



Cultural Competence Concepts

Why Gender Stereotypes Matter

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Gender stereotypes are generalized beliefs that we hold about people based solely on their gender. This can include how a person should look, act, feel, or think as a male or female. For example, we might think that a woman is supposed to be very gentle, take care of children, and do housework like cooking and cleaning. In contrast, we might think that a man is supposed to be tough, mow the lawn, and make financial decisions for the family. Although these biases may not seem very serious and may even cast a positive light at times, in fact, stereotypes can be problematic with serious consequences.

Why do we hold stereotypes and why is it a problem?

In many ways, holding stereotypes is innate to human beings. The human mind is primed to think efficiently. This includes setting up categories and classes in our minds and then fitting in objects, people, and events that we encounter. This is how the brain receives and processes information. For example, we might have a class or category in our head of “pillows.” When we encounter a rectangular, soft, fluffy object that looks like a pillow—we would categorize it as such and we would know how to interact with it. We know that we are not supposed to eat it or try to wear it. Our minds recognize that it is inanimate; therefore, we do not try to talk to this object or expect it to respond. Because of this category in our head, we can easily identify a pillow and we know what to do with this object. It would

be quite inefficient for us to deal with each pillow as if it were a new, unknown object that we had to learn about.

Thinking in categories seems like a reasonable way to interact with the world, and stereotypes are a type of category we apply to groups of people. Nonetheless, stereotypes can be problematic for several reasons:

- *Stereotypes can and, in fact, tend to be wrong.* Girls do not all like pink bows and dolls. Boys do not all like sports. There is no evidence that boys have a greater natural ability in mathematics and that girls have a greater natural ability in language arts.
- *Stereotypes prevent us from seeing the real characteristics of the person in front of us.* Instead of seeing the unique traits of an individual, we immediately make assumptions and expectations for behaviors, personality, attitude, and ways of thinking. Furthermore, we tend to judge others who do not conform to those expectations—the stay-at-home father who has a breadwinner wife, the boy who wants to dance ballet, the girl who does not enjoy dolls.
- *Stereotypes are rigid.* We oftentimes fail to acknowledge evidence that contradicts our stereotypes or explain this evidence away. For example, perhaps that teenage boy who showed nurturance to his classmate was simply trying to please the teacher. Perhaps that college woman who solved the toughest math problem in first year calculus just had a lucky day.

Examples of gender stereotypes and how they form

Whether or not we intend to do so, we communicate our stereotypes and expectations for girls and boys as soon as they are born. For example, the moment many expecting parents find out the sex of their baby, they pick a name that reflects that gender. Parents may begin preparing a room for the child painted in “boy” or “girl” colors. Friends give gifts based on whether they are expecting a girl or a boy.

Indeed, stereotypes about gender start early. Research shows that adults and children even make different judgments about a baby’s characteristics and behaviors based on whether they think that baby is a boy or girl. For example, both children and adults will judge a baby’s cries (e.g., is it a cry of “distress?”) differently depending on that child’s sex.

As children grow up, these stereotypes are even further reinforced. The toys, activities, tasks, and opportunities that adults choose and make available for girls and boys diverge even further. These toys and play activities in which children participate further perpetuate those stereotypes.

By playing only with dolls and tea sets, girls may learn that they are supposed to grow up, work inside the home, cook dinner, and take care of their children. By playing with only trucks and action figures, boys can learn that they are expected to be tough, to work outside the home with heavy machinery, and to be the protector of their families. Not being allowed to play with toys typically given to the other gender (e.g., tea sets for boys) can be a strong signal that possibilities associated with those activities are not allowed.

Children also learn how a “good girl” or “good boy” is supposed to act based on the way we teach or act around them. Table I shows some common expectations we have for each gender. For example, girls are often told not to shout or are asked to use a nicer voice. When boys talk loudly or shout, we are less likely to ask them to quiet down. Because of this, boys may grow up feeling more assertive than girls. Girls may be judged harshly for being assertive, and boys may be judged negatively for being more cooperative.

The impacts of gender stereotypes

As mentioned earlier, stereotypes can, and tend to be false. They do not always reflect reality. Most stereotypes tend to be negative and prevent people from reaching their highest potential. Even “positive” stereotypes end up lumping people together and ignoring their individuality. Here are just a few of the impacts of gender stereotypes:

Table I. Common expectations based on gender for women and men

Girls/women:	Boys/men:
are supposed to look pretty	enjoy outdoor activities
are quieter	are good at mathematics
are supposed to do housework and cook	are lazy and messy
are flirts	are good at sports
are weak, compared with men	are not good at cooking
are accountable for raising the children	are in charge of the household
are good at sewing	are loud and confident

- *We limit our opportunities by being tied to activities deemed appropriate only for our gender.* Only engaging in experiences designated as appropriate for one’s gender can mean missing out on potentially beneficial opportunities of other activities. One example is children’s toys and games. Research suggests many benefits to traditionally gendered toys and games. Studies have found that games typically considered as feminine (e.g., pretend play) can foster many positive outcomes such as creativity and complex social interactions. In contrast, games and toys typically considered masculine (e.g., field sports) can promote spatial skills. Girls can certainly gain from masculine toys and boys from feminine games, but if we direct them to only “gender stereotyped” play, we deny children the full realm of cognitive, physical, and emotional skills development that can emerge from these activities.
- *We stigmatize behaviors that do not conform to the stereotype.* Girls and boys, and men and women, can benefit from and enjoy activities typically assigned to the opposite gender. Similarly, adult men and women can now partake in various careers even if they are not considered “typical” for their genders (e.g., female firefighters, male preschool teachers) and engage in hobbies and activities that are similarly deemed “appropriate” for only one gender (e.g., males taking Zumba® classes, females racing cars). Yet, there can be quite a stigma when people engage in activities or show traits that are stereotyped to be of the opposite gender. For instance, women may feel direct or indirect pressure to take on the bigger bulk of housework, and men may feel pressured to earn money and provide for their family. When men and women choose different life paths, they may be judged negatively by other people, which may cause them to feel like they are not good enough or do not fit in.

- *Stereotypes cause stress and lower performance.* “Stereotype threat” refers to awareness of negative stereotypes and fear of acting in ways that will confirm that stereotype. For example, a woman might be aware of the stereotype that females are highly emotional and fear that she might be acting in ways consistent with this stereotype. Presence of stereotype threat and even just awareness of stereotypes has been linked to poorer outcomes in various domains, including academics, level of engagement in work in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) fields, and even performance in chess. Stereotypes and even being conscious of stereotypes about groups to which we belong can impact both males and females in many negative ways.
- *Stereotypes act as self-fulfilling prophecies.* Stereotypes can shape the ways that we act towards others and shape their outcomes. For example, teachers can communicate their stereotypes about girls’ and boys’ skills in subjects like mathematics. These stereotypes impact the class atmosphere, which can either encourage or discourage children’s engagement in particular subjects. Another scenario is women and work. People holding gender stereotypes may think that women are less competent and as a result not take their words or ideas seriously. Obviously, this can impact women’s engagement and performance. Women are now working in jobs requiring higher levels of logic and mathematical skills (e.g., science, engineering), but they are often still viewed as less competent than men in these fields. As a result, even though girls do possess the qualities needed to go into these particular STEM careers, they may choose not to because of how society views their capabilities, compared with boys.

How to limit gender stereotypes

Even though gender stereotypes are deeply engrained, there are things we can do to limit their negative impacts. Leading researchers who study gender stereotypes and stereotype threat have recommended several interventions for addressing stereotypes.

- *Awareness.* It is important to be aware of our own stereotypes so that we can work to change them and catch ourselves when we are being swayed by deeply held attitudes. It is important that we acknowledge the gender stereotypes we hold. We have to make conscious decisions to not view others stereotypically,

or at least not be bound by rigid assumptions. When we are aware that we hold certain stereotypes, we can consciously work to be open-minded and view others as individuals.

- *Exposure to diversity.* It is important to expose children and adults to diversity in the examples and models that they see in real life and in media. For example, when working with children, examine the characters in the books they read and the television shows they watch. Do the storybooks only depict people in sex-stereotyped roles? Are all firefighters and doctors in the stories men? Are all the housekeepers and caregivers women? Are children depicted as engaged in only stereotyped play? Being exposed to diverse examples can start breaking down the idea that certain roles, activities, and careers are reserved only for specific genders.
- *Growth mindset.* Promoting a growth mindset means de-emphasizing inborn and permanent abilities and instead focusing on things that can be achieved through hard effort. Research has shown general benefits of this approach but this is especially applicable to break down stereotypes by changing the idea that males and females are born with innate tendencies toward certain skills.
- *Institutional change.* Making changes at the individual level is certainly important. In addition, it is essential to review policies and the climate at the group, team, and institutional level. Does our company have policies that favor one group over another? Is gender stereotyping and discrimination viewed as acceptable in our institution? Do we regularly check to make sure that we do not have anything in our own rules that communicates discrimination? Having clear policies and statements that we do not tolerate discrimination or prejudice—whether we are a school, team, 4-H club, or any institution, is essential in developing a climate that is accepting.

Resources

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