

Gender Stereotypes and their Effects in Social Situations

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Abstract

A glance through human history in order to better understand the relationships between men and women brings to our attention the dramatic ways they have changed in time. Most of the civilizations were based on a patriarchal model, but one cannot ignore the fact that during human existence, matriarchal societies also existed. The term of "patriarchy" comes from the Greek word "patriarkhēs" where pater means "father of a race" and arkhō means "I lead" (Walby, 1990).

Matriarchy, as described by Heide Göttner-Abendroth, includes three important criteria, namely the economic, social and cultural ones. On an economic level, the author states that matriarchal societies were agrarian developed around 10.000 years ago, at the beginning of the Neolithic era. Considering the system of goods distribution, it was based on an economic reciprocity, so Göttner-Abendroth (2004) describes them as societies of reciprocity.

Keywords: *Stereotypes, matrilineal societies, balanced economic reciprocity, sexism, the illusory correlation*

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I. PATRIARCHY AND MATRIARCHY

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On a social level, matriarchy was based on an extension of the clans union which was formed according to the matrilineality or maternal heritage principle. In other words, women had the power to dispose of clan goods, especially the power to control food sources. Considering marriage, they were unions between two clans which did not sight the individual characteristics of the partners but mostly the one common to the clan possibilities. Göttner-Abendroth (2004) speaks of the matriarchal society as a kinship one. The cultural criteria is described by the author as one in which the concrete belief of rebirth within the same clan is present, as we are presented a true cult of ancestors, dominated by entities such as Mother Earth and the Cosmos Goddess, a cult which lack the dualistic vision of the world and morality, where everything in life is part of a symbolic system, thus matriarchal societies also being named sacral societies of cults of the Goddess. Regarding the political decisional processes, Göttner-Abendroth (2004) supports the idea that they were made in egalitarian manner based on consultations.

II. GENDER STEREOTYPES

Considering the evolution of the relations between man and women in society, our opinion is that a series of anatomic structure differences which are also reflected in behavior may represent the basis of certain gender stereotypes, still confronted by the modern societies.

The stereotype is a preconceived idea, lacking precise data, based only on anecdotes, which are imposed upon the members of a group (Sillamy, 1996). As for the stereotype origins, they can be emphasized in more ways: from historical, political, social perspectives, seeming that they transcend the cultural barrier (Williams, & Best, 1982). From the perspective of some other authors, the stereotypes build-up includes two processes. The first is the categorizing, in which

people, as observers, naturally categorize different objects in groups and do not think of the respective object as being unique (Fiske, Neuberg, Beattie, & Milberg, 1987). In this matter we may consider for instance the social categorization as a necessary and adaptive characteristic of the social perception, but it sometimes leads people to overestimating differences between groups and within-groups similarities (Allen, & Wilder, 1975; Tajfel, & Wilkes, 1963; Wilder, 1986).

The second process which promotes stereotypes derives from the first. Although grouping human beings is similar to grouping objects, there is one vital difference. When it comes to social categorization, observers may or may not be members of a category. Groups in which we identify ourselves are known as “in-groups” and the ones we don’t identify ourselves with are named “out-groups”. The distinction is important because of the out-group homogeneity bias, which leads to the tendency of assuming higher similarities among members of the out-groups compared to the in-groups. Further, people are aware of the fine, often subtle differences between individuals of their group, but when it comes to other groups, all are the same (Linville, Fischer, & Salovey, 1989). As a consequence of the out-group homogeneity bias, people rapidly generalize from a member of the group, to the entire group (Simon, & Mummendey, 1990).

In Robert S. Feldman’s “Social Psychology”, he mentions the fact that traditional gender stereotypes are framed in highly regulated categories. An example of this matter is found in one study, in which participants were asked how they would describe the typical man and woman, using a series of dimensions such as “very passive” and “very active”. Also they are asked to mention which of these dimensions seemed the most attractive or suitable (Ridgeway, 2011). The results have shown that traits can be grouped in two categories: one referring to competences and the other to kindness and expressivity. The second category was assessed by the participants as belonging to women, while the first was seen as mostly belonging to men (Kite, Deaux, & Haines, 2008). If we were to make a list of characteristics we might say that men might be: aggressive, dominant, independent, powerful, hardy, severe, harsh, etc., while women would be: affective, attractive, curious, dreamy, dependent, kind, sexy, sentimental, weak, submissive, etc. Many times, such stereotypes turned into what we today know as sexism.

Sexism is a type of discrimination based on a person’s gender (Nelson, 2009). It starts with the simple fact that the gender is the most obviously used social category which helps us identify ourselves, compared to others. Another example in this case is the way in which Americans categorize women, as: housewives, career-oriented, athletes, feminists, and sex objects (Ashmore, & Del Boca, 1981; Deaux, 1985; Noseworthy, & Lott, 1984).

The question psychologists posed was whether stereotypes and generalized beliefs rapidly and conveniently offer certain information, what makes that negative images persist? An answer in this case could be found regarding illusory correlations.

The illusory correlation was first discovered by Loren Chapman and it was tested in social psychology by other researchers who consider that minority group members can be perceived as owning characteristics with a low probability of being shown based on the simple fact that the group members characteristics are so rare and implicitly distinctive (Chapman, 1967; Hamilton, & Gifford, 1976; Hamilton, 2015). We live in a patriarchal society in which women play a minor role, being therefore more exposed to stereotypes (Mies, 1998).

III. CONCLUSIONS

As a conclusion, if we are to assume that stereotypes are born out of the tendency to categorize other objects, and then it is easy to justify them as a necessary evil, a product of the way in which people thinks. However this conclusion is only partially correct. Some social categories are unavoidable and, most likely, lead to stereotypes. On the other hand, it is still important to identify the disabling stereotypes and avoid labeling an entire group of people or even of a society, based on them. At the same time, we may ask ourselves to what extent in an era of technology and globalization, stereotypes still make sense. It is to be seen to what extent the behavior of the present and next generations will find or not a meaning to stereotypes, especially regarding gender.

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