

# RACIAL AND GENDER IDENTITIES

Sasha Shen Johfre and Aliya Saperstein

## KEY FINDINGS

- Millennials are more likely than previous generations to identify as multiracial.
- Millennials also are more likely to adopt unconventional gender identities, such as reporting that they see themselves as equally feminine and masculine.
- However, they are not outpacing previous generations in rejecting race and gender stereotypes. Their attitudes toward women’s roles and perceptions of black Americans are quite similar to those of baby boomers or Gen Xers.

American millennials have been hailed as the “bridge” to a more racially diverse future and cast as pushing the boundaries of gender with new forms of identity and expression.<sup>1</sup> But the labeling and branding of each new generation often invites criticism. Are these characterizations on the mark? Are millennials indeed embracing a more diverse and unconventional set of racial and gender identities? Are they also poised to challenge social norms around race and gender in other ways?

We take on each of these questions in turn. We show that millennials do see their racial and gender identities in ever more complicated ways—just as the stereotypes would have it—but they are not combining these innovative identity projects with especially high levels of egalitarianism and tolerance for others. The rapid transformation in race and gender labels has not been matched by an equally strong commitment to more fundamental change in beliefs and behaviors.

### Racial identification

Racial diversity among millennials is a product of several major changes in the late 20th century, including the shifting of immigration streams from Europe to Asia and Latin America and increasing acceptance of intermarriage.<sup>2</sup> As a result of these changes, millennials have lived and worked in racially diverse neighborhoods, schools, and workplaces. Even the homes they grew up in were diverse, as more of their parents formed partnerships across conventional racial boundaries than in any preceding generation.

New forms of data collection also emerged during this period. The oldest millennials were on the cusp of adulthood in 1997 when the U.S. Office of Management and Budget announced that it was revising guidelines for all federal data collection to allow Americans to “mark one or more” boxes when identifying their race.<sup>3</sup> Unlike previous cohorts, when most millennials sent off their college applications or applied for their first jobs, they were not forced to choose just one race to describe themselves.

Millennials thus stand out from previous generations in two ways. First, they have more *awareness* of racial diversity in their ancestry, meaning that they more frequently know they have relatives who are considered members of different races. Second, they have embraced *new classificatory tools* that not only tap into this awareness but also legitimate more complexity in racial identification than was possible in the past.

We explore these generational differences in multiracial ancestry and identification using unique data from the 2015 Pew Research Center Survey of Multiracial Adults, which was the first nationally representative survey to ask respondents to report not only their own race but also the races of their parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, and earlier ancestors.<sup>4</sup> Consistent with previous research, the Pew data show that millennials are less likely than previous generations to identify as monoracial white (64% of millennials versus 66% of Generation X and 81% of baby boomers), and more likely to identify with two or more races (10% of millennials versus 6% of Generation X

and 5% of baby boomers).<sup>5</sup>

We find that rates of multiracial identification are higher for millennials, in part, because more than 25 percent of millennials are aware that they have ancestors of different races, compared with 22 percent of Gen Xers, 17 percent of baby boomers, and 10 percent of the Silent Generation. Further, more than half of millennials with multiracial ancestry trace their mixed heritage to their parents or grandparents, whereas previous generations are more likely to report that the “mixing” occurred further back in their family tree.

However, not everyone who is aware that they have ancestors of different races chooses to self-identify with multiple races. Among Gen Xers, boomers, and members of the Silent Generation who are aware of having multiracial ancestry, about one in four select more than one race for self-identification; that share rises to one in three among millennials. The conversion of multiracial awareness into multiracial identity occurs more reliably among millennials, in part, because their awareness is more likely to come from close relatives who identify with different races.<sup>6</sup>

It is clear that millennials are both claiming their mixed heritage in greater numbers and more likely to embrace multiraciality as an identity than previous generations. But these patterns also stem from changes in how the government and organizations measure race; the new metrics reveal more diversity among all generations than was previously captured in official statistics.

### Gender identification

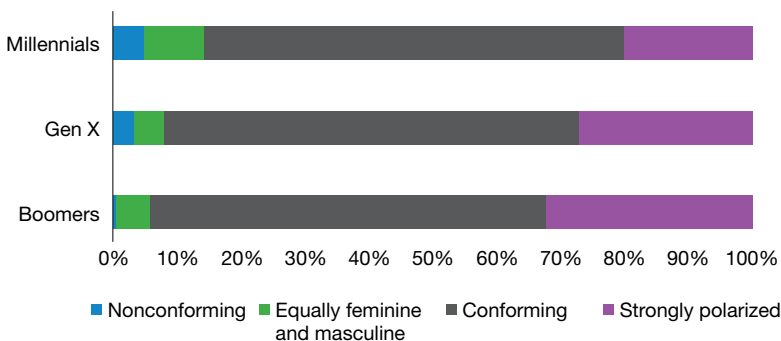
Millennials came of age at a time of rapidly shifting gender identity norms. Previous generations pioneered dramatic changes in rights and roles that brought increasing parity between women and men, but as the 20th century turned to the 21st, Americans increasingly questioned whether they should be limited to thinking about gender in static, binary terms. Suddenly, the English lexicon expanded to include terms like *cisgender*, *transgender*, *nonbinary*, and *genderqueer*.

In contrast with racial identification, though, social surveys and government data collection have been slower to adapt to changing conceptions of gender. Options to identify beyond “female” and “male” or “man” and “woman” remain limited and were generally not available to millennials when they were applying to college or their first jobs.<sup>7</sup>

When such options *are* included in surveys, they are quite frequently embraced. One recent study with expanded gender measures found that when respondents are offered separate scales to describe their femininity and masculinity, most do not fit in an all-or-nothing model of gender with two distinct and opposite dimensions. That is, most women surveyed did not see themselves as being “very” feminine and “not at all” masculine, and most men surveyed did not see themselves as being “very” masculine and “not at all” feminine. Furthermore, about 1 in 10 respondents reported seeing themselves as either equally feminine and masculine or gender nonconforming (i.e., with lower scores on their gender-typical scale than their atypical one).<sup>8</sup>

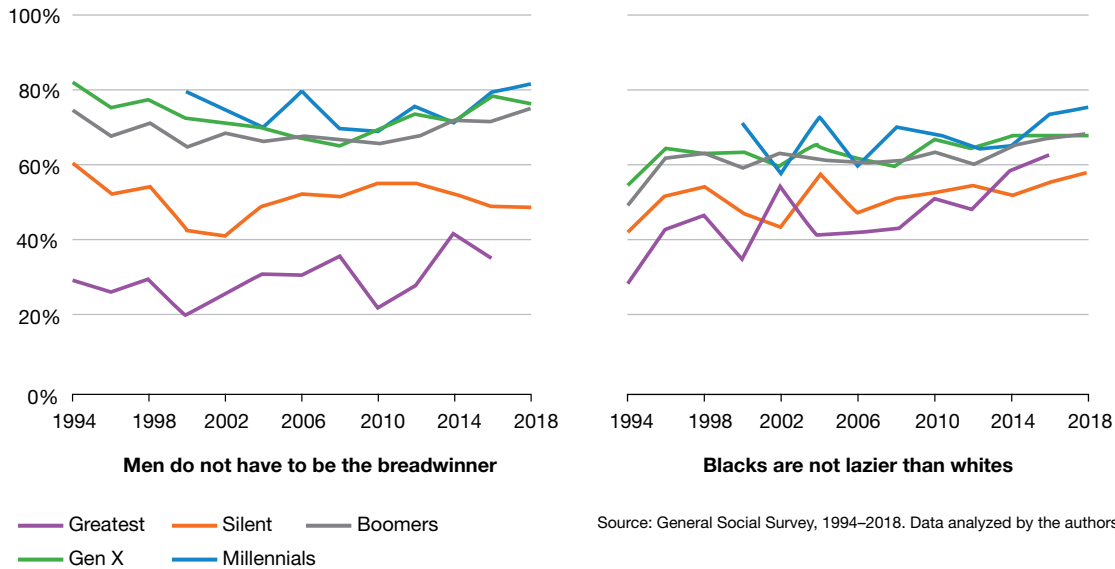
We draw on this same national survey data in Figure 1 to highlight generational differences across four types of responses: (1) people who see their gender in strongly polarized terms (i.e., at the highest end of their gender-typical scale and the lowest end of their atypical scale); (2) people who gave more tempered but still gender-conforming responses (i.e., women who identified as more feminine than masculine and men who identified as more masculine than feminine); (3) people who see themselves as equally feminine and masculine; and (4) people who gave gender nonconforming responses. As might be expected, we find that millennials are the least likely to identify themselves in strongly polarized terms and most likely to identify in ways that challenge traditional notions of gender. Large majorities in every generation still see themselves as gender-

Figure 1. Millennials are more likely than prior generations to identify in ways that challenge strongly polarized notions of gender.



Source: Alternative Gender Measures Survey, 2014. Data analyzed by the authors.

Figure 2. Millennials' attitudes are not markedly more egalitarian than those of Gen Xers and boomers.



conforming, but, as with race, new forms of data collection and increasing acceptance of gender diversity offer a more complex portrait of gender identification.

### Identity and attitudes

Given that millennials are more willing to reject traditional gender and racial identities for themselves, some might expect that they also are more accepting of nontraditional gender roles and racial equality. Are millennials innovators in both personal identities and social attitudes?

At present, the answer is no: Like boomers and Gen Xers, millennials are significantly more egalitarian than Americans from the Silent and Greatest generations on such matters as whether they would vote for a woman as president or welcome an interracial marriage in their family.<sup>9</sup> However, as shown in Figure 2, beliefs among the three youngest generations are remarkably similar.

The slow pace of change in gender ideology can be seen in how people answer such survey questions as whether it is “much better for everyone involved if the man is the achiever outside the home and the woman takes care of the home and family.” One-fifth of millennials hold traditional, inequalitarian views on this issue, nearly the same as the rates among Gen Xers and boomers. Racist stereotypes are similarly entrenched across recent generations, with millennials and Gen Xers being

equally likely to believe that blacks are lazier than whites (Figure 2).<sup>10</sup>

This evidence of stability masks some changes that are occurring. More millennials endorse *strongly* egalitarian views than previous generations, and this is echoed in their visible roles in social movements such as #MeToo and Black Lives Matter.<sup>11</sup> However, this trend is offset by the many millennials who maintain ambivalent or traditional views so that, on average, little generational change has occurred on gender and racial attitudes since the baby boomers came of age.

### Conclusion

We have shown that the millennial generation is on the leading edge of changes in racial and gender identities, but it is not embracing racial and gender equality more than the two prior generations. Reconciling this seeming contradiction might be the millennials' greatest challenge. As they begin to take on roles as workplace managers and national leaders, it remains to be seen whether millennials will settle for challenging race and gender labels or escalate efforts to promote racial and gender equality.

*Sasha Shen Johfre is a doctoral student in sociology at Stanford University. Aliya Saperstein is Associate Professor of Sociology at Stanford University.*

## Notes

1. Frey, William. 2018. "The Millennial Generation: A Demographic Bridge to America's Diverse Future." Brookings Institution; Schawbel, Dan. 2017. "Are Millennials Putting an End to Gender Differences?" *Newsweek*, November 18; Henig, Robin Marantz. 2017. "How Science Is Helping Us Understand Gender." *National Geographic*, January.
2. Lee, Jennifer, and Frank Bean. 2004. "America's Changing Color Lines: Immigration, Race/Ethnicity and Multiracial Identification." *Annual Review of Sociology* 30, 221–242.
3. Snipp, C. Matthew. 2003. "Racial Measurement in the American Census." *Annual Review of Sociology* 29, 563–588.
4. Pew Research Center. 2015. "Multiracial in America: Proud, Diverse and Growing in Numbers."
5. See also Frey, 2018. However, we cannot say for certain whether the generational differences in self-identification are best explained by variation across *cohort* rather than variation by *age* because no comparable historical data that allowed for identifying as multiracial exist.
6. Previous research shows that Americans are more likely to self-identify as multiracial when they report that their mixed heritage dates just one or two generations back, rather than three or more. Morning, Ann, and Aliya Saperstein. 2018. "The Generational Locus of Multiraciality and Its Implications for Racial Self-Identification." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 677, 57–68.
7. Saperstein, Aliya. 2018. "Gender Identification." In "State of the Union: The Poverty and Inequality Report," ed. Stanford Center on Poverty and Inequality, special issue, *Pathways Magazine*.
8. Magliozzi, Devon, Aliya Saperstein, and Laurel Westbrook. 2016. "Scaling Up: Representing Gender Diversity in Survey Research." *Socius*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2378023116664352>; Saperstein, Aliya, and Laurel Westbrook. *Alternative Gender Measures Survey*. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributor]. <https://doi.org/10.3886/E109542V1>.
9. Bobo, Lawrence D., Camille Z. Charles, Maria Krysan, and Alicia D. Simmons. 2012. "The Real Record on Racial Attitudes." In *Social Trends in American Life: Finds from the General Social Survey Since 1972*, ed. Peter V. Marsden. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press; Clement, Scott. 2015. "Millennials Are Just About as Racist as Their Parents." *Washington Post*, April 7; Shu, Xiaoling, and Kelsey D. Meagher. 2017. "Beyond the Stalled Gender Revolution: Historical and Cohort Dynamics in Gender Attitudes from 1977 to 2016." *Social Forces* 96, 1243–1274.
10. We defined egalitarian gender and race attitudes as: (1) disagreeing with the statement that "it is much better for everyone if the man is the achiever..." and (2) positioning blacks and whites equally on a seven-point scale between "hardworking" and "lazy" or reporting that whites are lazier than blacks. Patterns for both attitude questions hold in logistic regressions controlling for year, sex (male/female), race (white, black, other), age, education, marital status, region, and political ideology.
11. Scarborough, William J., Ray Sin, and Barbara Risman. 2018. "Attitudes and the Stalled Gender Revolution: Egalitarianism, Traditionalism, and Ambivalence from 1977 through 2016." *Gender & Society* 33(2), 173–200.