HOW ARE PERCEIVED THE CURRENT WOMEN AND MEN? A STUDY ABOUT GENDER STEREOTYPES AND SEXISM AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Abstract

The massive incorporation of women into the educational system and the labour market in the last decades could lead us misleadingly to see the reality in a very optimistic way. The reality is that women, despite their excellent qualifications comparable to that of men, are still in a discriminatory situation in comparison to men. Growing literature analyses the underlying processes to shed light to this problem, and the explanations that has received the most attention from researchers are the existence of gender stereotypes and sexist attitudes in our society. People associate communal qualities (e.g., nice, compassionate) with women, while agentic qualities (e.g., assertive, competitive) are more linked to men, which precisely are considered as requirements for success in labour world. The aim of this study is to analyse whether there are differences in how men and women are perceived (i.e., which are their characteristic traits) and to explore the possible effect of sexism on these perceptions. The sample is composed of 200 Spanish university students (n = 110 men and n = 90 women). The results show that there are significant differences in how women and men in general are perceived in terms of their characteristic traits nowadays. In the majority of the attributes, women in general are perceived in a feminine way, while men are viewed in a masculine way, in accordance to gender stereotypes. In addition, there are some statistical differences in these perceptions in function of the degree of sexist attitudes among the participants. In particular, those students who scored lower in sexism attribute some typical masculine traits to women. On the contrary, those students who scored higher in sexism attribute typical feminine traits to women. In the case of perceptions about men, the students who scored lower in sexism attribute one typical feminine trait to men, while those students who scored higher in sexism attribute typical masculine traits to men. It is interesting to highlight that perceptions about women are less favourably than the perceptions about men. Those findings suggest the important weight of gender stereotypes and the prejudice against women in our society. The implications of the results for education, university teaching-learning process, future research guidelines, and limitations of the study are also discussed.

Keywords: Transformational leadership, gender stereotypes, female university students.

1   INTRODUCTION

The growing participation of women into public sphere began as a result of war conflicts and accelerated in the later decades of the twentieth century. Gradually women were introduced in professions that were previously reserved for men [1], as it was assumed to be hazardous or requiring certain physical skills that they seemed to lack. Since then, more and more have a job or wish to have one and, therefore, have greater weight in the overall economic activity [2, 3]. In a parallel way, there has been an important increase in the educational level of the population in general, and women in particular. Thus, the gender gap has progressively narrowed. More and more qualified women with higher levels of qualification work or plan to do so in jobs that previously had vetted and therefore have a more significant weight at workplace. However, from a transversal perspective, women situation is not analogous to the male position. For many women, significant gains in education have not translated into better labour market outcomes. This is reflected in the difficulty of many of them to fully develop a professional career that allows them gain positions of high responsibility. Whether women do not have the same opportunities as men do, might be that women are not perceived equally capable as men, in a world where gender stereotypes and sexism continue to exist.

2 GENDER STEREOTYPES AND SEXISM

There is an especially relevant factor in understanding why barriers to women's work advancement appear. We refer to the influence of gender stereotypes [4]. Gender stereotypes are a set of socially shared beliefs about the characteristics and habitual behaviours of men and women [5], applied indiscriminately to all members of the group. Stereotypes encompass a descriptive component (i.e., how the members of the group are and behave) and a prescriptive component (i.e., how women/men should be and behave).

From a descriptive point of view, it is often assumed that men are independent, dominant, aggressive, assertive, confident, and intellectual, while women are emotional, compassionate, homey, submissive, and gentle [6]. For instance, Schein developed a key research line on the descriptive dimension of gender stereotypes in management in the seventies of the twentieth century. The results of her studies on the characteristics of leadership positions showed that both men and women leaders [7, 8] perceived that the characteristics associated with success in management performance were closer to the features associated with men than women were. This led her to coining the slogan "think manager-think male". This association of management, power, and responsibility with male characteristics obviously tends to disadvantage women in selection for managerial positions, as well as in organizational decisions about their promotion, training, and career plans. This phenomenon also perpetuates far from disappearing, particularly among men [9].

The second component of gender stereotypes, the prescriptive dimension refers to the beliefs about how men and women should be and behave. For example, the female stereotype includes requirements such as that a woman should have interpersonal skills, be passive, docile, show interest and cooperate with others. On the contrary, men should have initiative, be ambitious, or aggressive. The female dimension of gender stereotype is called communal, while the male dimension is named instrumental or agentic [10]. Although there are obvious biological differences between men and women, the magnitude and scope of them is much lower than stereotypes suggest, but persist and affect the behaviour of both women and men in all spheres of life, including work [5], and particularly in everything related to career development [4].

Furthermore, frequently gender stereotypes result in prejudice against women. According to Glick and Fiske Ambivalent Sexism Theory [11], there are two different but related types of sexism: (1) hostile sexism, which encompasses the negative equivalents on each dimension: dominative paternalism, derogatory beliefs, and heterosexual hostility, and (2) benevolent sexism, which encompasses subjectively positive (for the sexist) attitudes toward women in traditional roles: protective paternalism, idealization of women, and desire for intimate relations. Both forms of sexism serve to justify and maintain patriarchy and traditional gender roles. Thus, for different reasons, both hostile and benevolent sexist attitudes on the part of organizational decision makers could cause bias against women when selection or promotion decisions are made to fill very socially valued jobs, such as high responsibility positions.

In this context, this study is conducted with the aim of analysing whether there are differences in how men and women are perceived nowadays (i.e., which are their characteristic traits) and to explore the possible effect of sexism on these perceptions.

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Sample and procedure

The sample was composed of 200 university students from several degree courses in Spain. There were 90 females (45%) and 110 males (55%), aged between 20 and 50 years (mean = 23.04, SD = 4.11). The students participated in the study during a class exercise. No incentives were involved. Confidentiality of their responses was fully guaranteed.

3.2 Variables and measures

The variables analysed in the students were the following:

- *Gender*. Male – female.

- *Age*. Years old.

- *Gender characteristic attributes*. The participants were asked to indicate how much several attributes were typical or characteristic of a woman in general or a man in general on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*No characteristic*) to 5 (T*otally characteristic*). The attributes were 18 items that make up the short version of the *Bem Sex Roles Inventory* (*BSRI*) [12] and that resulted to be stereotypically masculine and stereotypically feminine in the cultural context of Spain [13]. Nine of the items evaluate stereotypically masculine attributes (e.g., aggressive) (typical woman α = .65; typical man α = .64) and the other nine items evaluate stereotypically feminine attributes (e.g., warm) (typical woman α = .73; typical man α = .79).

- *Sexism. Participants completed t*he 22-item Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI) [11], which measures both hostile and benevolent sexism toward women. They were asked to indicate agreement or disagreement on a scale that ranged from 0 (*Strongly disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly agree*) with no midpoint (respondents were forced to agree or disagree at least slightly with each item). Here we used the mean score of the entire inventory ((e.g., "No matter how accomplished he is, a man is not truly complete as a person unless he has the love of a woman", α = .93).

3.3 Data analyses

Data analysis was performed using the SPSS statistics computer program. Descriptive analysis and internal consistencies (Cronbach's α) were performed. In order to achieve the first study objective, *t* tests were carried out where the mean score of each characteristic attribute for woman in general was compared to the mean score of that attribute for man in general. Secondly, we calculated the median score of the sample in sexism (median score = 2.45) and we divided the sample into two categories: low sexism (scores lower tan 2.45) and high sexism (scores higher than 2.45). We performed ANOVAs in which the factor was sexism (low vs. high) and the dependent variables were the characteristic attributes for a woman in general and a man in general.

4 RESULTS

The Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations (SD) of the study variables. The mean scores reveal that this sample considered the masculine attributes more typical of a man than a woman did. In contrast, the feminine attributes were more typical of a woman than a man was. The mean score of sexism was relatively low. In addition, in general, the results of *t* tests confirmed that masculine attributes were more typical of a man than a woman was {t (199, 1) = -12.75, p < .001}, while feminine attributes were more typical of a woman than a man was {t (199, 1) = 25.34, p < .001}.

Table 1: Means and standard deviations of the study variables.

Variables	Mean	SD
1- *Gender*	-	-
2- *Age*	23.04	4.11
3- *Masculine attributes of a woman in general*	3.05	0.57
3- *Masculine attributes of a man in general*	3.66	0.57
4- *Feminine attributes of a woman in general*	3.82	0.47
4- *Feminine attributes of a man in general*	2.79	0.51
5- Sexism	2.20	0.96

Table 2: Means, standard deviations of personal attributes typical of a woman and a man.

	Woman in general		Man in general		
Masculine items	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	p
Athletic	2.85	0.75	3.85	0.75	<.001
Strong personality	3.59	0.93	3.62	0.80	.75
Willing to take risks	2.79	0.84	3.78	0.85	<.001
Dominant	3.35	1.05	3.59	0.95	.012
Aggressive	2.71	0.95	3.89	2.39	<.001
Act as a leader	3.51	2.27	3.69	0.90	.27
Individualistic	2.89	0.94	3.54	0.98	<.001
Hard-hearted	2.93	0.90	3.86	0.78	<.001
Egoistic	2.85	1.00	3.15	1.00	<.001
Feminine items	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	p
Affectionate	3.96	0.69	2.83	0.76	<.001
Sensitive to the needs of others	3.97	0.79	2.79	0.79	<.001
Understanding	3.83	0.81	3.06	0.80	<.001
Compassionate	3.71	0.81	2.92	0.83	<.001
Warm-hearted	3.88	0.76	3.08	0.83	<.001
Tender	4.00	0.87	2.67	0.84	<.001
Loves children	4.19	0.75	3.03	0.90	<.001
Cries easily	3.94	0.93	2.21	0.84	<.001
Submissive	2.85	1.02	2.53	0.97	<.001

Whether we analyse each specific attribute, we see, as Table 2 displays, there were significant differences in how women and men in general were perceived in terms of their characteristic traits nowadays. In all the attributes considered traditionally feminine (e.g., affectionate, sensitive to the needs of others, understanding, compassionate, warm-hearted, tender, loves children, cries easily, submissive) women in general, compared to men, were perceived in that feminine way. In contrast, in most of the attributes considered traditionally masculine, men compared to women, were viewed in a masculine way (e.g., athletic, willing to take risks, dominant, aggressive, individualistic, hard-hearted, and egoistic), in accordance to gender stereotypes. However, in strong personality and act as a leader did not appear gender differences.

In addition, we explored the possible effect of sexism on those perceptions. The results of the ANOVAs are displayed in Table 3 (typical of a woman) and in Table 4 (typical of a man). Table 3 show some statistical differences in the perceptions about women in function of the degree of sexist attitudes among the participants. In particular, typical women were seen as more athletic, willing to take risks, hard-hearted, and less egoistic among the respondents with low sexism scores. In contrast, typical women were perceived as more submissive and crying easily among the respondents with high sexism scores.

Table 3: Summary of ANOVA. Differences in personal attributes typical of a woman depending on the degree of sexism.

Masculine items	Low sexism Mean score n = 100	High sexism Mean score n = 100	p	Feminine items	Low sexism Mean score n = 100	High sexism Mean score n = 100	p
Athletic	2.98	2.73	.021	*Affectionate*	3.97	3.96	.922
Strong personality	3.58	3.60	.91	*Sensitive to the needs of others*	3.89	4.06	.13
Willing to take risks	2.93	2.64	.012	*Understanding*	3.83	3.83	.95
Dominant	3.30	3.40	.53	*Compassionate*	3.64	3.78	.24
Aggressive	2.74	2.65	.52	*Warm-hearted*	3.85	3.90	.69
Act as a leader	3.37	3.64	.41	*Tender*	4.03	3.97	.62
Individualistic	2.93	2.85	.51	*Loves children*	4.11	4.27	.14
Hard-hearted	3.12	2.70	<.001	*Cries easily*	3.69	4.20	<.001
Egoistic	2.71	3.00	.040	*Submissive*	2.67	3.04	.010

Table 4 show some statistical differences in the perceptions about men based on the degree of sexist attitudes among the participants. In particular, typical men were seen as more dominant, aggressive, hard-hearted, submissive, and acting as a leader among the respondents with high sexism scores. In contrast, typical men were perceived loving children, crying easily, and less submissive among the respondents with low sexism scores.

Table 4: Summary of ANOVA. Differences in Personal attributes typical of a man depending on degree of sexism.

Masculine items	Low sexism Mean score n = 100	High sexism Mean score n = 100	p	Feminine items	Low sexism Mean score n = 100	High sexism Mean score n = 100	p
Athletic	3.77	3.93	.15	*Affectionate*	2.87	2.79	.42
Strong personality	3.53	3.70	.15	*Sensitive to the needs of others*	2.86	2.70	.16
Willing to take risks	3.70	3.87	.15	*Understanding*	3.06	3.05	.92
Dominant	3.45	3.72	.045	*Compassionate*	2.96	2.89	.56
Aggressive	3.50	4.28	.021	*Warm-hearted*	2.98	3.17	.11
Act as a leader	3.53	3.85	.012	*Tender*	2.64	2.70	.64
Individualistic	3.46	3.62	.25	*Loves children*	3.14	2.92	.08
Hard-hearted	3.72	4.00	.011	*Cries easily*	2.33	2.09	.043
Egoistic	3.04	3.25	.144	*Submissive*	2.35	2.71	.009

5   CONCLUSIONS

More and more qualified women with higher levels of qualification work or plan to do so in jobs that previously had vetted and therefore have a more significant weight at labour world. However, from a transversal perspective, women situation is not analogous to the male position. For many women, significant gains in education have not translated into better labour market outcomes. This is reflected in the difficulty of many women to fully develop a professional career that allows them gain positions of high responsibility [1, 2, and 3]. Whether women do not have the same opportunities as men do, might

be that women are not perceived equally capable as men, in a world where gender stereotypes and sexism continue to exist [4, 5, 6, 11]. In this context, this study is conducted with the aim of analysing whether there are differences in how men and women are perceived (i.e., which are their characteristic traits) and to explore the possible effect of sexism on these perceptions.

The results of this study reveal that this sample considers the masculine attributes more typical of a man than a woman does, while the feminine attributes were more typical of a woman than a man in a significant way. The mean score of sexism among respondents was relatively low. When we analyse each specific attribute, we see that there are significant differences in how women and men in general are perceived in terms of their characteristic traits nowadays. In all the attributes considered traditionally, feminine women in general, compared to men, are perceived in that feminine way. Thus, this confirms the validity of those gender stereotypes on the women perception. This trend is also confirmed in the case of perception about men. They are seen as more athletic, willing to take risks, dominant, aggressive, individualistic, hard-hearted, and egoist, than women, in accordance to gender stereotypes. However, not in all the attributes considered traditionally masculine, men compared to women, obtain higher scores, since in two traditional masculine traits (i.e., strong personality and act as a leader) do not appear gender differences. This means that nowadays, at least in these two personal attributes, men and women are seen in a similar way. This leads us to think that the idea that only men can be good leaders and have a strong personality is disappearing among university students. It is a hope that in the not-too-distant future women could enjoy the same opportunities for occupying positions of high status and power.

This study also displays the weight of sexism on perceptions about women and men, as this prejudice against women contribute to perpetuate gender stereotypes extraordinarily. In particular, typical women are seen as more athletic, willing to take risks, hard-hearted, and less egoist among the respondents with low sexism scores. In contrast, typical women were perceived as more submissive and crying easily among the respondents with high sexism scores. This means that, in this study, sexism biases impression of women, acquiring a less socially desirable character. To be submissive and cry easily is perceived as a sign of weakness. In the case of men, also differences in the perceptions about them appear because of the degree of sexist attitudes among the participants. Typical men are viewed as more dominant, aggressive, hard-hearted, submissive, and acting as a leader among the respondents with high sexism scores. In contrast, typical men were perceived loving children, crying easily, and less submissive among the respondents with low sexism scores. In addition, in this case, sexism biases impression of men, contributing to maintain the traditional masculine perception about them.

Sexism and gender stereotypes reinforce each other, and could contribute severely to perpetuate the inequalities of women at work. That is the reason why gender stereotypes and sexism must be combated in and through education. Insofar as this has been achieved, future generations could enjoy from equality in the society. Gender equality means equal visibility, empowerment, responsibility and participation of both sexes in all spheres of public and private life. Achieving gender equality is central to the protection of human rights, the functioning of democracy, and respect for the rule of law, and economic growth and competitiveness [14].

The Council of Europe has put together a compilation of examples of activities that the Council of Europe member states are implementing to encourage an education free from gender stereotypes. The compilation also identifies ways to implement the measures included in the Committee of Ministers Recommendation on gender mainstreaming in education. Some of these good practices include: (a) STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) disciplines promotion among girls; (b) campaigns to inform and motivate girls and women to choose non-stereotypical careers; (c) gender equality training programmes for teachers; (d) gender proofing of text books and teaching materials; (e) the creation of a gender-aware school culture and a whole school approach to gender equality; (f) initiatives aimed at increasing the gender awareness of parents; (g) measures to increase the number of men in early childhood education and care; (h) peer-to-peer education for gender equality; and (i) financial assistance for families to support girls' school attendance [14].

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