

THE SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY OF GENDER

TEXTS IN SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

Susan T. Fiske, *Series Editor*

Social Cognition: Understanding Self and Others

Gordon B. Moskowitz

The Social Psychology of Gender:
How Power and Intimacy Shape Gender Relations

Laurie A. Rudman and Peter Glick

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**Laurie A. Rudman
Peter Glick**

Series Editor's Note by Susan T. Fiske



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To Bob, for his unstinting love and support
-L. A. R.

To my mom, Betty Udman Glick,
and her daughters, Amy, Anne, and Sarilynn,
who taught me to respect as well as love
competent women
-P. G.

About the Authors

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been administered to tens of thousands of people in over 25 nations. These cross-cultural studies have shown that subjectively benevolent, but traditional, beliefs about women are associated with hostility toward nontraditional women, and with actual gender inequality. Dr. Glick is on the editorial boards of four professional journals and has been elected a Fellow of the American Psychological Association, the Association for Psychological Science, and the Society for the Psychology of Women. He is also on the Executive Councils (and a Fellow) of the Society of Experimental Social Psychology and the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues.

Series Editor's Note

Launching a series requires pioneering crafts to sail first, and this book, the second in the Texts in Social Psychology series, helps set its course. The series aims to chart the broad expanse of social psychology, including all our central destinations, through the eyes of expert, exciting explorers.

Laurie A. Rudman and Peter Glick's deft, yet comprehensive, treatment of the social psychology of gender represents just what I had hoped for. Provocative but professional, engaging but expert, the chapters cover every standard topic in gender courses, and then some. The chapter organization works equally well for a course or for a professional who is catching up. Bringing in everyday examples and news stories, as well as popular culture, the book also describes research examples and methods throughout. This is fully engaged science at its best.

Rudman and Glick organize their text around the twin themes of dominance and interdependence. This goes beyond traditional views of gender relations as yet another intergroup encounter, so readers will appreciate just how different this intimate interaction really is. Intriguing topics include the nature–culture tension, development of voluntary gender segregation, stereotype accuracy, why gender stereotypes are uniquely prescriptive, self-stereotyping, how to overcome backlash, and meditations about romance amid dominance. This text provides new vistas on familiar topics and new routes to explore. Bon voyage!

SUSAN T. FISKE
Eugene Higgins Professor
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Preface

About the Book

Each of us interacts on a daily basis with both women and men. From personal experience, we all know a tremendous amount about gender relations, although often what we know is implicit, something we cannot fully articulate. This book aims to help readers look at this well-trodden territory with fresh eyes, providing conceptual tools as well as a foundation of empirical facts about gender. Although some of this material may confirm common sense, we hope that this book will do much more than that. Indeed, the success of the book can be judged by how many times you, the reader, thinks “Ah, so *that’s* why ...” as you experience a moment of insight into otherwise puzzling events in your own life. In other words, although the gender-related phenomena discussed here may be highly recognizable, the purpose of this book is not merely to describe but to explain and make sense of people’s daily experiences with gender, using the scientific tools of social psychology.

Put more boldly, we hope that students who read this book will see their social world in new ways. Although this book reflects our underlying commitment to and concern with equality, the main aim here is intellectual rather than political, to reveal just how intriguing, complex, and strange gender phenomena are. For example, have you ever considered how your attitudes toward the other sex have changed during the

course of your life? Many people spend their childhood largely indifferent to or actively avoiding members of the other sex, only to later want their most intimate, closest relationship to be with a person from this previously ignored or dreaded group. Or have you considered the seemingly contradictory ways that society treats men and women? On the one hand, women are relatively scarce at the highest levels of power and leadership, often viewed or portrayed as sexual objects, and consigned to enact feminine ideals that lead them to labor more on behalf of others than for their own status and independence. By these standards, women are oppressed. But what about the facts that women are stereotyped more positively than men, that they are currently doing better in high school and college than young men, and that men genuinely report tremendous affection for women? By these standards, women are thriving and valued. Gender relations defy simple, overgeneralized narratives about oppression (the “battle between the sexes”) or rosy platitudes about how love conquers all; instead, they embody all sorts of apparent contradictions. Nonetheless, some basic social psychological principles about gender, based on contemporary theories and research, can help to resolve this confusing picture, making sense of its underlying patterns.

Research on the psychology of gender has exploded since the 1970s. However, social psychological investigations of gender relations developed primarily in two separate areas: prejudice and close relationships. Prejudice researchers treated sexism as though it were just another type of prejudice (like racism or homophobia), driven by an underlying antipathy toward women. For the most part, this research focused on negative stereotypes of women and resistance to giving them equal rights and roles. By contrast, relationship researchers emphasized romantic attraction and interdependence, focusing on the factors that draw women and men together into loving, intimate relationships. These two approaches painted very different, seemingly incompatible, pictures of male–female relations. However, since the mid-1990s, a second wave of research has revolutionized the field’s appreciation of the complexities and subtleties of relations between the sexes, and has begun to bridge the gap between the approaches taken by prejudice and close relationship researchers. This book is very much conceived in the spirit of this integrated view of gender.

In particular, the central aim of this book is to show how two basic aspects of gender relations—male dominance and intimate heterosexual interdependence—combine to foster complex and ambivalent relations between and attitudes toward men and women. These basic facts about

the structure of gender relations help to make sense of many otherwise apparently contradictory observations, from which an impressive number of implications for how people conceive of men's and women's traits, roles, and behavior follow. This approach also emphasizes the uniqueness of gender relations. No other two groups have experienced such persistent differences in power and status coupled with such deep and intimate interdependence. In the past, gender relations have been inappropriately shoehorned into existing paradigms (e.g., if prejudice is an antipathy, sexists must be overtly hostile toward women). Only recently have the unique qualities of gender relations begun to be understood and investigated.

We aim, then, to present the “cutting edge” of gender research. But we also have diligently attempted to present this work in a highly accessible way. It should take no prior scientific training to understand this book. Further, although our claims are based on evidence, we have tried to avoid merely compiling a list of facts about gender. Instead, we hope that each chapter reads a bit like a story, with a coherent set of identifiable themes. We intend this not to be a dry textbook but rather fun and engaging reading that, at the same time, does not “dumb down” the research and illuminates the complexity of the subject. Our intended audience includes students in undergraduate and graduate courses on gender, the psychology of women, women's studies, and social psychology. But we hope that this book will prove equally accessible to a general audience of people interested in gender issues while doing sufficient justice to the current state of the field that researchers seeking an overview on gender relations will also find it useful.

Finally, although, as stated previously, our main aim is intellectual, no book on gender can avoid a political dimension. We do not pretend to be apolitical, but we have attempted above all to be balanced and to let the empirical data, not wishful thinking, guide our conclusions. That said, this book reflects a commitment to gender equality (which we hope is a noncontroversial position in the minds of most readers) and, therefore, emphasizes the challenges that women face as they strive for gender parity and that both sexes face as they strive toward harmonious and equitable relations.

About the Authors' Collaboration

We initially met at a conference in Toronto in 1997 and began plotting our first research collaboration within an hour. Both of us were

experienced gender researchers with keen interests in bridging the gap between research on sexism and close relationships. When Susan T. Fiske asked us to write this volume for the Texts in Social Psychology series, it was an offer we could not (and did not want to) refuse. This book is very much a joint product of the two authors.

Acknowledgments

First, we owe Susan Fiske an enormous debt for providing us with a rich and rewarding opportunity and for her generous editorial assistance throughout the process of writing this book. We are also deeply indebted to Alice Eagly for her valuable insights and comments on an earlier version of the book. More generally, we wish to acknowledge how much both Susan and Alice have influenced and supported each of us throughout our careers, as colleagues, collaborators, first-class scientists, role models, and supportive friends.

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Last, but not least, we wish to thank our respective spouses, Robert Jorissen and Karen Carr Glick, for their many insightful conversations about gender and for helping us appreciate the very best aspects of relations between the two sexes.

LAURIE A. RUDMAN
PETER GLICK

Contents

Chapter 1.	Understanding Gender	1
Chapter 2.	Dominance and Interdependence	25
Chapter 3.	Development of Gender Relations	54
Chapter 4.	Content and Origins of Gender Stereotypes	81
Chapter 5.	Descriptive and Prescriptive Stereotyping	105
Chapter 6.	Self-Sustaining Prophecies	131
Chapter 7.	Obstacles to Gender Nonconformity	156
Chapter 8.	Sexism in the Workplace	178
Chapter 9.	Love and Romance	204
Chapter 10.	Sex	231
Chapter 11.	Gender and Violence	257
Chapter 12.	Progress, Pitfalls, and Remedies	285
	References	311
	Author Index	364
	Subject Index	377

CHAPTER 1

Understanding Gender

Try casually scanning newspaper articles for a week or two with an eye toward assessing the current state of gender relations. This exercise will as likely lead to confusion as insight, with one article seeming to contradict the next. For example, in the Business pages, you might find any number of feature stories profiling female executives, something unheard of not so long ago. But turn the page and you may well find an article documenting the stubborn persistence of the “glass ceiling.” In 2005, the profiled female CEO would have been one of only eight to lead a Fortune 500 company (Catalyst, 2006).

In the Nation section, an article cites disturbing evidence that boys currently perform significantly worse overall than girls in high school and college, earning lower grades and dropping out at a higher rate (Lewin, 2006). A conservative editorial columnist cites these data as evidence that “reverse discrimination” increasingly targets boys while girls unfairly benefit (Brooks, 2006). But another article shows that, among adult men and women, men still make markedly more money and that past progress toward closing the gender gap in pay has stalled or even reversed in recent years (Leonhardt, 2006). Even though boys currently perform worse than girls in school, in the job market power and resources still seem to flow more toward men than women.

An obituary of the pioneering feminist Betty Friedan marvels at the doors she helped to open, freeing young women from traditional notions of “femininity.” Yet months later, in a Sunday magazine article,

a prominent journalist anguishes about her own young daughter's fanatical attraction to "Princess culture," those ubiquitous dolls, accessories, and fashions marketed to girls that have become increasingly popular, generating billions of dollars in business (Orenstein, 2006). The journalist openly worries about how her daughter's fascination with "playing Princess" might curtail her aspirations by leading her later to abandon personal ambition in favor of "waiting for my Prince to come." A later article reveals how it is increasingly popular for women to bring their young daughters with them for spa treatments (Rosenbloom, 2007) and "Club Libby Lu" advertises its own "sparkle spa experience" and products aimed at its 6- to 12-year-old clientele whom they label as "very important princesses" (see www.clublibbylu.com).

Finally, the Sports section devotes more coverage than ever before to women's sports, reflecting both a shift in attitudes and government laws that mandate equal opportunity for female athletes in high schools and universities. Yet men's sports still dominate, especially at the professional level. A front page article reveals an interesting symptom of ambivalence about female athletes. It describes conflict among female cheerleaders and female athletes in high schools that now require cheerleaders to perform their routines at girls' as well as boys' team sporting events (Hu, 2007). Both the cheerleaders and the female athletes seem upset. For the cheerleaders, it means extra work, rendering them less available for travel to the boys' games (which they seem to value as more important), and some report that cheering for other women makes them feel "odd." The female athletes, in turn, view the cheerleaders as projecting a conventionally feminine and constrictive image that conflicts with their vision of the competitive female athlete. School administrators counter by pointing out the athleticism of the cheerleaders' routines. In the end, everybody seems uncomfortable about this juxtaposition of old and new feminine ideals.

The apparent contradictions in these and many other newspaper articles related to gender reflect, in part, conflicting contemporary political viewpoints. They also represent a complex and confusing reality in which every current seems to have a cross-current, every change seems to evoke a backlash. A student on the debate team assigned to argue that "there has been a steady march of progress toward gender equality, which will be completely achieved in the near future" would have no difficulty creating a compelling narrative. For example, who can doubt that our grandmothers had many fewer career and relationship choices than women do today? Yet another student assigned to the opposing side could amass a host of facts suggesting that progress toward gender

equality has often been superficial or uneven, and that past gains have now stalled or even begun to reverse.

This book will not provide a definitive answer to this complicated debate. However, it will offer a set of conceptual tools to help you better understand the bewildering complexity of gender relations. We will provide ways of thinking about the apparent paradoxes of gender relations that will help cut through some of the clutter. To do so, we focus on fundamental social psychological forces that have long shaped (and continue to shape) how people conceive of men and women as well as how the sexes relate to each other. Although research on gender is still young, having begun in earnest in the 1970s, researchers have learned a tremendous amount in the past 35 years about how gender colors almost every aspect of daily life.

Brief Overview of the Book

This book examines how gender affects people's social lives from childhood onward, focusing on how women and men relate to each other. We cover a variety of domains in which gender relations occur, ranging from the schoolyard to the workplace to heterosexual romance. Our approach, however, is not simply to cover a set of topics but to provide a set of principles that lends coherence to an otherwise confusing picture.

To begin, the current chapter reviews the long-standing nature–culture debate. Evolutionary and cultural approaches will both figure prominently throughout this book. These approaches, however, have often been viewed in the past as oppositional. Some have argued that the psychology of gender is fixed as a result of inherent, evolved sex differences. Others have viewed gender as a wholly arbitrary cultural construction based on rules about masculinity and femininity determined only by history, not biology. We seek to transcend simplistic debates about whether gender is more conditioned by nature or by culture by detailing a “third way”—the social structural approach (Eagly, 1987)—which has the potential to incorporate and envelop insights from both evolutionary and cultural theories.

Chapter 2 considers in more detail how the unique structure of gender relations, with its unusual combination of dominance and intimate interdependence, creates a fundamental ambivalence toward both sexes. For instance, although many cultures devalue women in a variety of ways, women also commonly elicit affection, adoration, and pro-

tection from men; and although men may automatically be accorded more status and authority than women, stereotypes generally characterize men more negatively than women. We show how these ambivalent reactions result from two structural facts: (1) men's power and social dominance coupled with (2) intimate interdependence between the sexes. Although male dominance tends to encourage hostility between the sexes, intimate heterosexual interdependence entwines men and women, blunts hostility with benevolence, and creates genuine feelings of love and affection between the sexes. Although preferable to hostility, some forms of subjectively benevolent feelings toward each sex, especially women, can have harmful effects, insidiously reinforcing gender inequality in surprising ways. Distinguishing benevolence that is patronizing and condescending from attitudes that are purely affectionate or loving constitutes one of the most difficult puzzles of gender relations.

Chapter 3 traces the curious journey that most people take from endorsing overtly hostile gender relations in early and middle childhood to experiencing much more complicated and ambivalent feelings in adolescence and adulthood. These emotional changes parallel changes in the structure of gender relations. Sex segregation in childhood typically gives way to intimate heterosexual relationships in adolescence, when, for most, sexual development changes indifference and animosity toward the other sex into heightened interest and attraction.

Chapters 4 and 5 detail how popular conceptions of masculinity and femininity affect women's and men's self-conceptions and behavior toward members of each sex. Chapter 4 covers the origins and content of "gender stereotypes," defined as beliefs that specific attributes characterize one gender more than the other. These beliefs show impressive consistency across cultures and across time and can be traced to men's and women's differing roles and status. Chapter 5 explains how gender stereotypes describe men and women, setting up differing expectations about their preferences, traits, and behavior. It also shows how gender stereotypes go further to prescribe how men and women ought to be, specifying gendered norms about appropriate behavior. Both the descriptive and prescriptive aspects of stereotypes have important implications for how individual men and women are perceived and treated differently based on their gender.

Chapters 6 and 7 reveal how gender stereotypes affect people's social interactions and their self-concepts. In Chapter 6, we examine the means by which gender stereotypes can create social reality because people often conform to gendered expectations (e.g., boys acting

tough) to avoid being punished for failing to do so. These processes lead to a self-sustaining prophecy that allows stereotypes perpetually to regenerate. In Chapter 7, we describe both personal and social obstacles to thwarting stereotypes, emphasizing the unfavorable treatment that gender vanguards (such as female leaders) receive. Although men and women in many contemporary societies are allowed greater leeway in their behavior than in more traditional times, gender deviance still often elicits social rejection and punishment. This is often especially harsh toward boys and men (e.g., rejection of boys who are “sissies” and men who are effeminate).

Chapter 8 focuses on the workplace, juxtaposing the substantial gains that women have made with the obstacles that remain to be overcome. We apply principles from earlier chapters to understand the ways in which “old-fashioned” sexism has shape shifted to more modern forms of discrimination that maintain sex segregation in the workplace, despite the increasing number of women who have careers outside the home.

Chapters 9 and 10 examine heterosexual love and sex. In both chapters, we consider how popular cultural ideals about romance impose a restrictive set of norms on the conduct of intimate heterosexual relationships (e.g., requiring men to show off their talents and resources while women are passively wined, dined, and wooed). We attempt to distinguish love (transcendent feelings of passionate attraction and intimacy) from traditional ideals of romance that can act to reinforce inequality, for instance by insisting on feminine virtues of modesty and deference in order to attract a man. These cultural ideals can straitjacket both men and women by trapping them in predetermined relationship roles, reducing a couple’s freedom to express their love and making it more difficult to achieve fulfilling sex lives.

Chapter 11 considers the link between gender and violence. We note how patriarchy elicits not only violence against women but also violence between men as they compete for status and resources. Statistically, men are by far the more physically violent sex, but male-initiated aggression, especially murder, much more frequently targets other men rather than women. To some extent, women are the protected sex, with boys and men being raised “not to hit a woman.” In addition, common forms of couple aggression (e.g., throwing objects) show, at least in Western nations, a surprisingly high degree of gender parity. Yet when it comes to violence in relationships producing injuries, men are more commonly the culprits. Further, rape and sexual assault are almost wholly committed by men and primarily victimize women. Although

women disproportionately fear assaults by strangers, they face much greater risk of assault from male acquaintances and intimates than from strangers.

Chapter 12 concludes by considering the advances industrialized societies have made toward achieving gender equality, the problems that remain, and the prospects for global change in a time of increasing disparity between more and less developed nations. We emphasize the accumulating evidence that gender equality is good for men as well as women and point to organizational, personal, and legal remedies that have the potential to promote progress.

Conceptual Approaches to Gender

No two human groups experience more constant social differentiation than men and women. Indeed, the first question people typically ask about a newborn is whether the baby is a boy or a girl. Of course, gender is rooted in biological sex categories, based on the genotype and genitalia one possesses when born. But many cultural constructions, such as gender stereotypes, are layered on top of this biological distinction. These cultural beliefs dictate the relative masculinity or femininity of a host of behaviors, traits, occupations, and roles. This book loosely follows the conventional distinction gender researchers make between the terms “sex” and “gender.” When strictly referring to the biological categories of male and female we typically use the term “sex,” and when referring more broadly to social constructions of masculinity and femininity, such as stereotypes and roles, we typically use the term “gender.” This rule, however, is not hard and fast. For example, we sometimes use “gender” when referring to people’s social classification of others as male or female because once an individual is categorized by sex, a variety of assumptions about gender (i.e., masculinity or femininity) automatically come into play. As a result, we frequently use “sex” and “gender” interchangeably when referring to the simple categorization of these two groups.

Avoiding Simplistic Essentialism

The sex versus gender distinction represents an attempt by theorists and researchers to try to avoid “essentializing” cultural conceptions of masculinity and femininity. “Psychological essentialism” is the tendency to view category members (e.g., all men or all women) as sharing deep,

immutable properties that fundamentally determine “who they are” (Medin & Ortony, 1989; Yzerbyt, Rocher, & Schadron, 1997). In other words, essentialism views biological sex differences as strongly determining a host of psychological sex differences. Gender essentialists view differences in how women and men think, feel, and act as biologically fixed and immutable. As a result, they assume that new cultural conditions (e.g., the influx of women into the paid workforce) will not make men and women more alike.

Categories endowed with essences are viewed as “homogeneous, mutually exclusive, and unalterable” (Haslam, Rothschild, & Ernst, 2000, p. 114). Racial and other social groups have also historically been represented in these terms. For example, racists talk about race as “in the blood,” and the “one-drop” rule labeled people as Black even if they appeared to be White. The Nazis used a similar rule to label people as Jewish during World War II, even if they had been raised as Christians. Nonetheless, compared with other social categories, people rate gender as more natural, immutable, discrete, and stable, in other words as more “essentialistic” (Haslam et al., 2000).

The jury is still out on the degree to which biological sex differences translate into psychological characteristics (as we note later). However, laypeople show an exaggerated tendency to essentialize gender that even the most biologically oriented psychologists would probably dispute. The perennial success of books such as *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* (Gray, 1992) reveals the widespread appeal of gender essentialism. The popularity of essentialist beliefs occurs for at least two reasons. First, gender relates to an underlying and (usually) clear-cut dichotomy between being female or male that is not the case for other social categories. For example, many African Americans may also have White ancestors and thus not be purely Black or White. Other important group memberships are based on beliefs and practices (e.g., being Christian or Muslim) that can change throughout one’s lifetime. By contrast, women and men are more clearly and permanently biologically divided. Second, obvious physical differences underscore gender as a highly differentiated social category. Women have more salient reproductive sexual characteristics than men, whereas men are taller, stronger, and hairier and weigh more, on average, than women. Sex-linked physical attributes make gender a prime category for popular versions of essentialism.

For everyone, from kindergartners to adults at a cocktail party, essentialism provides a ready explanation for why people behave as they do: “He’s a boy” or “She’s a woman” often constitutes the only expla-

nation people require (Gelman, Collman, & Maccoby, 1986; Yzerbyt, Rogier, & Fiske, 1998). Because it divides men and women into seemingly immutable categories, essentialism reinforces perceptions of the sexes as biological opposites, implying that when it comes to gender, nature conquers nurture (Gelman & Taylor, 2000; M. G. Taylor, 1996). Keep in mind as we review biological views about gender that evolutionary and biological influences are only part of a complex stew of ingredients that differentiate the two sexes.

Biological and Cultural Explanations

Essentialism remains an important undercurrent in nature–culture debates among gender theorists and researchers (see Eagly & Wood, 1999, Wood & Eagly, 2002, for insightful discussions). On one side, some evolutionary theorists view women and men as fundamentally different, both physically and psychologically, such as in their abilities, ways of thinking, and personalities. From this perspective, gender stereotypes (e.g., that men are analytical and women emotional) reflect inherent and stable sex differences that developed as adaptations that served to increase the odds of human survival.

By contrast, most cultural or social theorists view gender as a social construction, a product of cultural ideals about femininity and masculinity. Gender, of course, builds on the biological categories of female and male, but social constructionists tend to believe that biological sex differences affect only a limited number of physical traits (e.g., size, genitalia, and facial hair) and that psychological differences between the sexes are culturally created. Biological essentialism is anathema to social constructionists, who point out that variation within each sex on any specific characteristic remains much greater than the average difference between the sexes (Hyde, 2005). From this perspective, differences between men and women trace back to culture more than nature. These differences nevertheless become “real” because social forces compel men and women to enact or “perform” gender (and not because sex differences are deeply embedded in people’s genetic codes).

In the remainder of this chapter, we first review the two poles of the nature–culture debate before introducing a social structural approach that can help to integrate both biological and cultural views. Indeed, although the nature–culture debate has often been viewed as an either–or proposition, many contemporary psychological theorists

view biological and social explanations as compatible and complementary.

The Cultural Approach

The most prominent cultural theories and research on the psychology of gender emphasize gender socialization, the process by which girls and boys learn feminine and masculine identities (e.g., see C. L. Martin & Ruble, 2004). From infancy on, how people are treated depends on their sex. Nonetheless, socialization is not a passive process. Rather, as children learn gendered expectations, they also begin actively to “perform gender,” trying to live up to society’s predetermined gender ideals and stereotypes (processes we explore in detail in subsequent chapters). Thus, cultural theorists are social constructionists; they assume that cultural beliefs create most, if not all, observed sex differences in behavior as people act out cultural scripts assigned to their gender.

Social learning theory (Mischel, 1966) represents one influential cultural explanation of gender differences. Social learning theorists focus on modeling or observational learning, which refers to acquiring behaviors by observing how similar others, such as same-sex others, behave. Consistent with the social learning perspective, many studies demonstrate that children learn what it means to be male or female through observation. For instance, children are more likely to imitate the behavior of a person of the same sex as opposed to the other sex (Bussey & Bandura, 1999).

Cultural theorists (e.g., Bem, 1981) also emphasize how society communicates shared cultural ideals about how people of each gender ought to behave. These expectations range from the kinds and colors of clothes boys and girls should wear (e.g., blue vs. pink) to the kinds of activities (e.g., baseball vs. figure skating) and occupations (e.g., doctor vs. nurse) they should prefer. These gendered cultural ideals form coherent knowledge structures known as “gender schemas” that guide people’s perceptions of self and others and their behavior and preferences and generally become the lenses through which people view their social world (Bem, 1981). Children quickly learn gender schemas, such as which toys they ought to prefer, and use this knowledge to understand other people and to inform their actions toward others. Gender schemas represent habits of mind that persist through adulthood. For instance, one might assume solely on the basis of their gender that a man probably prefers watching football over shopping, whereas a woman would likely prefer shopping.

Consider how cultural theorists might explain popular beliefs about sex differences by listing your own responses to the question, “What cultural forces or institutions account for the persistence of gender stereotypes?” We cannot enforce a brief pause here, but humor us—it will only take a few seconds for you to list a few things that most quickly come to mind.

Have you made a short list? If you have, we suspect it includes the media (e.g., television, movies, video games, the Internet), authority figures (e.g., parents and teachers), and peers as conduits of stereotypes. Why? Because the media, authority figures, and peers transmit cultural beliefs that affect children’s socialization. If these cultural agents consistently reinforce messages about sex differences, they can at least partly account for the continuation of gender stereotypes. Also, because people adopt traits appropriate to their gender (i.e., attempt to live up to the stereotypes about their sex), gender socialization can precipitate actual sex differences in behavior. In turn, sex differences in behavior perpetuate the stereotypes by making them appear to be accurate.

There is no doubt that cultural influences are both important and ubiquitous. The next time you watch a television sitcom, go to a movie, or read a book, try to notice their heavy reliance on stereotypes to “tell a story.” This shows how stereotypes allow people to communicate with each other in a kind of short-hand code that relies on culturally shared assumptions about gender. Television commercials (and the products they advertise) illustrate this phenomenon nicely. For instance, spend a day counting how many advertisements for cleaning products feature women versus men. An analysis of television commercials from the 1990s revealed that female characters tend to be shown in a family setting rather than at work in a paid job. And women depicted at work tend to hold service-oriented or clerical positions rather than high-status professional jobs; they also tend to lack authority and were frequently shown as sex objects (Coltrane & Adams, 1997).

The constant bombardment of such cultural images can influence viewers’ gender attitudes. For example, men who viewed more “macho” (vs. androgynous) magazine advertisements subsequently evinced more traditional gender role attitudes (Garst & Bodenhausen, 1997). Among adolescent girls, those who watch more television also show more traditional gender role attitudes (Rivadeneyra & Ward, 2005), as do girls who frequently view music videos (Ward, Hansbrough, & Walker, 2005). Throughout this book, we describe the myriad effects that cultural forces, including the media, have on people’s perceptions of gender.

But exclusively cultural explanations of gender tend to beg an important question: How did beliefs about what it means to be male or female get started in the first place? The cross-cultural ubiquity and consistency of beliefs about gender remain especially puzzling given the existence of few, if any, inherent psychological sex differences (see Hyde, 2005). In other words, if men and women are more similar than different, why do so many human cultures persistently view the sexes as different? And why do so many cultures tend to agree in their characterizations of the two sexes (e.g., viewing men as aggressive and women as warm)? In fact, evolutionary psychologists use cross-cultural consistency as a primary source of support for their suggestion that sex differences stem from different selection pressures that were first established in primeval environments.

The Evolutionary Approach

Based on Darwinian theory, the evolutionary approach emphasizes biologically based sex differences, not only in physical characteristics but in psychological traits, mental processes, and behavior (e.g., Buss, 2003). Like cultural theorists, evolutionary psychologists are concerned with the origins of gender differences, but their focus is on more distal, biological causes. Both schools of thought argue that past events continue to influence people today, but evolutionary theorists stress long-ago species adaptation, whereas cultural theorists focus on more proximate social forces. Moreover, evolutionary theorists uniquely rely on comparing people to animals because some of the basics of heterosexual reproduction, which are theorized to have created psychological and behavioral sex differences, ought to have had similar evolutionary influences across species.

When it comes to gender, evolutionary theorists suggest an alternative to cultural explanations. They contend that men and women fundamentally differ, in all sorts of ways, because of evolutionary biology. For instance, why are men stereotyped as aggressive and women as nurturing? Evolutionary theorists answer that these beliefs accurately reflect inherent sex differences. Men evolved to be competitive providers, whereas women evolved to be caregivers. The evolutionary approach generates controversy among gender researchers because it suggests an essentialistic view in which men and women fundamentally differ psychologically as well as physically. Although social as well as natural scientists generally accept Darwinian evolution as an explanation for how

humans evolved over time, whether evolutionary pressures created significant biologically based sex differences in people's personality traits and behavior remains a matter of debate (see Eagly & Wood, 1999, Wood & Eagly 2002, or Hyde, 2005, for the more minimalist position and Buss, 2003, for the evolutionary argument).

The evolutionary argument about sex differences relies heavily on the process of sexual selection, as distinguished from the more familiar notion of natural selection. Evolutionary theory emphasizes that people must reproduce, not just survive, to pass on their genes. Survival to adulthood, of course, is essential for an individual to reproduce. But Darwin (1871) recognized that survival alone is not enough and that sexual reproduction is a tricky business that requires, among other things, the ability to attract mates. Darwin's sexual selection theory considers mating strategies, noting that possessing the traits potential mates find attractive increases an individual's chances of reproducing, making the genes for those traits more common in successive generations. If, in earlier stages of human evolutionary history, men and women began to select mates based on different traits, then sexual selection could have led to biologically based sex differences in personality and capabilities. These sex differences in psychological characteristics would, unless subjected to new selection pressures, persist to the present day.

Consider a nonhuman example. If peahens prefer peacocks with beautiful plumage, the more bedecked the male, the better his chances of reproducing. This kind of selection, repeated over many, many generations, can result in large differences between males and females. Peacocks became increasingly colorful because only the ones with colorful plumage attracted mates and passed on their genes, so that genes for drab plumage became deselected in males. In contrast, females retained their more modest coloring because peacocks did not restrict themselves to mating with the most ornate peahens. Subjected only to natural selection, the peahens' more modest coloring persists because it allows them to blend in with the underbrush, offering more protection from predators. Sexual selection, then, can work in a direction opposite to natural selection. The peacock's magnificent plumage makes it ungainly and potentially more vulnerable to predation; therefore, it would not occur through natural selection, commonly referred to as survival of the fittest. Of course, natural selection places limits on how ornate the peacock's plumage can get, but the peahen's preferences also represent a potent selective force. Similar examples occur in many other bird species, with males being more brightly or ornately plumed than females (e.g., the cardinals in your backyard).

But why did peahens and not peacocks become so choosy about their mate's superficial plumage? Darwinian sexual selection arguments (more fully developed by Trivers, 1972) rely on the notion that asymmetries in the mechanics of sexual reproduction lead to sex differences in mate preferences. The crux of the argument is that sperm is cheap and eggs are not. Consider this argument in a human context. Sexual access to a variety of women maximizes a man's potential reproductive success. If an individual man could attract multiple female sexual partners, he could potentially sire many children. Consider the potential reproductive abilities of an ancient male ruler who had a harem or a contemporary male sports or rock star with a large following of "groupies." Theoretically, a particularly attractive man could potentially sire thousands of offspring. By contrast, a woman's reproductive potential faces a sharp limit, no matter how many mates she can obtain. Each offspring requires at least a 9-month investment at considerable physiological costs to the mother. Across her life span, a woman might potentially give birth to a dozen or so children, but certainly not hundreds, let alone thousands.

According to Trivers (1972), because of differences in reproductive investment, women evolved a choosier mate selection strategy. As a result, men and women theoretically look for different kinds of traits in a mate. According to this evolutionary logic, women tend to desire a mate who appears not only "fit" (i.e., a survivor) but also able and willing to provide resources for offspring, thereby maximizing each one's survival potential. A man's social status and dominance hypothetically indicate his ability to provide, suggesting that he has the ability to out-compete other men for resources. Women's choosiness placed a selection pressure on men, increasing competition among them to demonstrate dominance and to amass the most resources. This argument has been used to suggest that, ironically, women's mating preferences result in the selection of genes that foster male dominance, which in turn results in the subordination of women, whom men exclude from this competition (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999; Smuts, 1995).

Evolutionary theorists further note that men face the particular problem of uncertainty about the paternity of a mate's offspring. Men hypothetically evolved to exercise control over their mates' sexuality so that they can have confidence that their mate has not had sex with anyone else (Daly, Wilson, & Weghorst, 1982; Smuts, 1995). Because of paternal uncertainty, men evolved to experience strong sexual jealousy and to engage in "mate guarding." The latter can be seen in various cultural practices designed to control women's sexuality, ranging from

marriage (to ensure wives' monogamy) to female circumcision, which curtails women's sexual pleasure. According to evolutionary theorists, selection pressures toward male assertiveness, combined with those for mate guarding and control over female sexuality, explain men's tendency to dominate women as well as sex differences in traits such as aggressiveness (Buss, 2003, 2005).

So far, we have described an evolutionary account for human sex differences that could also be applied to other species. However, contemporary evolutionary theorists have provided more complex explanations that incorporate the unique properties of humans. In particular, they emphasize how humans' cognitive flexibility combined with openness to the influence of others enabled adaptation to different and rapidly changing environments (Caporeal, 2004). The human propensity to absorb social norms and culture makes good evolutionary sense because it enabled people to band together to survive and to pass on important knowledge, such as how to build tools (Caporeal, 2001). Moreover, our ability to form stable, interdependent groups affords a wide range of adaptive behaviors; to enhance group functioning, many roles are necessary. For example, not every male needs to be aggressive if he has other skills useful to the group.

As a result, very little human behavior is genetically preprogrammed; instead, malleability and openness to social and cultural influences distinguish humans from most other species. For example, females of most other species cannot choose when or whether to mate; when they are in estrus, their biology dictates it is time for sex. By contrast, humans' ability to choose a wide variety of behaviors, sexual and otherwise, makes us a divergent and diverse species. In popular culture, however, evolutionary explanations that take account of the interaction between biological predispositions and social environments tend to be rendered in a more simplistic, essentialistic manner.

Further, keep in mind that evolutionary theory does not imply that sex differences are either desirable or inevitable. The first false conclusion—that what is natural is also desirable—represents what philosophers term the “naturalistic fallacy” (Moore, 1903). This fallacy is quickly exposed when one substitutes “death and illness” for “sex differences”: The former are certainly natural but not at all desirable. The unnatural eradication of devastating illnesses (e.g., smallpox) and the creation of living conditions and medical interventions that prolong life represent some of humanity's most prized achievements. To expose the second fallacy—that genetically influenced traits are inevitable or unaffected by social conditions—consider another example. Height clearly

has a strong genetic component, but how tall an individual becomes also has a great deal to do with environment. A poorly nourished child may quickly lose the height advantage conferred by inheriting a genetic predisposition for tallness. If you have seen examples of clothing and armor from earlier eras, you know that they dramatically illustrate how environmental changes have affected this “biologically determined” trait. The increased height among people today reflects social changes that led to enhanced food production rather than further biological evolution. Thus, biologically influenced traits are still affected by environmental factors.

Nonetheless, if the sexual selection argument holds and some psychological sex differences are deeply embedded in human biology, not just human culture, important implications follow. Although evolutionary theorists acknowledge that environments significantly alter the expression of genes, they also view evolved characteristics as setting limits on environmental effects. For example, if boys and girls receive similar nutrition, genetic predispositions for sex differences in height will still lead, on average, to taller men. Similarly, if male dominance striving is coded in men’s genes, efforts to create gender equality must work against psychological sex differences that continue to promote male dominance (see Chapter 2).

The Continuing Nature–Culture Debate

Evolutionary theorists support their views by pointing to cross-cultural consistencies in sex differences, which they view as incompatible with the cultural approach. For instance, an initial examination of men’s and women’s mate preferences in 37 nations suggested, as sexual selection theory predicts, that men and women focus on different characteristics when choosing mates (Buss et al., 1990), with women putting greater emphasis on a mate’s earning potential (i.e., ability to obtain resources) and men putting more emphasis on potential mates’ physical attractiveness.

A reanalysis of the same data (by Eagly & Wood, 1999) with an eye toward cross-cultural differences in mate preferences, however, suggests a social explanation for these gender differences. National indices of gender equality (e.g., gender similarities in health, standard of living, and occupational equality) significantly accounted for sex differences in mate preferences. Specifically, more egalitarian nations show reduced sex differences in preferences for mates with good earning potential. When women have few opportunities to gain resources on their own,

they appear to seek such resources in their mates, but when women's status is higher this sex difference tends to dissipate (although not completely disappear).

These data still leave plenty of room for debate. Arguments over the degree to which gender-related phenomena show cross-cultural similarities (as evolutionary theory predicts) or differences (as cultural explanations imply) tend to have the quality of disagreements about whether a glass is half full or half empty. Further, evolutionary psychologists do not expect complete cross-cultural uniformity, noting that evolved predispositions respond to environmental triggers or circumstances. Thus, variations across cultures do not necessarily falsify the evolutionary approach. Nonetheless, evidence that mating preferences vary depending on the degree of gender equality in a society tends to undercut the evolutionary argument and to support cultural explanations.

Examining the cumulative research on sex differences in psychological traits and abilities also sheds light on the nature-culture debate. Meta-analyses—statistically based summaries of research findings—generally reveal small or nonexistent sex differences in psychological traits. Additionally, there tends to be much greater variation within each sex on any specific trait relative to between-sex differences (Hyde, 2005). Figure 1.1 illustrates how, even for traits in which modest sex differences have been found, the overlap between the sexes overwhelms

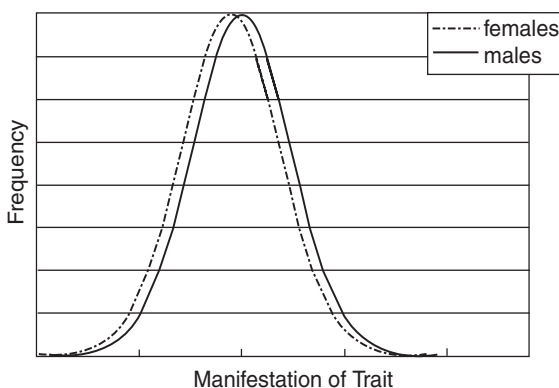


FIGURE 1.1. Graphic representation of a modest (typical) sex difference. From Hyde (2005). Copyright 2005 by the American Psychological Association. Reprinted by permission.

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