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**Gender: Challenging Attitudes, Conceptualizations and
Theories Relevant to Work and Family Roles
Tiffany Hunt
University of Ottawa**

*Sponsored by the Hudson's Bay Company
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College of Social and Applied Human Sciences
University of Guelph*

In recent years, gender has become the primary analytical focus of women's studies and several interdisciplinary programs in colleges and universities. Gender is a variable that is frequently considered in social scientific research. Specifically, several studies have examined gender in relation to work and family roles (Chait Barnett & Shibley Hyde, 2001; McHale & Crouter, 1992; Thompson & Waler, 1989). Despite growing research in this area, there has been a general lack of theoretical advancement. The purpose of this paper is to explore some of the limitations that have impeded advancement and to consider a new theory that may offer a new direction for research studies. This will be accomplished by examining outdated gender attitudes, conceptualizations and theories relevant to work and family roles, and to examine the newly proposed expansionist theory.

Although gender has been the focus of much research attention, consensus over the meaning of gender remains diverse and inconsistent. Gender is a term that has been defined and interpreted in several ways by scholars. This is problematic, as multiple meanings and conceptualizations of gender may jeopardize the validity of research generalizations (Hawkesworth, 1997). It has been argued that the notion of gender is so common that some individuals are not even troubled with its conceptualization. This untroubled attitude towards gender has been deemed as the "natural attitude", which is defined as: "...a series of "unquestionable axioms" about gender, including the beliefs that there are two and only two genders; gender is invariant; genitals are the essential signs of gender; the male/female dichotomy is natural; being masculine or feminine is natural and not a matter of choice, all individuals can and must be classified as masculine or feminine-any deviation from such a classification being a either a joke or a pathology. (Hawkesworth, 1997, p. 649 as cited in Garfinkle, 1967, p. 122-128)

Hawkesworth (1997) noted that it is important to identify the presuppositions of gender theorists to determine whether or not the "natural attitude" is being challenged or reinforced. Thompson and Walker (1989) have also pointed out the need for researchers to examine their conceptualizations of gender, as gender is typically thought of in two problematic ways: as an individual problem, or in terms of gender roles. Conceptualizing gender as an individual property can lead to reinforcing differences rather than similarities between men and women. In addition, the notion of gender roles may serve to reinforce inequalities, and the "natural attitude" as gender roles are understood as "a set of expectations for behaving, thinking and feeling that is based on a person's biological sex" (Kilmartin, 2000 p. 20). It is suggested that gender be studied in separation from roles in order to assess the potential interactive effects of gender and roles for men and women (Thompson & Walker, 1989). Another consideration relevant to gender studies is the recognition of discourse that surrounds it. As Sjorup (1994) observed, gender is frequently subsumed in discourses of power relations, parenthood and individual differences. Therefore, it is important to consider conceptualizations of gender in relation to the social and cultural forces that may be implicated in discourse.

In recent reviews of theoretical conceptualizations of gender, it is evident that some researchers continue to reinforce the “natural attitude”. For instance, Udry (2000) put forth a theory of gendered behaviour that claimed sex dimorphic behaviours arise from different levels of testosterone exposure during prenatal development. Using a sample of women from the longitudinal Child Health and Development Study, mother’s prenatal, and daughter’s adult blood samples were assessed for levels of testosterone and sex hormone binding globulin (SHBG) (Udry, 2000). The results indicated that increased levels of SHBG in the mother produced decreased transmission of testosterone to the daughter and, therefore, promoted more feminine behaviour. However, increased levels of prenatal testosterone had less of an effect on adult testosterone and, therefore, less effect on feminine behaviour (Udry, 2000). When considered with potential socialization effects, it was argued that in daughters with “natural tendencies” to be feminine (low testosterone exposure in the prenatal period), femininity would be enhanced through maternal encouragements of feminine behaviours. However, if femininity was below average in childhood, maternal efforts toward feminization would not be effective (Udry, 2000). Although men were not directly considered in this study, it was concluded that men and women have specific biological predispositions that will enhance or immunize them towards gendered patterns of socialization (Udry, 2000).

In response to Udry’s findings, Miller and Costello (2000) noted that Udry failed to specify the mechanism through which hormone exposures produced gender specific behaviours and preferences. Furthermore, a causal relationship is not necessarily merited from the results; it may be that the hormones influenced the behaviours or that the behaviours influenced the hormone levels. In addition, without direct evaluation of male participants, it is inappropriate to generalize the results from a female to male population (Miller & Costello, 2000). It appears that Udry adopted a position grounded in biological determinism, in which gendered behaviour is thought to be a direct product of biological forces. This is a view that is likely rooted in sociobiological theory.

The notion of “inherent” and “natural” differences in gender is revealed through sociobiological and evolutionary theories in psychology. For example, in explaining parental involvement and mate selection, it is suggested that prehistorically, men attempted to reproduce with as many women as possible in order to spread their genes, whereas, women devoted their energy to producing and raising children in order to increase the reproductive chances of their offspring (Chait Barnett & Sibley Hyde, 2001). Based on the reproductive goals of men and women, it is argued that men developed aggressive and competitive behaviours; whereas, women developed nurturant and supportive tendencies. Thus, the assumptions of sociobiological and evolutionary theories imply that gender roles are both functional and natural (Chait Barnett & Sibley Hyde, 2001)

The natural roles of men and women have also been explained from a psychoanalytic perspective. The Freudian view of gender roles asserts that the

goals of a young man are to overcome the Oedipal complex, enter the world of work and find a suitable wife; whereas, the goals of a young woman are to marry and have a child (Chait Barnett & Shibley Hyde, 2001). According to Erikson (1968) much of a woman's identity is based on her attractiveness and search for a man; therefore, marriage offers some closure for a woman's identity struggles, by giving her a role, or a sense of purpose. From the psychoanalytic perspective, a pattern of male domination and female subordination emerges in relation to both labour and marriage roles. It is inferred that sex segregation is a normal process with men acting as the breadwinners and women acting as the homemakers (Chait Barnett & Shibley Hyde, 2001). Similar to the sociobiological and evolutionary theories, psychoanalytic theory suggests that gender roles serve functional purposes. Therefore, it would be predicted that if men and women were to perform non-traditional roles or multiple roles, much distress would arise with potential negative consequences in their relationships and physical and mental health (Chait Barnett & Sibley Hyde, 2001). However, current research has failed to produce results that are supportive of the predictions of traditional gender theories (Chait Barnett & Shibley Hyde, 2001) In fact, the relevance of psychoanalytic theory, sociobiological and evolutionary theory in current conceptualizations of gender and gender roles is questionable.

Sjorup (1994) noted that specific gender roles in relation to parental and labour practices have changed. For instance, fathers are taking an active role in parenting and women are pursuing careers in various trades of the workforce (Sjorup, 1994). Current concepts of gender roles in labour have extended beyond the mere division of labour and towards restructuring the concept of labour. Whereas work was previously conceived in quantitative patterns such as productive versus unproductive work, or paid versus unpaid work, labour is now assessed in qualitative manner that allows for the recognition of such elements as caring and service (Sjorup, 1994).

In addition to changes in labour conceptualization, there have been several changes in attitudes and norms surrounding gender roles in the family. Thornton (1989) used a series of data sets to examine changing attitudes toward family issues from the late 1950s to the mid 1980s. The results indicated that changes in family attitudes and values were the most dramatic in the 1960s and 1970s with reduced endorsement in traditional norms to marry, bear children and have distinct gender roles for men and women. One trend that remained consistent from the 1970s to the 1980s was increased egalitarian attitudes toward gender roles (Thornton, 1989). Additional research has shown that increased egalitarian gender roles have influenced couples' marital evaluation, where inconsistencies between gender roles and labour division produced marital dissatisfaction (McHale & Crouter, 1992). As Higgins, Duxbury and Lee (1994) have pointed out, a traditional gendered division of labour with the husband as the breadwinner and the wife as the homemaker, is no longer a realistic choice for many couples. Both men and women are expected to balance work and family responsibilities (Higgins et al., 1994).

It is apparent that the assumptions and views posited by the traditional theories of gender roles are no longer compatible with current concepts of gender in relation to work and the family. Surprisingly, few modified theories have emerged. However, one theory has recently been proposed that does attempt to incorporate modern conceptions of women, men, work and the family. This theory is known as the expansionist theory (Chait Barnett & Shibley Hyde, 2001).

The expansionist theory is based upon four principles. The first principle claims that overall, multiple roles are beneficial to both men and women's physical health, mental health and relationship health. The second principle states that several processes contribute to the positive effects of multiple roles, such as social support and added income (Chait Barnett & Shibley Hyde, 2001). The third principle recognizes that there are specific conditions that predict beneficial effects of multiple roles, for example, time restraints and the quality of the roles. Finally, the fourth principle notes that psychological gender differences tend to be minor (Chait Barnett & Shibley Hyde, 2001).

The expansionist theory is based upon findings of meta-analytic research summaries by Chait Barnett and Shibley Hyde (2001). The expansionist theory has several important implications for social scientists, family practitioners and employers. Specifically, the four principles are empirically testable and merit further study. Social scientists should conduct future research to explore the conditions that restrict the beneficial effects of multiple roles for men and women. Furthermore, it would be useful to direct research towards identifying similarities between the nature of women in men with respect to current cultural norms, roles and discourses (Chait Barnett & Shibley Hyde, 2001). Family practitioners, employers and industrial organizational psychologists may want to engage in a collaborative attempt to assess the effectiveness of interventions such as on-site day care, parenting courses and flexible work arrangements (Higgins et al., 1994). Policies and research should also be evaluated and modified, if necessary, to incorporate current conceptualizations of the relationships between work, family and multiple roles.

In conclusion, current research findings have revealed the need to revise theoretical approaches in relation to gender and role conceptualization. It is evident that the "natural attitude" and differences in gender conceptualization have created various limitations in research approaches (Hawkesworth, 1997). Traditional theories of gender including sociobiological, evolutionary and psychoanalytic theory, have failed to predict outcomes relevant to non-traditional and multiple roles for men and women. However, in an attempt to account for some of the limitations posited from outdated attitudes, conceptualizations and theories, Chait Barnett and Shibley Hyde (2001) have proposed the expansionist theory. The expansionist theory appears to be representative of the current situation of men and women in relation to their work and family roles. Furthermore, the theory offers four testable premises that can be validated or

challenged by future research. The expansionist theory offers some useful guidance relevant to research and policy development for social scientists, family practitioners and employers (Chait Barnett & Shibley Hyde, 2001). Although all theories may be bound in relation to culture and time, a shift away from the “natural attitude” appears to be merited.

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