

Men, women and leadership

Lance Workman talks to Alice Eagly about the evolution of the psychology of gender

You're a social psychologist interested in gender. I wonder what first got you interested in this area. Was it personal experience, or purely academic?
Well, my early interest reflected the culture of the late sixties and early seventies. With the rise of the feminist movement, there was a lot of discussion about gender – for example, people wondered why women have lower status and power than men and how women might differ from men in their psychology. It seemed that psychologists didn't have very good answers for a whole range of such questions. True, there was a lot of speculation and discourse on these matters, but it wasn't evidence-based in a scientific sense. It seemed that we could and should do better.

You developed two research interests – the psychology of gender and the psychology of attitudes. Did those two come together for you?

Yes, in various ways. For example, I have done some research in recent years on the differing sociopolitical attitudes that men and women have in most Western industrialised countries. It is well known that women vote to the left of men, so I used my knowledge of gender and social role theory to shed light on the attitudes that underlie these voting patterns.

You say that women are to the left of men in general. Why do you think that's the case? Is it because they're more empathic or more social creatures?
This phenomenon has much more to do with the social position of women in society, whereby women are more disadvantaged than men in power, resources and authority and have more direct responsibility for child rearing and for caring activities more generally. Women tend to support not just pro-women policies but also policies that assist disadvantaged people as well as children and families. It is in these 'social compassion' attitudes where some of the largest gaps in attitudes are found.

You're particularly interested in the psychology of leadership. What differences do you find between men and women?

Well, of course the most obvious difference is that there are a lot fewer women than men in leadership roles, especially at higher levels, even though women have gained more access to authority in recent decades. In terms of leadership style, there's a lot of overlap between men and women, but there are some average differences. We find that women are more democratic and participative – that is, less likely to be autocratic and thus to order people around. We also know that if women do act autocratically, they tend to get a more negative reaction than men do. A bullying boss is usually not liked, man or woman, but people get angrier with a female bullying boss.

So do you think women make better leaders?

Research that I've completed on transformational versus transactional leadership suggests that women may have an overall advantage in leadership style. The transformational leader is one who serves as a role model, is inspiring in many ways, and is attentive to followers and individual needs. This is the type of leadership that many experts on leadership regard as optimal in contemporary organisations. We find that women who lead are somewhat more transformational than their male counterparts, and transformational leadership is actually correlated with

effectiveness. Women are also more likely than men to reward followers for appropriate behaviour rather than reprimand them for inappropriate behaviour. These tendencies are also associated with greater leader effectiveness.

Could men learn something from women who are leaders?

Yes, especially in terms of transformational style and the appropriate use of reward. However, women can have some vulnerabilities as leaders. There are times and circumstances when leaders benefit from coming on strong – that is, from acting in a relatively autocratic and directive manner. So, when a less democratic approach is needed, it may be that women could model their behaviour on that of some male leaders. However, this mode is more difficult for women than men because of the more negative reactions that many people have to highly authoritative and directive women.

What about the idea that to get to the top as leaders women sometimes have to be tougher than men? The Margaret Thatcher queen bee syndrome – is that a real syndrome or just an aberrant one-off?

I agree that some women who have risen to high places, and Thatcher's a good example, may have had to emulate men and in fact 'overachieve' – that is, be more extreme – to gain legitimacy as a leader.

Under these circumstances, a woman may have few options, so a number of women world leaders, such as Golda Meir and Indira Gandhi as well as Margaret Thatcher, adopted quite commanding, masculine leadership styles. In settings in which women leaders are more common, they tend to develop a more differentiated, nuanced style.

In understanding women's political leadership, it is important to look at the circumstances under which they are elected to high office. Take Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, who is the president of Liberia. Her election campaign promoted a maternal image. The country had been war-torn for decades, and the men had been killing each other in civil strife. She presented herself as a maternal leader capable of healing the nation's problems. So, under specialised conditions, a woman can take on a more maternal leadership role.



Alice Eagly

Talking about women in high office, what do you think about Hillary Clinton? Do you have any thoughts about how she would tackle the presidential role?

I think she is trying to blend the masculine and the feminine. She had been criticised for being cold and not friendly enough – in other words, not feminine enough. So she's now appearing as friendlier and more relaxed. She's also worked to build credentials in culturally masculine areas such as terrorism and the military. She does a fine job of presenting her views in an authoritative, competent manner. She's attempting to meet expectations for her as a leader and as a woman. It's a difficult balancing act, but the right way to proceed as a female presidential candidate in the United States.

"it's not surprising that women are more assertive than they used to be"

Moving on from leadership, you're seen as a critic of evolutionary psychology. I know the issues are complex, but in a nutshell where are your criticisms?

That mainstream evolutionary psychology theory does not take sufficient account of causes other than evolved psychological dispositions, or acknowledge how central behavioural flexibility is to both men and women. It's very important to understand the contemporaneous causes that account for variability in sex differences. Instead, evolutionary psychologists generally adopt the 'reverse engineering' logic of saying, 'Oh there's a sex difference, let me tell you how it was adaptive in ancestral environments and arose through sexual selection processes.' I recommend that scholars regard behaviour as emergent from several influences – that is, evolved physical and psychological dispositions; social structural, economic and ecological conditions; and situated activity in society.

I suspect you're not so keen on the Cosmides and Tooby notion of domain-specific modularity?

True, extreme modularity is not plausible because we observe so much behavioural flexibility even in other species that don't have the complex cognitive apparatus of humans. This flexibility extends to mating and many other behaviours.

What do you think of David Buss's cross-cultural studies of mate choice and the differences between the sexes?

I admire cross-cultural studies, and I think Buss's study of mating preferences in 37 cultures is an excellent, innovative

project. What I did at one point, with my colleague Wendy Wood, was to reanalyse the data and add data on gender equality from the United Nations archive, which provides quantitative measures of gender equality. Our point was that the differences that evolutionary psychologists have been interested in are influenced by the contemporaneous societal role structure. So, if women are not employed or they have poor chances in the workforce compared to men, would you be surprised that they're quite interested in finding a partner who has resources, or that men might be interested in women's domestic qualities when there is a strong male-female division of labour?

We understand the implications of that sort of traditional system: he earns, she stays at home, a trade-off that is enhanced by an age difference between the spouses. With an older man and younger woman, she'll likely be more subordinate to him and accepting of the inequality of the arrangement. As you can see, our analysis was a social role analysis. We showed that when women have relatively higher status and the male-female division of labour is weaker, sex differences in most mating preferences become less pronounced.

So you consider the evolutionary psychology model a little simplistic?

Well, we need scientific debate about issues such as why there is an age gap between marital partners. My views are evolutionary as well, and the emphasis in my work is on the importance of evolved physical differences between men and women. Men are bigger and stronger; women have reproductive activity in the form of gestation, birth and lactation. These are very essential, sex-differentiated, characteristics. Size and strength are continuous and overlap in their distribution but with a clear sex difference. Of course, reproduction is dichotomous. These human biological characteristics have implications for the role structure – but these implications depend on the culture, social structure and economy. Most of the psychology of women and men then flows from placement in the role structure, which itself is variable across time and cultures. That was our point in relation to Buss's 37 cultures study – that the male-female division of labour is variable and affects mating preferences. It's important to understand how we get different kinds of role structures, and how, through various kinds of social psychological mediation, roles increase or lessen sex-differentiated behaviour.

So in a sense, because we've evolved these different bodies, we get feedback from the way that people treat us and the psychology is laid on top of that?

Not exactly. Look at it this way: there's an economy, ecology and culture out there, and humans have to produce behaviour that allows them to thrive in that environment, using the raw material of the evolved traits of men and women. Different environments promote differing types of role structures. In the last century, that environment has changed a lot. It's now populated by a huge number of humans, so we don't need to increase fertility. This means that the reproductive demands on women are much less, and women have entered the paid workforce much more in industrialised cultures. Men have greater size and strength, but most jobs now involve sitting in front of computers or interacting with people. So men and women have moved into more similar occupational roles, especially in 'brain jobs', as opposed to 'brawn jobs'. And of course these brain jobs are the ones that produce greater income. So it's not surprising that women are more assertive than they used to be and take more risks than they used to do. Occupational segregation is decreasing, and women don't have to do so much caring for the family because they typically don't have many children. At the same time men have shown some shift to accepting more childcare and domestic work in families, at least in the US.

Do you think that we'll continue to become more similar?

Perhaps I'll go out of business in studying sex differences! But that's too simple – I expect more male-female similarity only in the psychological attributes that are influenced by the aspects of roles that are changing. But, overall, the trends are toward more similar roles and psychology. What are the limits of such changes? That's a sticky question. Attitudinally and behaviourally in some respects, change toward gender equality has slowed down in recent years in the US and perhaps in some other industrialised nations. Are we reaching some sort of limit? My best guess is that we are taking a pause as we let the men catch up with the changes that have occurred in women. Men's attitudes have changed over the years but have remained less progressive than those of women. Women can't produce gender equality on their own, so may be waiting for men to catch up and more fully accept greater equality.

Well, thanks for allowing me to catch up with you!