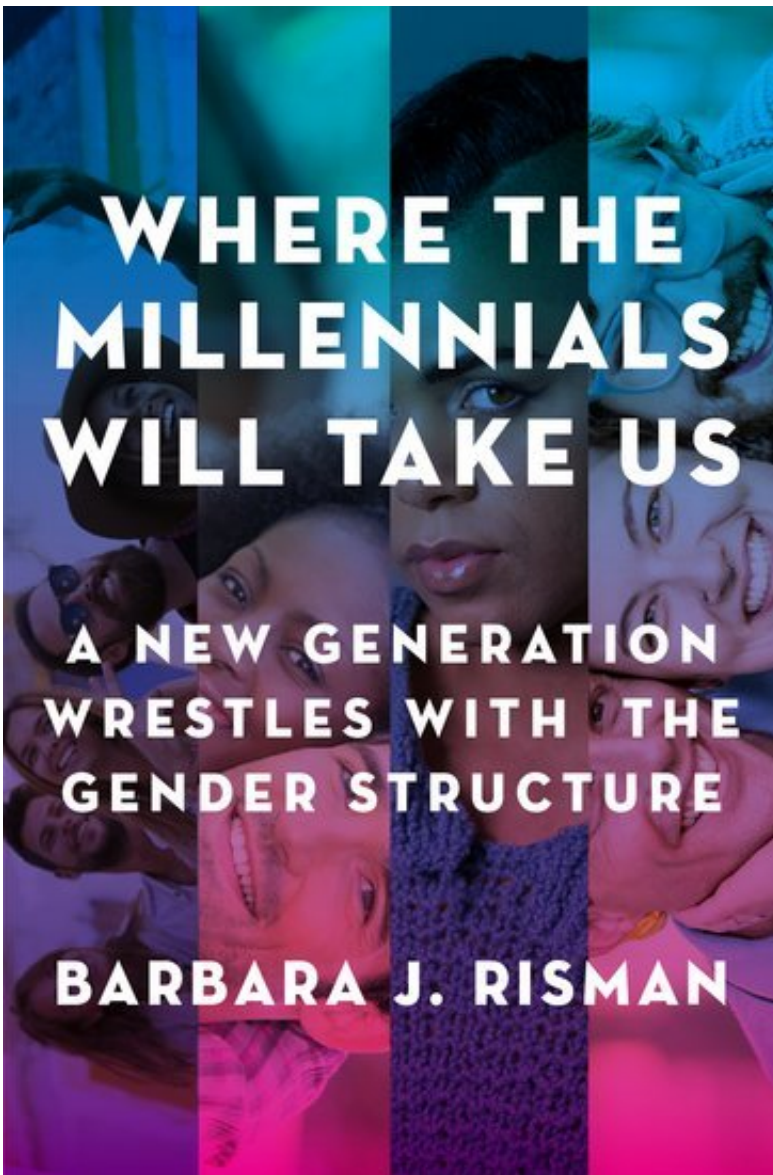


# Are millennials gender rebels or returning to tradition?

January 11 2018, by Brian Flood

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"Where the Millennials Will Take Us: A New Generation Wrestles with the Gender Structure" by Barbara Risman, UIC professor of sociology and

distinguished professor of liberal arts and sciences. Credit: Oxford University

Some research suggests that millennials are pushing boundaries by not only rejecting traditional distinctions between the sexes, both at home and at work, but also refusing to accept gender categories altogether.

Other studies indicate millennials are idealizing traditional roles where stay-at-home moms are primarily responsible for children.

A forthcoming book from a University of Illinois at Chicago sociologist shows that both are true, so don't expect to find one typical millennial.

["Where the Millennials Will Take Us: A New Generation Wrestles with the Gender Structure"](#) details feedback from more than 100 life history interviews with a [gender](#) and ethnically diverse group of millennials that includes transgender and gender queer youth.

Using her theory of gender as a social structure, Barbara Risman, UIC professor of sociology and distinguished professor of liberal arts and sciences, provides insight into the minds of today's young adults to uncover the strategies they use to negotiate the unsettled gender norms and expectations facing their generation.

Beyond how gender is embodied by many individuals, she reports on its influences in daily life and its entrenchment within the organization of workplaces, politics and ideology.

"I found that the fear of being stigmatized for challenging old gender stereotypes is still widespread, but far more among young men than women," Risman said. "Still, nearly everyone felt the powerful constraint of gender stereotypes when it came to how to display their bodies—from

the clothes they wore to the mannerisms they used; to what they weighed and where they had muscle."

The interviews show how dramatically the gender structure still constrains life in America, according to Risman, who is an executive officer of the Council on Contemporary Families, a national organization.

"Both men and women, and those who reject being so labeled, all know the presumptions that come with being female or male: the expectations that women be pretty, supportive and nice, and the expectations that men avoid anything that is considered feminine," she explained. "It is not that all, or even most, millennials always meet gendered expectations, but they face consequences for not doing so."

The millennial generation may not inspire a new wave of feminism in spite of the emergence of gender "rebels" who reject categories altogether, but Risman doesn't foresee a retreat to 1950s ideals either.

"Some millennials may be ambivalent about how far to push the gender revolution, but this is not your grandparents' ambivalence," she said. "In my research, what was very clear is that even millennials who make traditional choices are unlikely to accept a political agenda that penalizes people who do not."

The book concludes with Risman's call for a fourth wave of feminism to eliminate not only sexism but also the gender structure itself.

"To achieve a more just society we must overcome gender expectations entirely, so that none of us are constrained by expectations simply because of the sex category to which we were assigned," she said. "Nor should any business assume that some people have caretaking responsibilities and some do not. If women are not expected to care for

the young and the old, then we all must be, and workplaces have to change to make that possible."

Risman, who received the American Sociological Association's 2011 award for public understanding of sociology, is author of "Gender Vertigo: American Families in Transition" and co-editor of "Families As They Really Are," an edited textbook featuring a collection of research studies on how families function in everyday life.

She is spending the spring semester as a fellow at the Institute for Advanced Study at Durham University in the United Kingdom.

Provided by University of Illinois at Chicago

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