Gender: how stubborn are the stereotypes?

Fifty years after a seminal study on attitudes to gender, what has changed? ask *Paul B. Hutchings and Katie E. Sullivan,* who are part of a major initiative to capture global views on gender

While putting together a lecture on sexism back in 2015, a story in the press caught our attention: a female doctor had joined a gym, but when she picked her electronic changing room access card she found that it wouldn't give her entry to the female changing rooms, but could get her into the male changing room. It turned out that the gym's computer system was set up so that everyone registering with the title 'Dr' was assigned to the male changing room (Wheaton, 2015). A harmless glitch or one tiny fragment of a bigger picture?

One only needs look at the hashtag #Everydaysexism on Twitter to see this type of occurrence happening repeatedly, and to see the patterns of these occurrences. A tweet that most prominently comes to mind was from a woman who had booked a single occupancy hotel room but, when she went to pay her bill the following morning, the hotel wanted to charge her for double occupancy as she had clearly had a man staying with her in the room. Their evidence? A copy of the *Financial Times* newspaper had been ordered to the room; after all, everybody knows that only men read the *Financial Times*!

What we are seeing in action here are gender-based assumptions. Stereotypes. But when it comes to gender these stereotypes often take two different forms. The descriptive stereotype gives us an idea of how people behave, or at least an idea of how we *think* they behave. In the case of the *Financial Times* readership it is true that they are more likely to be male, but that doesn't mean females don't read the *FT*; in fact, around 20 per cent of their readers are estimated to be female. However, it is the prescriptive stereotype that can be the most influential; not merely describing how people behave, but how they *should* behave. It is here that we often see the most pervasive elements of cultural norms and society come into play in people's attitudes, where they make judgments about whether the behaviours of an individual in society are *correct*. Any female who has been told their behaviour is 'unladylike', any male who has been told to 'man up' will recognise this prescriptive stereotype about gender.

Descriptive and prescriptive

While the above gives us anecdotal clues about the issues that are faced by both females and males in society, it is the data that must guide us, and over the past 50 years there have been several studies carried out examining the expectations associated with descriptive and prescriptive gender

stereotypes. The Broverman et al. (1972) paper that brought together findings from several of their research studies with various American populations on their Sex Role Questionnaire indicated that males and females associated many traits with the different genders and roles associated with those genders: in particular females were seen as gentle and passive while males were more associated with aggression; females as emotional but males as nonemotional; females as indecisive but males as decisive. Traits associated positively with males tended to relate to competency and agency whilst those more associated with females were related to warmth and expressiveness, with the competency cluster seen as more desirable by both males and females.

Williams and Best (1990) expanded upon this research almost 30 years later by expanding the Sex Role Questionnaire into a Sex Stereotype Index, incorporating 300 descriptive adjectives for gender stereotypes, and recruiting teams to carry out the research in 30 countries worldwide to enable a cross-cultural evaluation of the traits associated with gender. While they identified fewer specific traits associated with each gender, importantly the broad definitions still seemed to capture many elements of the Broverman et al. study; female traits being focused on communal nurturing and fostering relationships, while male traits were still associated with strength and dominance, and this was seen in many cultures across the world. At around the same time as the Williams and Best research, another dichotomous argument was being played out, but this time on the airport and bookshop shelves; John Gray's (1992) multi-million bestseller *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* may have approached the issue from a different direction, but the societal message was the same; males and females are different and see themselves as different.

Dominance and 'niceness'

Fast-forward 30 years and, certainly from a Western perspective, it feels like we live in a world with different ideas about the societal expectations of males and females, with gender identity thrust to the fore in recent years. That isn't to say that some excellent and enlightening research hasn't been carried out during those years. For example, Rudman and Glick (2001) found that women attempting to display agentic competence and dominance (identified by Broverman et al., as being 'male' domains) faced a backlash for not adhering to the prescriptive expectations of communality and niceness (the 'female' domains). So maybe not so different after all?

To try and get a global perspective on this in 2019, a project was put together by researchers at the University of Gdansk and the University of Southern Florida to examine whether there had been changes at a global level since the Williams and Best study 30 years previously. It was also an opportunity to explore new theories, such as those relating to issues of alliance (male support for females in achieving equality), zero-sum beliefs (whether fears of having to give up privileged status

and 'losing out' would lead to less male support for women achieving greater equality) and precarious manhood beliefs (the theory that men must engage in demonstrations of certain behaviours to be considered as 'real men'). Research teams were recruited to the Towards Gender Harmony project from across the world and data was gathered from over 30,000 participants in 62 countries using identical translation of validated scales to examine issues relating to gender traits and stereotypes, with our research team gathering responses from Welsh participants. Accurately translating the measures into the language of each country was also an important part of the study… felly, mae graddfeydd y prosiect Cytgord Rhywedd bellach ar gael yn Gymraeg.* Participants were asked to rate themselves on over 50 traits such as how compassionate, dominant, and sensitive they are. They also rated men and women as groups for the same traits, providing an indicator of their ingroup and outgroup attitudes and how they compared to those group attitudes.

The findings have been fascinating, if not always as positive as one might hope. An examination of responses from over 6,000 men in 42 countries looking at their support for collective action to promote gender equality, such as signing a petition, found that greater zero-sum beliefs (belief that males would have to give something up to allow women to become more equal) led to less likelihood to support collective action, and this was moderated by hostile sexism (Kosakowska-Berezecka et al., 2020). While this might be expected, and suggestive of a need to address zero-sum beliefs as a route to achieving equality, what was somewhat surprising was that country scores on the Global Gender Gap Index, indicating greater parity in a country between males and females, negatively predicted collective intention actions. In short, the more equality there is between genders, the less likely men are to provide further alliance to women.

The 'Nordic' paradox

It could be that in these countries men feel that there is nothing left to do to achieve equality, or they may consider that the advances that women have made have now put them in a position of further gains being a threat to their dominance (the zero-sum belief theory). It has been known for a while that the path to equality is not a straightforward one, with occurrences that do not neatly fit a model of attitudes and behaviour. A case in point is that some of the most gender equal countries in the world also show some of the highest reported rates of intimate partner violence (the 'Nordic paradox'), although a recent paper by Humbert et al., (2021) sheds new light on this. It may be that females in more gender-equal countries feel safer and more supported, and more likely to be believed in reporting these crimes than in countries with lower levels of gender equality. However, this makes the need for a push towards equality in other countries even more important;

unreported violence towards women is still violence towards women, and addressing that is an urgent issue in all countries.

The project also examined Precarious Manhood Beliefs (Bosson et al., 2021), whether it was felt in society that manhood was something that could be lost by not behaving in the ways that would be expected of a 'real man'. The findings, from over 33,000 participants in 62 countries, suggest that the concept of precarious manhood is seen in almost all countries examined, but at different levels. In particular, less egalitarian countries show higher levels of precarious manhood beliefs, not just by males but also by females, suggesting that it is rooted in socialisation structures such as family influence, peer influence, and the messages presented and condoned within many forms of media. Data from the project also appears to show that the findings in relation to gender differences in traits still exist across the globe, with females seeing themselves as more communal than men see themselves. In that respect the findings from Broverman et al., (1972) and Williams and Best (1990) still appear to be relevant in modern society; while the gap is smaller between females and males in more egalitarian countries, the traits that we assign to ourselves and others appear to remain divided between males and females.

In talks and lectures on this topic we are often asked about how contemporary issues such as the Incel (involuntary celibate) subculture or gender fluidity, trans-gender, and non-binary identities fit with this type of research? After all, many of the measures are designed for a binary world of male and female. It is true that few, if any, measures in large gender attitude studies directly measure these issues, although it may be possible to extrapolate from combinations of measures such as levels of hostile and benevolent sexism, precarious manhood beliefs, and comparison of self-to-group trait descriptions. A global project in 20 or 30 years time may contain entirely new categories and measures to those in the Gender Harmony project, just as that project contained new measures developed since the Williams and Best study. However, there will undoubtedly be some of the same measures that have existed since the Broverman et al., study; one of the fundamental points of prescriptive stereotypes is that, despite the changes occurring out in the real world, they stubbornly refuse to change with the times.

We may like to think that in our contemporary Western society we are approaching a point where we will achieve gender equality, particularly in the UK with our equality legislation and opportunities for all genders. However, prescriptive stereotypes can be hard to change, particularly when they appear to go beyond the individual and permeate our national consciousness.

Breaking down gender concepts

A case in point for this comes from some interesting comments from participants in our Welsh sample that we are currently following up on with a research project run by some of our students that Katie Sullivan leads. In the Gender Harmony survey, there were free-text questions asking participants to tell us what behaviours a man could display to others if he wanted to prove himself to be a 'real man', and whether they had ever felt 'unmanly/unwomanly'. Many of the females provided responses describing a real man as being someone who was loyal and supporting of their family, sharing responsibilities with childcare and chores. The responses from males largely centred around a 'real man' playing sport, going to the gym, drinking, and aggression. However, the male participants were not saying that these were behaviours that they carried out which made them feel manly; instead, this was how they felt they were expected to behave to be perceived as a 'real man' and felt that not behaving in that way made them feel as if they weren't meeting that societal criterion for being a real man – the prescriptive stereotype.

All of this suggests that there is still much further to go in relation to equality, not just to achieve equality in law but also in how we see the roles and traits of each of the genders. It also suggests that we need to focus upon attitudes towards men as much as women to break down the concept of what a 'real man' is, as this is a prescriptive stereotype that does not appeal to many women nor many men, yet still seems to pervade many cultures. Back in 1972 Broverman et al., argued that their findings showed that those traits classified as feminine were valued less than the traits classified as masculine, and that led to females having a more negative self-concept than males: highly beneficial for a male-dominated, hierarchical society; highly negative for an equal society. With the changes that have occurred over the last 50 years it may be that this finding is no longer as straightforward as it once was, with new findings suggesting that males and females, dependent upon their attitudes towards themselves and others on issues of gender and equality, may face self-concept issues that need to be addressed.

Understanding and addressing the issues that different gender groups face, particularly on a global scale, is a huge task that is undoubtedly multidisciplinary in nature. From education, through media messaging, to national policy-making, it will take a concerted effort to change the prescriptive stereotypes that exist, but doing so will hopefully lead to more equal societies across the globe and achieve the harmony that the Towards Gender Harmony project set out to address.

*so, the Gender Harmony project scales are now available in Welsh

Dr Paul B. Hutchings is Academic Director of the Centre for Psychology and Counselling at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David and lead of the Welsh research team on the Towards Gender Harmony project.

Dr Katie E. Sullivan is a social and political psychology lecturer at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David and researcher in the Welsh research team on the Towards Gender Harmony project.

Key Sources

Bosson, J. K., Jurek, P., Vandello, J. A., Kosakowska-Berezecka, N., Olech, M., Besta, T., Bender, M., Hoorens, V., Becker, M., Timur Sevincer, A., Best, D. L., Safdar, S., Włodarczyk, A., Zawisza, M., Żadkowska, M., Abuhamdeh, S., Badu Agyemang, C., Akbaş, G., Albayrak-Aydemir, N., … Žukauskienė, R. (2021). Psychometric properties and correlates of precarious manhood beliefs in 62 nations. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology, 52(3)*, 231–258. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022022121997997

Broverman, I. K., Vogel, S. R., Broverman, D. M., Clarkson, F. E., & Rosenkrantz, P. S. (1972). Sex-role stereotypes: A current appraisal. *Journal of Social issues, 28(2)*, 59-78. doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4560.1972.tb00018.x

Gray, J. (1992). *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus: A practical guide for improving communication and getting what you want in your relationships.* Harper Collins.

Humbert, A. L., Strid, S., Hearn, J., & Balkmar, D. (2021). Undoing the 'Nordic Paradox': Factors affecting rates of disclosed violence against women across the EU. *PLoS ONE 16(5)*, e0249693. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal. pone.0249693

Kosakowska-Berezecka, N., Besta, T., Bosson, J. K., Jurek, P., Vandello, J. A., Best, D. L., Wlodarczyk, A., Safdar, S., Zawisza, M., Żadkowska, M., Sobiecki, J., Agyemang, C. B., Akbaş, G., Ammirati, S., Anderson, J., Anjum, G., Aruta, J. J. B. R., Ashraf, M., Bakaitytė, A. . . ., Žukauskienė, R. (2020). Country-level and individual-level predictors of men's support for gender equality in 42 countries. *European Journal of Social Psychology, 50(6)*, 1276–1291. https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2696

Rudman, L. A., & Glick, P. (2001). Prescriptive gender stereotypes and the backlash toward agentic women. *Journal of Social Issues, 57(4),* 743-762.

Wheaton, O. (2015, March 18). Gym's computer assumed woman was a man because she is a doctor. *Metro*. https://metro.co.uk/2015/03/18/gyms-computer-assumed-this-woman-was-a-man-because-she-is-a-doctor-5110391/

Williams, J.E., & Best, D. L. (1990). *Measuring sex stereotypes: A multinational study.* Sage.