

Opinions about gender roles in cultural context



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The aim of this research was to investigate opinions about gender roles in cultural context.

A short interview was conducted with a White female British Student on her opinions about gender roles. The following themes form the basis of the interview: opinions about the preferred sex of first babies, how household task is divided between boys and girls, whether boys and girls were disciplined differently at home, the roles of fathers and of mothers, who should be main a family's provider, head of the house and who should be a boss. The respondent believed that it doesn't really matter if a first baby was a boy or girl. Being the only child she could not come to a firm answer as to how household task should be divided and whether boys were disciplined differently from girls. She gave a more egalitarian response as to the roles of father's and mother's, preferred family's main provider, preferred head of household and preference for chosen a boss.

These responses were discussed with reference to William and Best (1982) study on gender stereotypes across cultures. Introduction Gender has been carefully differentiated from the concept of sex in many introductory textbooks in psychology. Sex is usually defined as biological aspects of femaleness or maleness, while gender is defined as acquired behavioural and psychological aspects of being a woman or a man (Ashmore, 1990). William and Best (1982) sampled a total of 3, 000 people from thirty countries representing both Western nations (France, Germany, Norway, Holland, Italy, U.

S. A.) and non-Western nations (Malaysia, Nigeria, Peru). They used the Adjective Check list (ACL) listing 300 adjectives to study the respondents' opinions on gender stereotypes. The respondents were asked to decide whether each adjective is more descriptive of a male or a female.

If more than two thirds of the culture agreed on an adjective as fitting male or female, this was taken as consensus within the culture. If more than two thirds of cultures agreed on a characteristic then this was taken as cross-cultural consensus. According to Williams and Best (1982), a high degree of consensus existed across cultures regarding male or female stereotypes. One hundred adjectives reached consensus. Examples of adjectives that males were thought to be are active, adventurous, bossy, assertive, tough, lazy, obnoxious etc.

Females were thought to be affectionate, modest, appreciative, charming, timid, talkative, fickle etc. They however pointed out that these stereotypes were not real gender differences. Williams et al (1990) found that clear differences in gender stereotypes were found in countries that were conservative and hierarchical, with a lower level of socio-economic development, a relatively low degree of Christian affiliation, and a relatively low proportion of women attending university. Countries that valued harmony and egalitarianism had less clearly differentiated gender stereotypes.

Also, individualistic societies had less consensus about gender roles than collectivist societies. Williams and Best (1990) also found fascinating evidence related to differences in the socialisation of gender stereotypes among

children five to eleven years of age. For example across all age groups, children in most countries were more familiar to with the male stereotype than the female, suggesting that male stereotypes are more dominant in their lives and are learned earlier. Only in Brazil, Portugal, and Germany did five-year-old children clearly identified more with the female stereotype. Overall, Williams and Best suggest that gender stereotypes are more established in children by the time they are eight years old.

After that age, they serve as powerful blueprints for behaviours that are reinforced throughout life. Gender-role stereotypes influence types of clothing and social ritual, and also affect they way in which men and women in a given society view themselves and others. According to William et al (1990) by age nine, children are already applying gender stereotypes in their description of themselves. Hofstede (1980) studied work related attitudes across 50 countries.

He conducted a large scale survey of work related values in a major multinational corporation. Based on the data obtained, he generated four dimensions of differentiation among the cultures in his sample. One of these dimensions was called masculinity (MA). This dimension refers to the degree to which a culture will foster, encourage, or maintain differences between males and females. Cultures scoring high on MA tended to endorse items and values thought to be associated with masculinity and male gender roles in the work place. Japan, Austria, Venezuela, and Italy had the highest MA scores.

Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden had the lowest. Although Hofstede's (1980) study focused entirely on work-related values, his findings are however relevant in explaining that cultures will arrive at different ways of dealing with differences between men and women. Cultures vary in how they act on these gender differences, with some cultures fostering and encouraging great differences between the genders and other cultures minimizing those differences. It is precisely these cultural differences in gender roles that Hofstede's data on MA address. The aim of this research was to investigate opinions about gender roles in cultural context using Williams and Best (1982) study on gender stereotypes across cultures as a framework for discussion.

Method
Participants The respondent for the interview was a female psychology student at the University of Lincoln. She described herself as White British with English as her only fluently spoken language. **Setting** The interview took place at the University atrium at a time when it was quite. **The interview schedule** The full interview schedule is presented in Appendix One.

The biographical information questions included the participants self report on culture of origin, spoken language and opinion on whether participants perceives her culture was individualistic or collectivist. The following main themes formed the basis of the interview schedule; opinions about gender stereotypes, opinions on gender roles, and whether gender roles varies across cultures. These questions were influenced by cross-cultural studies of gender stereotypes and roles across cultures. Studies looked at included Williams and Best (1982), and Hofstede (1980). **Procedure** The respondent was first thanked for accepting to participate. The purpose of the interview

was explained to her as being a first year assessed project on people's opinions on gender roles.

The respondent was assured of the anonymity and confidentiality of her answers. She was asked whether she had any questions before the interview begins. Then she was asked if she was ready to be interviewed and also informed that she could end the interview at any time. After gaining her consent the interview began. Responses were taped recorded and transcribed later by interviewer. The interview lasted approximately twelve minutes.

Ethical consideration The respondent was assured that her answers were both confidential and anonymous. She was told that the interview was required for an assessed first year Psychology in Cultural context unit. She was asked for her permission and consent before the tape recording of the interview began. The respondent was also told that she could end the at any time.

Results and Discussion The responses to questions were discussed with reference to William and Best (1982) study on gender stereotypes across cultures and Hofstede's (1980) study on work related values. With reference to Appendix 2, the respondent was of the opinion that it doesn't really matter in her culture whether a first baby was a boy or girl. In the context of Williams and Best study, she could be seen as expressing a fairly typical opinion of individualistic societies. According to the study individualistic societies had less consensus on gender roles than collectivist. It may have also been that her country valued harmony and egalitarianism.

The respondent's opinions in this respect appear to reflect such cultural values. However this contrasted to her response on whether her culture was individualistic or collectivist. Her response to this question tended to label her culture as being more collectivist. She said: " My culture of origin is divided on whether it puts emphasis on the group or the individual as some would say it is group and others would say it is down to the individual as for me I would say it is a group but that some do perceive it to be an individual.

" The respondent stated that she was the only child and so couldn't come to a precise conclusion as to how household task should be divided between male and female children. However she said in her own case that all she had to do was to keep her room clean and sometimes helps mum with housework. Also she could not tell precisely whether boys and girls are disciplined differently. She said being an only child her parents treated her like an angel. However after the interview she pointed out that in the case of her friends who had brothers, the boys seemed to get into more trouble than the girls for doing something wrong. In this instance William et al (1990) study on gender stereotypes seem to be influential.

The study established that across all age groups, children in most countries were familiar with the male stereotype than with the female. This more or less accounted for her response that boys seem to get into more trouble. The respondent gave a more egalitarian response as to who should be head of the household. She said: " I think it should be equal, I don't think there should be one set person to be the head they should both make decisions together." In the context of Hofstede's (1980) study on work-related, her culture could be seen as scoring low on masculinity. This study also

explained why she thought who so ever earns more money should be the family's main bread winner.

And that it should not definitely be the man or the woman. She had no preference between men and women as to who should be a boss. This also tells that her culture scores low on masculinity. Personal ReflectionsI have learned more about Williams and Best study on gender stereotypes across cultures and found it useful for interpreting the interview. As the respondent comes from a different cultural background to myself, it was useful for me to learn opinions from another culture. William and Best study was useful in providing a model to think about culture and how the ideas we were discussing can be related to culture.

As my country of origin is Nigeria and my culture being more collectivist, I found her opinions very useful. It gave me an insight on how gender roles differed between the two cultures. The interview did not succeed in providing as much information on opinions about gender role in cultural context as is required. However it gave me some insight about gender stereotypes in the respondent's culture. The respondent was chosen because she was from a different culture to myself.

Although the interview went well in that she was able to answer all the questions, she did not have very firm answers for her opinions, probably because she is the only child. For future interviews I would chose someone who has both male and female siblings.