gender roles, gender standards were still very much present in society. Men were to be masculine and women feminine, even while society was changing.

Today, the gender roles of man and woman is nearly abolished. Society is now gender fluid; people are free to explore and pursue what they want to do and who they wish to be. Society welcomes gender fluid people and protects their rights. This is seen in social media movements and advocacies organizations. However, there is still a resistance to this change in gender roles and identities. For many, the gender roles of the past are still present subliminally. People who grew up in environments in which the more traditional gender roles were present, especially struggle in accepting the new. Even for those growing up currently, gender expectations are instilled in them automatically. Children are still being raised differently depending on their gender reinforcing the adoption of traditional gender standards. A large population of people still hold the strong masculine beliefs of the past in their lives, and this is where the issues with masculinity lie. Masculinity is still portrayed in a manner that impacts and affects society’s efforts to shift the narrative of gender roles.

The history and shift of masculinity and gender norms or stereotypes continue to affect men today. The initial impressions, customs, practices, and routines when raising a child affect him throughout his entire life. In fact, generational factors exist and affect the gender norms significantly today. For both boys and girls, they often learn through experiences and adult figures. Adults today still live with societal roles from their past which often reflect back onto their children. Furthermore, early education systems often group children by their gender. As a result, boys grow up being friends with boys, and girls vice versa. A critical influence on children comes from the norms picked up by friendships. As children grow up in gender dominant friend groups, there are many positives such as relationship skills, similarities, and a support foundation, however, negatives are also present. It is difficult to monitor these friendships and they are often infected with the same problematic societal norms. It often forms what is called a hypermasculine peer group that sets a foundation on the people in it. In an article discussing relationships between children, parents, and cultural norms, psychologist Michael Reichart states, “I think that hypermasculine peer-group norms can be a danger, particularly if the young man doesn’t have some kind of mentor or parental figure grounding him in a connection, serving as a moral compass, almost.” (Reichart, para. 21) That is, if boys lack a supportive role model and are more often in the presence of a masculine peer group, as they grow older, their moral compass is lacking, causing them to become easily influenced by cultural norms. Many of these norms that influence young men come from sources of media that they subliminally absorb.

Masculinity continues to be highlighted in social media today. This access to media combined with the shapeable nature of young men establishes and can instill their cultural norms. Similar to how Hollywood culture influenced the twentieth century, media today plays the same role. J.T. Wood states in her journal about the social media’s views on gender, “Because media pervade our lives, the ways they misrepresent genders may distort how we see ourselves and what we perceive as normal and desirable for men and women.” (Wood, pg. 232) This demonstrates the negative aspect of media today. While social media has served as an outlet for expressing gender fluidity, there is still a large presence of gender stereotypes as well. From children’s television to commercial advertisements and even social media platforms, there is always gender stereotypes implicitly pushing conformity.

Because masculinity has been so prevalent throughout history into the present, the term toxic masculinity has been formed. Toxic masculinity refers to instances of aggression that occur due to stereotypical masculinity. Toxic masculinity has given men a bad reputation today. The men of the past have always held a strong position over society, which was never right in terms of gender equality. This masculine position has led to the current divide we see in society today. As females continue to rise and fight for equal opportunity, they look back at the wronging’s of the past and the harm they may have felt from toxic masculinity. Because of this, presently men often are first to be blamed, and this is largely, in part, due to the circumstances that masculinity and a male dominated society had left behind. Unfortunately, toxic masculinity still very much exists today and because of this, men are often generalized in a negative way. With this and the ideals of being a strong man, men often face many mental health challenges.

In a society where men are told that the only way to be significant is to be considered successful by its standards—strong, aggressive, the provider--men frequently find themselves in a lousy emotional state. Their egos are constantly in contention with societal standards. In an article from The Atlantic about masculinity, a school of thought preached by Raewyn Connel states, “that common masculine ideals such as social respect, physical strength, and sexual potency become problematic when they set unattainable standards.” (Salter, para. 6) This is essentially saying that the mental well-being of a man is often in relation to the social status of the man, which is usually unattainable. This leads men to often face insecurities and anxiety that they have no way of dealing with. Often times men lash out and become aggressive and it is blamed on the aggressive nature of masculinity. However, it is not that masculinity entails aggression, it is that masculinity suppresses these emotions.

Masculinity of the past and present have created problematic circumstances that men of today are currently struggling with. Because of the past ideals that have been perpetuated over time, men struggle in handling emotions. The masculinity teachings of the past inhibit men from being able to express their emotions. Psychologist and researcher Wizdom Powell talks about this in a podcast with the American Psychological Association. She states, “But in general, when men adhere rigidly to the kinds of norms that encourage them to not share their emotions, to be sort of relentlessly self-reliant without seeking the help or support of others. They can have poorer mental health outcomes, particularly more depressive symptomatology because doing so cuts them off I think from the social networks and social supports that might help them get through a difficult time.” (Powell, 3:59) It is an issue that men created themselves that has backfired and reverted to destroying the men of today. In general, most men have difficulty understanding and communicating their emotions. They feel shame when faced with emotional stress because of the ideologies of the past. Men refuse to help themselves because it is seen as vulnerability. In an article by Psychology Today*,* a quote by the award-winning author, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie states,“By far the worst thing we do to males — by making them feel they have to be hard — is that we leave them with very fragile egos.” (Adi Jaffe, para. 5)The fragile ego of man is a result of years of demanding that they only be strong, viral, and aggressive. Instead of resulting in strength, it has resulted in fragility and insecurity—an insecurity with which they do not know how to cope or accept.

When evaluating the problems related to masculinity and male gender stereotype, male suicide is a consistent consequence observed and a very real issue. In the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s suicide data and statistics from 2020, “Males make up 49% of the population but nearly 80% of suicides.” (CDC) Along with this, suicide rates have been consistently rising between 2000 and 2018. It is an issue stemming from the history of masculinity and the continued demands of it today in society. Extinguishing gender conforming norms needs to be a priority in society today. A newspaper article from 2019 worked to spread this awareness by preaching masculine vulnerability. According to the author, Elliot Hawkins, “By speaking about our feelings and our mental health, we will normalize these conversations in society for ourselves and for future generations, which can only be a good thing. Talking about mental health doesn't make it worse and talking about suicide doesn't make it more likely to happen.” (Hawkins, para. 15)

To conclude, gender norms in American society have had lasting effects on men today, some, in a drastic way. American masculinity has evolved, and while there have been some inroads in that gender fluidity has become more accepted, the continued societal pressure for some ideal masculinity still has devastating effects for many men. This masculinity has been influenced by many factors over the years such as, wars, politics, the evolution and dissolution of the nuclear family; consumer culture and the film industry; the rise of feminism; generational factors; childhood development; and social media and today’s current societal expectations. Until we allow men to be vulnerable without being seen as weak, stereotypical masculinity will continue to effect men, resulting in men’s mental health issues seen in male suicide rates. Overall, masculinity has evolved a great deal in many positive directions since the 1950s; however, the shift and evolution of gender roles still has a considerable way to go and must continue to be explored, studied, and supported.

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