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Cross-Cultural Views of Women and Men

JOHN E. WILLIAMS & DEBORAH L. BEST

Imagine that you are on an extended trip around the world and you have visited a number of different countries on every continent. On your final airplane ride home, you decide to thumb back through the diary you have kept while on your trip—to reminisce a bit before you have to face the many tasks that will require your attention when you get home. While looking back through your diary you note that during your stay in Pakistan, you observed that men were highly visible in day-to-day activities and seemed to be “in charge” in most situations. Women were rarely seen in public places and, when they were, they appeared to be on specific errands and were often dressed in a manner that made it difficult to tell much about them. You rarely saw young men and women walking together as couples, enjoying what would be called a date in the United States. Moving a few pages ahead in your diary you see an entry that indicated that during your stay in Finland, you noticed that men and women seemed

to participate equally in many daily activities. Heterosexual couples were everywhere and many young women and men were dressed in a similar unisex style.

Reflecting on the various experiences you had in Pakistan, Finland, and the other countries you visited, you conclude that there are important differences in the way that men and women behave in different countries. It is obvious that the customs governing appropriate relations between men and women differ from country to country, but you wonder if there are differences in the way that people of the same gender in different countries view themselves. Are the self-concepts of men different in Pakistan and Finland? Do women in Pakistan view themselves as more feminine than women in Finland? Are the self-perceptions of men and women more similar in Finland than in Pakistan? What are the cultural perceptions and accepted behaviors of men and women in Pakistan and Finland?

John E. Williams is Wake Forest Professor and Chair in the Department of Psychology at Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem, NC, U.S.A. A personality-social psychologist, his research work has primarily been concerned with racial attitudes, gender stereotypes, and self concepts, all of which have been approached from a cross-cultural viewpoint. One of the two longest serving graduate department chairs of psychology in the United States, he currently serves as editor of the *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*.

Deborah L. Best is Professor of Psychology at Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem, NC, U.S.A. As a developmental psychologist, her research has concentrated upon the development of gender stereotypes, beliefs about aging, racial attitudes, and memory development in both children and older adults. She has conducted cross-cultural projects in the first three of her research areas. She is a consulting editor for the *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* and the *Psychology of Women Quarterly*. She also is Treasurer of the International Association for Cross-Cultural Psychology.

These questions address the three distinct but related aspects of the way that women and men are viewed in different cultures, and these are the focus of this chapter. The first aspect concerns *gender stereotypes* which are the popular views of how men and women differ in their psychological makeup. For example, men are often said to be more aggressive than women while women are said to be more emotional than men. The second aspect addresses the manner in which women and men view themselves, that is, the degree to which the gender stereotypes are incorporated into the *self-perceptions* of the two gender groups. To what degree do men have more "masculine" self-descriptions and do women have more "feminine" self-descriptions? The third aspect to be discussed is *sex-role ideology* which pertains to beliefs about the proper role relationships between men and women in different cultures. For example, is it appropriate for men to be dominant over women or should the two gender groups relate to one another in a more equal manner? We will consider some cross-cultural research findings bearing upon each of these three matters, in turn.

Cross-cultural research can be valuable when looking at gender differences because it provides a greater range of beliefs and roles than do single-culture studies. With greater variation comes the opportunity to look for possible causes of gender differences.

GENDER STEREOTYPES

We will begin our discussion with gender stereotypes because they serve as the foundation for gender differences in self perceptions and roles. First, let's look at how gender stereotypes are related to gender roles. In all societies, men and women generally carry out different occupational, homemaking, and leisure roles. For example, in the United States more men than women are construction workers and more women than men care for young children. These role assignments are supported by assumptions that men are stronger, more robust, and more rational than women, and are therefore more suited to be construction workers. Women, on the other hand, are gentle, kind, patient, and understanding, and as a consequence working with children is more suited to what women are like. Cultural assumptions or stereotypes about what men and women are like may also be reflected in

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Over the past 15 years, we have conducted gender stereotype studies in more than 30 countries around the world. In each country, university students were asked to consider a list of 300 adjectives (e.g., aggressive, emotional) and to indicate whether, in their culture, each adjective is more frequently associated with men, with women, or equally associated with both genders. The responses of the individual subjects in each country were then tallied to determine, for each adjective, the frequency with which it was associated with men and with women. In this manner, we identified the characteristics that are most highly associated with each gender group in each country.

When these data were analyzed, we found a high degree of pancultural agreement across all the countries studied in the characteristics differentially associated with women and men. This agreement is evident in Table 1 which shows the psychological characteristics that were generally associated with men and women across the 30 countries.

Looking at the table, it is clear that very different qualities are associated with men and with women, but with so many items, it is difficult to summarize what the major differences are. To solve this problem, we scored the male- and female-associated adjectives in each country in terms of affective meaning, the *favorability*, *strength*, and *activity* of the adjectives. Other researchers have shown that affective meanings are important in understanding more than just the dictionary definition of words. Our analysis produced an interesting pattern. In all countries, without exception, the characteristics associated with men were *stronger* and *more active*

and, based on the few countries where older children were studied, it appears that stereotype knowledge increases regularly through the teenage years and into young adulthood. In comparing the performance of the children across countries, it is interesting to note that the stereotype knowledge of the eight-year-olds was more similar than that of the five-year-olds. In other words, three additional years of exposure to their individual cultures did not lead to increased diversity but to increased similarity. Presumably, this similarity is another reflection of the generality of the adult gender stereotype model which is learned by children in all cultures studied.

The children in the study just described were all from the middle classes in their respective countries, so we could not tell whether sex stereotype knowledge differs as a function of social class. In a later study, however, this question was addressed in a few countries. Children from the higher social classes learned gender stereotypes earlier than children from the lower classes, perhaps due to differences in exposure to stereotypic presentations of women and men in children's stories, in the mass media, etc. Moreover, it may be a reflection of the fact that children from higher class groups tend to be somewhat brighter than children from lower class groups and, as a result, they may learn many things more rapidly, including sex stereotypes.

SELF CONCEPTS OF WOMEN AND MEN

We have seen that there is a widespread belief that men and women differ significantly in their psychological makeup and that children begin to learn these beliefs at an early age. In view of these findings, a related question concerns whether these stereotypic characteristics are reflected in the self concepts of men and women.

We addressed this question in a 14-country study in which university students were asked to consider each of the 300 adjectives that we had used in the earlier gender stereotype studies and to indicate those adjectives that were descriptive of self or ideal self. These self and ideal self descriptions were then scored in two different ways. First each description was scored in terms of "masculinity/femininity" by examining the adjectives that were male-associated and female-associated in the earlier sex stereotype study in their country. For

example, the self descriptions of subjects in India were examined for the items that had been identified by the earlier group of Indian students to be male-associated and female-associated. Because we used these culture-specific sex stereotype data in scoring, we were able to obtain a culture-specific definition of masculinity/femininity. Hence, a subject's self and ideal self descriptions were considered to be relatively masculine or relatively feminine depending upon how many culture-specific male-associated or female-associated adjectives the subject used in the descriptions.

Looking at masculinity/femininity, there were some interesting pancultural findings. In all countries, as expected, both the self and ideal self concepts of men were more masculine than women's while those of the women were more feminine than men's. Comparisons of the self and ideal self concepts are more informative. One might have expected that in moving from self to ideal self, men would like to be more masculine and women would like to be more feminine. However, in all countries both genders described the person they wanted to be, the ideal self as more masculine than their actual self. What might this mean? Think about the earlier finding that, in all countries, the male stereotype is stronger and more active than the female stereotype. Perhaps in saying that they wanted to be "more masculine" subjects were, in effect, saying that they wanted to be stronger and more active than they saw themselves to be.

When the masculinity/femininity data were examined for cross-cultural differences, some variations were observed but these variations were not systematically related to cultural differences. So, the intriguing idea that there are important cultural differences in masculinity/femininity was not supported in this study.

A different picture emerged when the self and ideal self concepts were scored in terms of favorability, strength, and activity. First, there was a modest tendency in most countries for the men's and women's self descriptions to parallel the strength and activity of the sex stereotypes—the self concepts of men were somewhat stronger and more active than those of women. More interesting findings were obtained when the differences between men's and women's self concepts in each country were compared using a combination of all three affective meaning scores. In some countries the men's and women's self descriptions were more similar and in other countries more differentiated.

TABLE 1 The 100 items of the pancultural adjective checklist

Male-Associated		Female-Associated	
Active	Loud	Affected	Modest
Adventurous	Obnoxious	Affectionate	Nervous
Aggressive	Opinionated	Appreciative	Patient
Arrogant	Opportunistic	Cautious	Pleasant
Autocratic	Pleasure-seeking	Changeable	Prudish
Bossy	Precise	Charming	Self-pitying
Capable	Progressive	Complaining	Sensitive
Coarse	Quick	Complicated	Sentimental
Conceited	Rational	Confused	Sexy
Confident	Realistic	Curious	Shy
Courageous	Reckless	Dependent	Softhearted
Cruel	Resourceful	Dreamy	Sophisticated
Cynical	Rigid	Emotional	Submissive
Determined	Robust	Excitable	Suggestible
Disorderly	Serious	Fault-finding	Talkative
Enterprising	Sharp-witted	Fearful	Timid
Greedy	Show-off	Fickle	Touchy
Hardheaded	Steady	Foolish	Unambitious
Humorous	Stern	Forgiving	Unintelligent
Indifferent	Stingy	Frivolous	Unstable
Individualistic	Stolid	Fussy	Warm
Initiative	Tough	Gentle	Weak
Interests wide	Unfriendly	Imaginative	Worrying
Inventive	Unscrupulous	Kind	Understanding
Lazy	Witty	Mild	Superstitious

than those associated with women, but there was no general pancultural pattern for the favorability scores. Taken as a group, the male stereotype characteristics were more favorable than the female characteristics in certain countries (Japan, South Africa, and Nigeria) and the female stereotype characteristics were more favorable in other countries (Italy, Peru, Australia). Across cultures, the stereotypes of women and men are equally favorable, but stereotypes of men are generally stronger and more active than those of women.

Despite the high degree of similarity in the gender stereotypes across the various cultural groups studied, there was also some evidence of systematic cultural variation. For example, male and female gender stereotypes were more differentiated in Protestant countries than in Catholic countries. Perhaps these differences reflect the varying place of women in both the theology and religious practices of these two religious groups.

Having found that adults hold stereotypic beliefs about characteristics associated with men and women, we naturally wondered how early in life young children begin to associate different characteristics with the two gender groups. We explored this question in a study of five-year-old and eight-

year-old middle-class children in 25 countries. In this study, children were shown silhouettes of a man and a woman and were asked to select between the ones described in a brief story. The stories were written to reflect the more important features of the adult sex stereotype characteristics. For example, in one story the child would be asked to select "the person who gets into fights" (aggressive) or in another story "the person who cries a lot" (emotional).

The results indicated that the five-year-old children in all countries showed at least a beginning knowledge of the adult stereotypes. The stories most frequently associated with the male figures were those involving the characteristics strong, aggressive, and cruel while those most frequently associated with the female figures were emotional, soft-hearted, and weak. There were also some interesting variations among the five-year-olds from different countries in their knowledge of the adult stereotypes. For example, Pakistani children showed the greatest knowledge of gender stereotypes while Brazilian children showed relatively little knowledge.

In all countries, there was an increase in sex stereotype knowledge from age five to age eight

The degree of *differentiation* of the men's and women's self concepts was related to a large number of cultural variables. Men's and women's self concepts were more differentiated in countries that were low in socioeconomic development, low in the percentage of women employed outside the home and attending the university, low in the percentage of the population identified as Christian, and relatively rural. In contrast, the countries where the self concepts of men and women were more similar tended to be more developed and more highly Christian, with higher percentages of women employed outside the home and in the university population, and relatively more urban in population distribution. One of the more intriguing relationships found was the tendency for the self concepts of men and women to become more similar as one moves north from the equator into the higher latitudes. What might account for this finding?

In summary, our cross-cultural study of self concepts of men and women suggests that there may be some interesting but relatively minor differences related to cultural factors. On the other hand, the results suggest that looking at these differences in terms of "masculinity/femininity" is not a very profitable approach.

SEX ROLE IDEOLOGY

We turn now to sex role ideology, beliefs concerning the proper role relationships between women and men. The same university students from 14 countries who participated in the self concept study completed a questionnaire expressing agreement or disagreement with statements concerning relationships between women and men. For example: "The husband should be regarded as the legal representative of the family group in all matters of law."; "A woman should have exactly the same freedom of action as a man." The questionnaires were scored so that high scores indicated a relatively egalitarian or "modern" ideology while low scores indicated a male dominant or "traditional" ideology. In each country, the ideology scores were examined separately for the men and women subjects and the results are shown in Figure 1. Here it can be seen that the most modern or egalitarian sex role ideologies were found in the Netherlands, Germany, and Finland while the most male dominant or traditional ideologies were found in Nigeria, Pakistan, and India. The United States fell toward the middle of the distribution of countries.

Perhaps not surprisingly, in the great majority of countries the women subjects tended to have

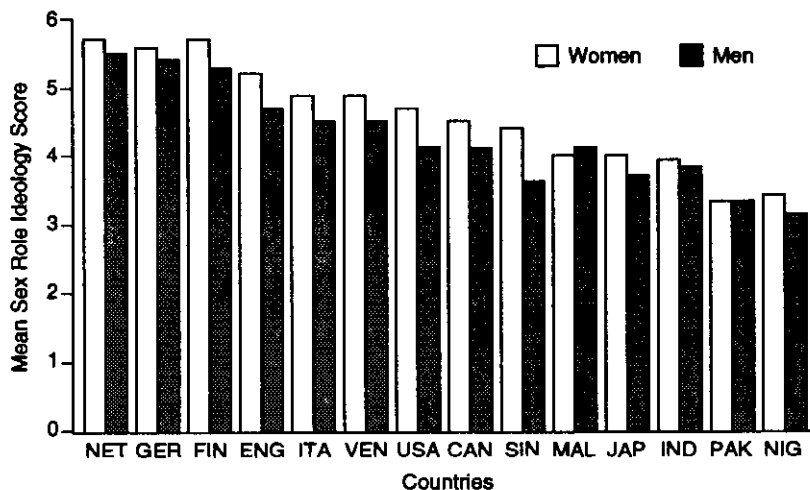


FIGURE 1 Mean sex role ideology scores for female (F) and male (M) subjects in 14 countries

Note: Countries are:

Netherlands	Italy	Singapore	Pakistan
Germany	Venezuela	Malaysia	Nigeria
Finland	United States	Japan	
England	Canada	India	

more modern views than did the men, but the differences were relatively small. Indeed, culture seems to contribute more to variations in sex role ideology than does gender, with more agreement between men and women in the same cultural group than among women or among men from different cultural groups.

The sex role ideology differences among the countries seen in the figure were related to a large number of cultural comparison variables. Sex role ideology tended to be more modern or egalitarian in countries that were more developed, more highly Christian, more urban, and, once again, from the higher northern latitudes. Stated the other way, sex role ideology tended to be more traditional and male dominant in countries that were lower in socioeconomic development, lower in the percent of Christians, more rural, and closer to the equator. These findings suggest substantial cross-cultural variations in beliefs about the proper role relationships between men and women.

SUMMARY

Across countries as different as Finland, Pakistan, New Zealand, Nigeria, Canada, and Venezuela,

there appears to be widespread cross-cultural agreement in the psychological characteristics believed to differentiate women and men. In each of the countries studied, children's learning of gender stereotypes generally begins before age five and continues through childhood and adolescence. Despite the powerful model provided by the general gender stereotypes, the self concepts of young men and women reveal only a slight echo of these stereotype characteristics. Moreover, there is substantial cross-cultural variation in beliefs concerning proper role relationships between men and women, and in most countries women have somewhat more modern or egalitarian views than do men.

SUGGESTED READINGS:

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