

APA UPDATES PRACTICE GUIDELINES FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS

Girls and women face considerable adversity due to the effects of sexism, oppression, discrimination and prejudice, but some are also often well-equipped to confront and surmount challenges in their lives, according to a new iteration of the American Psychological Association's *Guidelines for Psychological Practice with Girls and Women*. The guidelines encourage psychologists to incorporate a strengths-based perspective in their work with girls and women without denying the adversities they face. They caution against the tendency to pathologize the problems of girls and women "while considering the gendered, multicultural context of girls' and women's lives; and initiating discussions about coping mechanisms, resources, resilience, agency and hardiness."

The new guidelines, an update to the original document for practicing psychologists released in 2007, include more research on girls and a greater emphasis on what they refer to as the intersectionality of identity, including racial and ethnic identity, sexual identity, age and nationality. They include gender-variant and transgender girls and women and underscore the importance of global context and transnational issues.

"There has been a real burgeoning of the research about the importance of the ways that our many diverse identities intersect with gender," says Debra Mollen, PhD, a professor of counseling psychology at Texas Woman's University. She co-chaired the development of the new guidelines alongside Lillian Comas-Díaz, PhD, a clinical professor in the department of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at the George Washington University School of Medicine and the executive director of the Transcultural Mental Health Institute, and Sharon Lamb, EdD, PhD, a professor of counseling psychology at the University of Massachusetts, Boston. A diverse group of more than 40 graduate students, academics and practitioners contributed to the guidelines.

The guidelines acknowledge women still face many challenges, from discrimination in the workplace to lack of access to parental leave and affordable child care to continuing high rates of sexual violence and sexual harassment. The new guidelines address:

Sexual violence: In the decade-plus since approval of the original guidelines, society has increasingly recognized women's experience of sexual violence and abuse, Comas-Díaz says. The #MeToo movement has been particularly influential. However, she says, research still indicates that most women will experience some level of sexual violence or harassment during their lives. The guidelines recommend that clinicians understand this risk and educate themselves about treating trauma.

Transgender women and other nonbinary individuals. Rates of sexual violence among transgender individuals are more than twice that of cisgender individuals, making an understanding of trauma particularly important for psychologists treating transgender clients.

Intersectionality: Clinicians should seek to understand how classism, sexism, racism, sizeism and other experiences of discrimination can intersect to influence an individual client, the guidelines say. Life experiences matter as well. For example, Comas-Díaz says, women veterans report more post-traumatic stress symptoms than civilians and male veterans.

Women's strengths: While girls and women face systemic challenges, they have unique strengths and resilience to cope with adversity. The guidelines urge psychologists to recognize these strengths. Research shows that women live longer than men, experience less social isolation and are less likely to complete suicide. They are also more prone than men to seek psychological help and typically harbor less sexual prejudice. Strengths-based approaches can encompass many kinds of therapies, from psychodynamic to traditional folk healing, Lamb says.

In addition, because gender assumptions and stereotypes are omnipresent, the guidelines advise clinicians to strive to recognize their own internalized biases. Psychologists should choose assessments that have been normed using girls and women and should be aware of potential biases in scales and tests.

APA has developed several sets of guidelines for psychological practice with particular populations. All APA practice guidelines are developed by task forces of experts, reviewed by APA boards and committees, and shared with the public for comment before they are adopted. APA guidelines do not take precedence over a psychologist's informed professional judgment.

Full report and references available online at:
apa.org/about/policy/psychological-practice-girls-women.pdf