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BEYOND STEREOTYPES



Introduction



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Sometimes a glance at a person passing by on the street is enough to already think we know everything about them, or at least a lot... Who they are, what they should be doing, and what they're doing wrong. Where does this come from? What is it about us that makes it so easy to typecast people? And why do we even need stereotypes?

It's worth looking into this phenomenon. On the one hand, with the amount of information and stimuli we have to absorb on a daily basis, the time-saving function of stereotypes can be very useful. On the other hand, however, this cognitive stinginess has enormous consequences, which you can observe not only in your immediate surroundings, but also when following media reports from all over the world. Read about where they come from and how they affect our lives in the attached interview with dr. Sylwia Bedyńska entitled "At First Sight".



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Stereotypes are applied by us to others, but we can also be perceived stereotypically.

Most of us can effortlessly recall a time when someone judged us and said that we look or behave differently than we should, being, for example, a woman, a man, or a mother – simply because we belong to a particular social group. Many of us may have felt anger or a desire to rebel against imposing something on us that is not entirely compatible with who we are.



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Sometimes we don't know exactly what it is that's bothering us. After all, each of us needs a sense of belonging to a group with which they share some qualities. At the same time, membership means assigning us a social scenario that we "should" pursue. Going beyond this imaginary role exposes us to discomfort, judgement, and even rejection. This applies both to us, adults, and children who, on the basis of messages from the environment, quickly build an idea of the scenarios into which they should fit. So how do we broaden the description of these roles so as not to lose belonging, but also not to give up on our individual needs?

It's worth looking at how such beliefs have formed in our heads and why language plays a huge role in this. It's the messages – praise, judgements, comments – that, together with our specific behaviours, co-create the children's ideas about who they are and who they "should" be. So how should we talk to them so as not to limit them with stereotypes? Take a look at our posters with suggestions of good words that will help dispel gender stereotypes.

We also encourage you to look at your own beliefs regarding the extent to which our skills are defined by gender – and whether they are at all. Dr. Maria M. Pawłowska talks about how this happens and how it affects our lives. Perhaps you will discover that your choices have also repeatedly resulted from beliefs about what you can and cannot do depending on gender.

We want a good future for all of us, so let us not be constrained by stereotypes.

AT FIRST SIGHT

A manager interviews a woman for a job and consciously decides, “OK. She’s a woman, so she must be dumb. I will propose lower salary then”. That’s not how discrimination works. Dominika Wantuch talks to Sylwia Bedyńska, PhD

Sylwia Bedyńska, PhD – a psychologist, head of the Institute of Fundamentals of Psychology at the SWPS University. She works at the Centre for Research on Social Relations. She studies stereotype threat, i.e. how negative labelling of group members’ abilities affects their actual social functioning and achievements.

How long do we take to judge a person?

It depends what kind of judgement we’re talking about. If it’s a psychologist who has to give an assessment on a child, it will take long, because they have to follow a certain protocol. And in everyday life? Well, a fraction of a second.

That’s fast.

And how much time does it take you to have a look at somebody and think “a hausfrau”, “a dumb blonde”, “a loser”, “a bad mother”, etc. It’s a rapid process, because we judge people automatically.

Is it beyond our control?

The initiation of the stereotyping process is. We see somebody and an evaluative thought crosses our mind instantly. You can say that it’s been so since the dawn of time, as stereotypes and evaluation processes accompany us since the beginning of mankind. One might suppose that they are a by-product of the creation of social groups, or, as Yuval Harari would have it, the most important evolutionary invention of Homo sapiens.

Functioning in any social group is based on the recognition that one belongs to it. Just look at babies who very quickly begin to differentiate between female and male faces, and then to create groups: mum and dad, that is us, and others, that is strangers. Most likely, rapid evaluation was very useful in the evolutionary sense, because it helped people survive. By using stereotypes, they were able to quickly define a stranger who could be a threat.

But our evaluation of a person is not completely arbitrary, is it?

It's the outcome of several factors. First of all, the way our brain is constructed makes us automatically classify people. This process is based on some distinctive features, such as sex, race or age, and some less distinctive features, for example when we talk of classifying by sexual orientation or religion. Such automation allows us to save cognitive resources, because our brain is not able to process all information. Quite often, it has to make use of simplification, routine and automation. These tools are convenient and quick, and reflective processing of information takes time and effort. In the case of stereotypes, we get a ready-to-use pattern and we no longer have to analyse information.

And the way we describe a given group, i.e. the content of a stereotype, is part of our culture and is passed on to subsequent generations, who repeat and reinforce it. A father passes it on to his son and a mother to her daughter, with only minor changes.

It sounds as if we were submissive victims of imprinted patterns.

We are, to a certain degree – at the level of initiating a stereotype and filling it with content. Because it's beyond our control that, for example, attractive blondes or bold and muscular men are perceived as not very clever. And it is difficult to block this stereotype out, because even if, for example, you as a mother don't want to be judgemental and pass stereotypes on to your children, unfortunately you'll fail.

Stereotypes are passed on through commercials, billboards, fables, books, and movies. And such simple and easily accessible messages already recognised by our brain as familiar sell best. Like in the Bareja movie where Mr. Mamoń says that the songs we like best are ones that we already know.



You said that even if I wanted to avoid repeating stereotypes, I'm bound to fail. How come?

Because you have them imprinted and developed in the process of social learning and, whether you want it or not, you pass them on. And children learn by copying. They mimic a group that they want to belong to and people that are close to them, because this builds a community, affection and positive bonds.

You go for a walk with your child and you see a homeless person. You try not to judge, but all it takes is a moment, a brief grimace of revulsion, a gesture of disgust, an automatic step back or clenching your child's hand, which you do without even realising it. Children are excellent radars and very quickly and unquestioningly record your reaction. Then they build up a whole story based on it and form a certain evaluation of a homeless person. Sometimes it's totally unconscious.

Professor Bogusława Błoch and Professor Dariusz Doliński conducted a very interesting study among schoolchildren. They told students about a certain fictional social group. They labelled it because it is necessary in the stereotyping process, and made a single brief negative remark about the group. After some time, they met the same children to see what they had to say about the social group. It turned out that based on the brief negative remark, the children have built up a whole story. The remark was blown up by their minds and gaps were filled with further information according to the patterns we have followed since time immemorial. This is how our mind works. It builds stories and fills gaps even at the cost of departing from the truth. This gives rise to stereotypes which affect our judgements, emotions and behaviour.

And there's no way to fight it?

We may try not to judge, but it doesn't come easy. We'll keep acting mostly according to patterns, which come down to two dimensions.

Susan Fiske, an American feminist and social psychologist who studies stereotypes, distinguishes two dimensions which describe the content of stereotypes – warmth and competence.

What does it mean?

Let's take the simplest stereotype of a hausfrau. What do we think of her? Nice, warm, helpful, caring. We speak highly of her warmth, but at the same time think that she's dumb, incompetent and not very resourceful or ambitious. This judgement breeds a certain, pitiful approach towards a hausfrau. A business woman, on the other hand, is considered intelligent and ambitious, but at the same time unscrupulous and cold. We envy her.

Do these dimensions always exclude each other?

Yes, although there are groups that get low marks in both dimensions, for example drug addicts or homeless people.

Are there people who score high in both dimensions?

If we judge others, then no, not really. A high judgement in both dimensions is reserved for one social group only – our own, the one we strongly identify with.

So if you work and raise children at the same time, you will find working mothers intelligent and warm. If, of course, you value belonging to this group. Other people will use a stereotype and see working mothers as not very bright.

That's not fair.

But this is exactly what stereotypes are like – ruthless and one-sided. Stereotypes generate plenty of errors in judgement. Of course, they are not the only cognitive errors. Let's take the fundamental attribution error. It consists in thinking about someone else's failures, for example the failures of someone else's children, as resulting from their personal traits. If your neighbour's child gets a fail grade at school, we believe that the child is a dunce and is simply not bright enough. However, if our child fails, we attribute it to external factors (not enough sleep, a bad day, distress).

Because of the attribution error we make judgements that obscure true reasons for the behaviours we observe in people.

Interestingly, when we think about ourselves and our successes, it works the opposite way. We attribute our successes to our internal traits and talents and we rarely think that we succeeded because we were lucky.



Doesn't the way we judge others change depending on the social, political or economic context? After all, a hausfrau is viewed differently today than 40 or 50 years ago.

No, it doesn't. It's still the same stereotype, except that 40 years ago nobody reflected on it and the stereotypical approach could be seen in the way women were treated.

We often fail to identify our feelings towards certain groups in general, but it shows in our behaviour. I don't want to offend anybody, so I will draw on my experience. The SWPS University is located in Warsaw's Praga district where there's quite a lot of people of Romani descent. If a Romani gets on the bus with me, it is quite possible that I will move away. There's a stereotype of the gypsy thief, so I won't even notice that I'm taking a step back and I won't be aware of that.

And it won't change even if the Romani are your best students?

No, it won't. These automatic reactions can only change when I recognise them and start controlling them. So, if I sit on the examination board and a student of Romani descent enters the room, I can do two things – ignorantly use the stereotype and automatically condemn the student to a lower grade, or focus on this specific person and judge them based on their individual skills. But this process is extremely straining for our brain. It requires large cognitive resources, self-reflection and mental fitness.

And we like to cut corners...

And what makes the matter even more complicated is the fact that a judgement is quite often not even conscious. So, we judge unconsciously and this determines the way we act. This can often be seen in companies that discriminate against women.

How come?

Well, do you know a manager who will openly admit that he discriminates against women by offering them a lower salary and position?

No.

Well, that's because it's not like the manager consciously decides, *"OK. She's a woman, so she must be dumb. I will propose lower salary then"*. The stereotype that a woman has lower competences may not resurface in a conscious judgement, but she will receive a lower salary.

Are women at a greater risk of judgement than men?

No, they aren't. Both sexes are subject to similar pressure, but in different areas. Men possibly even more, because not that much attention is paid, for example, to assessing the competence of a man taking a paternity leave. And such a man is less valuable in the eyes of the employer, too.

Besides, I think that stereotypes are most dangerous when they concern groups and minorities that are not effectively protected.

LGBT?

That's one example. It's a group that is not protected and is also judged in terms of a third dimension, not distinguished by Susan Fiske, but mentioned by Bogdan Wojciszke. Non heterosexual people are considered immoral and all immoral behaviours are attributed to them, such as the cruelly unjust stigma of a gay person being a paedophile. This stereotype is spreading like a virus.

What's even worse, it also begins to function within the LGBT community itself. In the United States, Élisabeth Bosson and her team conducted a study on this phenomenon. They asked homosexual men to play with children for a while. The sheer fact of interacting with a child triggered a negative stereotype of a homosexual man in the heads of the study subjects. And even though these men knew that they are not dangerous, they still were aware that they are seen as a threat. Therefore, they couldn't help thinking that they had to be careful and cautious and keep a distance.

Unfortunately, each of us belongs to some group that is judged stereotypically. Sometimes we do it to ourselves. When I make a mistake while driving my car, I think that I drive "like a blonde".

This phenomenon of stereotype threat was first demonstrated by American psychologists Steele and Aronson on Afro-American students, who are considered less smart. It turned out that when this stereotype was triggered in their heads, they did worse in tests. And if nobody reminded them of the stereotype, their scores were on par with those of white students.



It seems so simple! All we have to do is stop telling girls that they are worse in science and they'll do better?

You touched upon an interesting issue, as new research has appeared on this subject. It needs some additional analysis, but its conclusions are interesting.

Two researchers, Stoet and Geary, analysed scores of lower secondary school pupils in PISA studies and checked how pupils performed in math tests in countries with different approach to gender equality. It turned out that in Scandinavian countries, in which gender equality is of great importance and where pupils choose courses themselves, girls don't perform better at all. They hypothesised that the reason could be stereotypes, which, despite lack of discrimination, resurface through other channels and do their dirty job, causing girls, who are guided by them, to take no interest in science courses.

In post-Soviet states, math test scores of boys and girls are similar, perhaps because the economic pressure is greater there and this limits the impact of stereotypes. When choosing fields of study, girls take into consideration economic prospects rather than interests. They select science courses because it pays off, so the influence of stereotypes might be weaker in this case.

So is there a chance that we will fight them?

I don't think so. They'll always be there. This is how our brain works. Besides, the underlying mechanism of stereotypes is sometimes beneficial.

From what I hear, there are no benefits.

A stereotype is a kind of a pattern. Thanks to stereotypes, when entering a room, we know what to sit on, because a pattern of a chair allows us to locate the correct piece of furniture, even if it is a designer chair and has three legs. The stereotype itself does no harm, because it's a kind of a cognitive structure. The harm is done by people who use stereotypes in their judgements and allow them to control their behaviour. Of course, there are certain benefits, because stereotypes are also used for building a positive image of one's own social group and for building its unity. Stereotypes simplify the world, although sometimes excessively.

That's why we shouldn't fight stereotypes, but judging each other based on these automatic thoughts. We should fight the application of these patterns in our lives. We should be aware of their existence and be able to stop them before taking any action. That's what procedures are for. Job applications in the United States often give no indication of the applicant's sex. There's an anecdote of the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra where women were not admitted for a long time because, allegedly, they had lower competence than men. However, when a procedure of auditions behind the curtain was put into place, women joined the orchestra. They still raise controversy, but they are hired.

Procedures may be used in professional life, but using them in personal life and in relationships is more difficult.

It takes a lot of effort, understanding the mechanisms of our own mind and learning self-awareness. It also requires not taking ourselves too seriously and admitting to ourselves that we sometimes use stereotypes. On the other hand, it requires recognising that others also use stereotypes for various reasons, often not very consciously, and judge us. For example, a woman who is a working mother will always be judged at some point and labelled as a careerist who sacrifices her children or as a “crazy” mum. It’s not pleasant, but as long as such judgements don’t result in aggression or law violation – as in the case of black or LGBT people – we should ignore them and go on with our life. And accept that our brain is not perfect and has flaws, one of which is the inclination to cut corners.



WHY IS GENDER EQUALITY A KEY ISSUE FOR GIRLS' DEVELOPMENT?

Positive self-esteem of girls grows and reaches its peak around the age of 9. However, after the age of 10, it begins to decline. Whoever we are – we can support girls in their development, self-acceptance, and self-confidence.

Iwona Chmura-Rutkowska, PhD – pedagogue and sociologist from the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, author of the book “To Be a Girl, To Be a Boy – and Survive. Gender and Violence at School in Teenage Narratives”.

We want girls to have the same opportunities to develop and choose their life paths as boys, to feel as important a part of society, to be safe, healthy, confident, to set ambitious goals, to believe in their abilities and to experience respect for their choices, passions and ways of life. So they can walk their own paths. How can we help them build and strengthen their self-esteem?

Looking closely at girls' everyday lives, it is clear that at home, at school and in other areas of life, girls all too often undergo training in passivity, silence, submission, responsibility and adaptation to others, confirming their belief in the lack of ability, insecurity when speaking publicly and defending their beliefs, focusing on physical attractiveness, self-criticism and sexualisation of their own bodies, i.e. perceiving and treating it as an object that must meet someone else's expectations and which is to fit into a specific pattern of sexual attractiveness, hence girls' efforts to have “sexy” attributes – clothes or hairstyles, to present themselves in a particular way on social media and describe themselves through terms related to sexuality, etc.

Differences in the perception of the behaviour of boys and girls and our beliefs

Each and every one of us can give many examples of this from our own lives. In many subtle ways, we undermine the development of girls, discouraging them from being leaders. When a little boy is decisive and confident, he gets a leadership label. When a girl behaves in the same way, she is very often referred to as “bossy”. Most girls throughout their childhood hear and see other women who judge and criticise their appearance. As they grow up, they themselves become very judgemental about their own bodies and those of other girls. Girls learn very early that their body and appearance are objects of someone's interest, pleasure and desire. Instead of beneficial knowledge about the structure and healthy functioning of the body and the development of sexuality, they receive advice on how to modify their appearance to please others. Culture has never sexualised girls so directly before. The Internet has become an area and an opportunity for “fishing”, exploitation, humiliation, and intimidation.

It is worth realising for ourselves what we have been taught about girls and women. Stereotypes related to femininity are our internal scheme, which is worth verifying. Because all beliefs about what girls and women are “by nature” and what they “should be” prevent us from supporting girls in exploiting all their potential, and not just the part that society considers “feminine”. Let us consider the effect of upbringing in the belief that girls should be: delicate, gentle, physically weak, quiet, dependent, variable, emotional, taking care of their appearance and focused on the private sphere.

What blocks girls

Whether we are parents or people who, in different roles and areas, influence girls’ lives, very often, in many different ways, without reflection, following our own beliefs and prejudices about femininity, we unconsciously contribute to weakening and blocking girls’ development:

- by offering different games, activities, physical activities, tasks, exercises, prizes, gifts or clothes to boys and girls,
- by applying double standards for assessing appearance and behaviour, e.g. by exaggerating the requirements for girls regarding the aesthetics of the work they do, applying specific restrictions on the way girls dress for school and lowering the requirements or assessments regarding subjects that are stereotypically considered male,
- by expressing more or less explicitly your own or borrowed/assimilated, harmful views about what boys and girls are or should be (“you behave worse than a boy”, “a girl should be able to write better”),
- by dividing interests, passions, school subjects and scientific fields into appropriate or more suitable for boys and girls,
- by treating what the girls have to say as less important (silence training),
- by putting emphasis on being kind and polite instead of allowing girls to express their own opinions (training submission and discipline towards authorities and norms),
- by disregarding or discouraging girls when appointing important functions and tasks, suggesting that boys are “by nature” more suited to these functions,
- by providing boys and girls with educational materials, set books or textbooks in which the figures of girls and women are stereotyped or omitted in the narrative about the world (e.g. in Polish textbooks and set books, men are presented in social and professional roles related to power, prestige and wealth, high education and autonomy, while women are presented in professions related to working in low-paid positions in trade and services or as people outside the world of professional work – unemployed, taking care of loved ones, working at home),
- by focusing on the appearance of girls, commenting on it, introducing regulations relating only to the appearance and clothing of girls, assessing and criticising,

- by sexualising the girls' behaviour, assigning them sexual meanings that are not the girls' intention. Girls receive a number of behavioural prohibitions every day, such as: don't sit like that, dress modestly, don't smile provocatively, etc., and hear comments and "jokes" of a sexual nature,
- by disregarding situations in which peers violate the boundaries and dignity of girls. This phenomenon consists of all unwanted forms of verbal and physical contact, such as touching different parts of the girl's body, pinching, patting, pushing one's body against theirs, kissing; verbal attacks, such as: name-calling, publicly commenting on their appearance and behaviour, gossip, intimidation, humiliation, using words of a sexual or homophobic nature, and harassment and sexual violence: forcing to watch pornography, sexual assault, forced sex and rape.

How to empower girls

Positive self-esteem of girls grows and reaches its peak around the age of 9. However, after the age of 10, it begins to decline. It's not surprising. This is a time at which society begins to insist on stereotypical "feminine" characteristics, while at the same time making it clear that what is masculine is better, more valuable, stronger and more important.

The influence of messages regarding social norms, which we receive from family, peers, neighbours and acquaintances, various institutions or the media, lasts throughout our lives but in childhood we are virtually defenceless in the face of these social pressures.



10 ways of promoting girls' self-esteem and self-confidence

1. Take the time to understand the girl's current problems and needs. These problems may change. Talk to her about them, without judging, comparing and imposing your vision of femininity and how "it should be". Let no topics, even difficult ones, become taboo.
2. Focus on the girl's intellect and skills. Suggest activities and classes in which she will learn new things, will have the opportunity to demonstrate courage and self-sufficiency, will be responsible for the whole and appreciated for the effort.
3. Give her signals that you believe in her and that she'll manage. The road to achieving a goal isn't always easy and simple. It is filled with various challenges. Your support, but not doing their work for them, can be extremely helpful in maintaining motivation to carry on.
4. Appreciate the successes and accompany calmly in failures. Teach the girl that difficulties and failures are part of learning and the way to success, and that it's worth being persistent in carrying out your plan.
5. Give the girl a choice and space to express her opinion. Let her voice and decisions be carefully heard and respected. Encourage the girl to share her views and knowledge, present her own perspective and come up with her own solutions. Ask for her opinions. Believe what she says.
6. Don't criticise girls or women for their appearance. And don't talk about yourself and/or your body in an offensive way.
7. Support, suggest and accompany the girl in various forms of physical activity. Teach her how to take care of her health and fitness. Don't treat her body as a project, though.
8. Encourage critical scrutiny of the patterns that culture offers girls and women. Talk about the consequences of following fashion as well as unhealthy, risky and destructive behaviours related to adapting to patterns.
9. Help the girl understand what boundaries are, both physical and mental. Teach her how to create safe boundaries for herself, how to recognise and react assertively in the event of violations of boundaries, and seek help when she experiences harm. Convince her that safety and a life without violence are her rights. Be attentive and alert to all signs of sexual harassment – do not underestimate any signals, believe what the girl says, be on her side, act decisively.
10. Show positive patterns. Offer girls books, films, meetings with women who are successful in various areas of life, including those that are considered stereotypically "masculine". Give special support to the girl when her interests, activities or behaviour don't fit into the traditional, socially expected gender patterns.

Let her be herself!

Whoever we are, we can support girls in their development, self-acceptance and confidence by providing them with a safe space and conditions for multilateral development, tools to understand the world and cope with different situations, and inspiring role models.

“BETTER” AND “WORSE” GENDER

What messages permeate our culture? How do they affect the perception of roles and tasks of men and women? Who is their transmission channel?

Iwona Chmura-Rutkowska, PhD – pedagogue and sociologist from the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, author of the book “To Be a Girl, To Be a Boy – and Survive. Gender and Violence at School in Teenage Narratives”.

The pursuit of true equality between men and women is based on overcoming the many stereotypical and archaic ways of thinking, which are firmly rooted in the culture in which we live. No one is born with prejudices or definitions of femininity and masculinity – they are variable in time and dependent on culture. Children, by observing adults and the environment and receiving information, prohibitions and orders, learn what is considered “appropriate” for each sex in their environment, and construct a “gender schema” on this basis.

Sandra Bem¹, who discovered this mechanism for the development of gender identity, also noted that culture is permeated by three “meta-messages” concerning gender, which are a barrier to the equal treatment of boys and girls, men and women. She called them “the lenses of gender” because they distort our perception of and thinking about others and affect our behaviour and relationships.

The first of the lenses is gender polarisation, i.e. the belief that all human features and attributes can be assigned to one of the sexes, i.e. they can be described as more or less “male” or “female”. Hence the popular belief that men and women come from two different planets. It is also a source of tendencies to emphasise gender differences, assign different roles and tasks to men and women, perceive them as people with different personality traits and expect different behaviours from them. Gender therefore becomes the central principle of describing human beings, although in reality it is one of the many components of our identity, and neither gender has a monopoly on any feature of human personality.

The second lens is androcentrism, which carries the message that men and everything in culture that is referred to as “masculine” are treated as more important, stronger and better. In other words, a man’s perspective and experience are treated as a neutral norm, a standard, and women and femininity are defined as different and worse. Hence the number of prohibitions and orders, rights and customs that depreciate girls and women, attribute lower social status to them and limit their possibilities of deciding about themselves and acquiring resources. Androcentrism is at the root of all forms of discrimination and violence against girls and women.

¹ S. L. Bem, *The Lenses of Gender: Transforming the Debate on Sexual Inequality*, Yale University Press, 1993.

The third lens that strengthens and justifies the previous two is biological essentialism, according to which differences between men and women and male dominance in all spheres of life are determined by biology (or a “divine plan”), and thus are “natural” and inevitable.

Men and women are very different, men are a “better” gender, and all this is due to nature – and these three ideas, permeating our culture and our thinking, are based on the traditional system of gender roles: that is, the distribution of attributes, activities and the assigned meanings in the world (better - worse) depending on gender. These ideas contain a fundamental inequality and contradict not only modern knowledge about human development, but also the principles of justice, equality, and democracy. The problem is that this anachronistic way of thinking, which is a fundamental source of barriers and human harm, is still passed down from generation to generation. The transmission channel for these beliefs, stereotypes and prejudices is education and socialisation in all their agendas: the family, the closest social environment, peers, in institutions and the media.



IF YOU WANT A GOOD FUTURE FOR YOUR DAUGHTER, DON'T KEEP HER FROM PLAYING WITH TOY CARS

I know that online magazines publish various gift guides on what will make an excellent birthday present for a boy and a girl, but it's absurd. Gender has no significance whatsoever. After all, it does not determine what we play with. Ewa Furtak talks to Maria M. Pawłowska, PhD

Maria M. Pawłowska, PhD – graduate of the University of Bristol, University of Cambridge, and University of Geneva, holder of a scholarship from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and from the Coimbra's European project. For many years she was a lecturer in post-graduate gender studies at the Polish Academy of Sciences (PAN), a sexual educator and an expert of the Institute of Public Affairs (ISP). She is the author of, among others, the publication titled "Female and Male Brains – Neurosexism in Action and Its Social Consequences". Today, she is part of "Vis-nea" – the first business in Poland created entirely by women and engaged in the collaboration between science and business.

You tore Polish school textbooks to pieces, arguing that they reinforce neurosexist stereotypes that lock girls into traditional roles and affirm them in their conviction that choice is not an option.

You can't be something that you don't see. It's really essential. Mae Jemison, the first black woman to travel to space, saw Nichelle Nichols as her inspiration – a black actress playing captain Uhura in the "Star Trek" series. What are Polish textbooks like? Well, they reinforce the stereotypes that due to their "dissimilarity" (from the male "standard" for human species), women are not fit for playing certain roles. Although women are more empathetic and emotional, they have less scientific minds, do worse in maths, physics and other sciences, and are only fit for tasks that don't involve thinking, making difficult decisions or managing people.

Basically, all school textbooks only show one woman who was successful in sciences – Marie Skłodowska-Curie. In general, textbooks include very few women depicted in a role other than a mother or wife.

This issue does not only concern textbooks. When cartoons were analysed, for example, it turned out that only one percent of the women featured in them play a role different than that of a wife or mother. Besides, stereotypically, every woman definitely wants to be a mother, while men have a choice – not every man necessarily wants to be a father.

Is it not true, then, that we are from Venus and men are from Mars?

Women and men usually differ in the reproductive organs they have, but this in no way translates into some innate intellectual differences or different capabilities they might have to perform, for example, a particular job. Male and female brains do not differ significantly in their structure. A male brain is sometimes bigger, but this is simply related to general body weight and stature. Neurosexism is nothing more than repeating the myths about the differences between female and male brains. Interestingly, these myths are usually based on old research, carried out 20 or 30 years ago, which has not been replicated and verified.

The term *neurosexism* has been coined by Cordelia Fine – a professor at the University of Melbourne and author of the book “*Delusions of Gender*” (it was also published in Poland last year). In her book, she described the very phenomenon of using neurobiological studies to support sexist stereotypes about the intellectual capabilities of women and men.

If the studies are old, why not discard them? Or do they have relevance to the lives and careers of contemporary women?

Of course they do, and the relevance is huge. The most feminised professions in Poland offer low pay and little prestige. They include kindergarten teachers, carers for the elderly, nurses, secretaries, and medical laboratory technicians. According to Statistics Poland (GUS), the percentage of women in these professions is 94.9 to 99.8 percent, but there are no laws that forbid men to be kindergarten teachers, are there? It is also noteworthy that at the time when IT jobs were low paid, many women worked in such professions. As soon as this changed, men began to dominate them.

It is difficult for women to access top positions. As much as 30 percent of all employers admit that they would rather hire a man in an executive post, and only 6 percent respond that they would offer such a post to a woman. This also translates into earnings.

It has nothing to do with competence, as women in Poland have, for example, better education. It is solely the effect of stereotypes, according to which, due to certain qualities, women are less fit for managing people.

We do have certain advantages over men, though. For example, girls talk sooner than boys, don't they?

Yes, indeed. Studies in small children show that girls have better language skills. However, there is no proof that this is due to predisposition. More likely, it is connected with the fact that guardians and parents talk to girls more often, believing – stereotypically – that they are more interested in interaction.

Some professions in Poland don't even have female names. What do we call, for example, a male nurse? However, I am certain that there are professions fit only for men on account of physical characteristics alone. I just cannot imagine a female miner working underground.

Well, I can. A well-built, strong woman – and there are women like that – will do much better in such a job than a short, diminutive man. In fact, you don't have to imagine that. Just read about the history of post-war Silesia. My husband would clip my daughter's nails when she was little, because we were told that it should be done by the parent with better manual skills, and that's definitely my husband.

Yet, it works both ways. Midwives are almost exclusively women. If you talk to men who chose this profession, they say that women giving birth just can't believe that a man can be empathic enough.

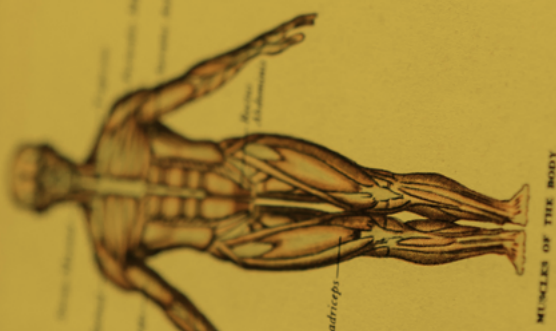
On the other hand, the fact that there are so many male obstetrician-gynaecologists (who earn much more than midwives) raises no eyebrows. No-one is questioning the fact that a man may lack certain qualities to pursue this profession. Moreover, sometimes male gynaecologists treat midwives condescendingly – as a representative of a worse and less responsible profession. Yet, it was a midwife who saved my life when I was pregnant. I have a great deal of respect for midwives and I believe that it is one of the most important professions in the world.

However, sometimes men have it tough too and therefore the fight against neurosexism is also in their interest. For many men, the myth that a man has to earn more no matter what costs them their health.

There's also the hormones.

To date there is no proof that hormones affect the structure or function of our brains. Testosterone is not a factor which might determine the fact that, for example, men are predisposed to be better mathematicians.

In fact, the term “sex hormones” itself is, in my opinion, incorrect. Both androgens and oestrogens can be found in both sexes and they also affect other organs, such as the skeletal system, in both men and women.



Polish evangelicals have recently started discussing the possibility of allowing women to be ordained priests, as is already the case in some other countries. This matter is, however, still postponed given social and cultural issues.

The domination of the Catholic Church in Poland translates greatly into the specific roles that girls are locked into. The Church is not progressive at all. It is an organisation completely dominated by men and it has an enormous impact on our lives. Unfortunately, this is the very reason why in school textbooks there is more about Pope John Paul II (a man) than Marie Skłodowska-Curie (a woman).

The fact that the Catholic Church still promotes a traditional division of roles in a family also does not help the professional opportunities of women. It is the mother who usually receives the call from the kindergarten if the child has diarrhoea or fever. Only 5 percent of fathers in Poland take their paternity leave for longer than 2 weeks.

At my renowned high school, a female teacher would tell us in French language classes that it's the boys who need to study, because the girls would simply *"put on a fancy hat and do just fine"*.

Many female and male teachers are well qualified and competent, and do a great job in our sexist society. Unfortunately, among them there are also individuals who only ask male students to explain something or write something on the board and who compliment female students on their looks. And another thing: why do school dress codes often refer only to girls? We need to start working on changing that, and not only that.

Is there anything else that we should pay attention to?

Well, it often starts already during pregnancy: a mum-to-be often thinks differently about her child, depending if it is a boy or a girl. We should not force girls, before they are even born, into a symbolic pink box decorated with cute teddy bears. The brain develops the fastest within the first two years of our life, and these conditions many things in later years. We should not force girls to play with dolls if they prefer toy cars. Let them play with both. During this summer holidays, we had someone assume again and again that, since we were coming with a child owning a cross bike, it had to be a boy, while it's actually our daughter who rides such a bike. I have also witnessed someone take a book about cars away from a 10-month old girl, as it was supposedly more appropriate for her little brother.

I know that online magazines publish various gift guides on what will make an excellent birthday present for a boy and a girl, but it's absurd. Gender has no significance whatsoever. After all, it does not determine what we play with. We should never say – even as a joke – that our daughter has a "fiancé" in kindergarten. We should react to sexist remarks already in playgrounds. We should never tell a crying boy to stop acting like a girl.

What else can be done so that girls believe that they don't have to be stuck for life in a pink box decorated with teddy bears?

Well, I can tell you how we raise our daughter. We bought her books about female pilots, chemists, politicians, and successful sportswomen, so that she can see – like Mae Jemison – who she can become. In fact, you don't even have to buy books, you may borrow them. In Poland, we have great libraries with a wide range of books to choose from. We should show our daughters not only working fathers, but also working and successful mums.

It's not like nothing can be done. Despite a traditionally low number of women at Polish technical universities, thanks to the "Girls at Technical Universities" (*"Dziewczyny na Politechniki"*) campaign – which has been going on for several years now – the number of women enrolling at such universities is higher every year. On the other hand, we would not need such campaigns today if not for years of leading girls to believe that they are not fit for studying science-based programs.

For the first time in history we also have as many as 12 women holding the post of vice-chancellors (rectors) of state higher education institutions. Not long ago it was simply unimaginable.

Perhaps, then, it is worth implementing a rule that when applying for a job, we shouldn't reveal our sex in the resume or application?

Some countries already have such policies in place. I honestly think that Poland is one of the few countries where we attach photographs to application documents. I believe it's something we should abandon as soon as possible.

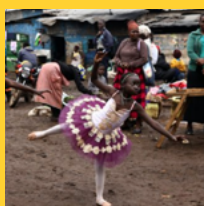
I wonder how much longer we, male and female journalists, should write sensationalistic articles about, for example, a woman becoming a fighter pilot.

Sensationalism is probably not the way to go, but we definitely should write about it. There's nothing wrong with praising success, especially when men keep beating us at the game of thrones. We need to support each other.



Throughout our life, each of us acquires many stereotypes regarding various groups, including those to which we belong. Stereotypes prevent us from seeing ourselves and others adequately. However, if we notice that a stereotypical opinion has entered our head, we can consciously try to block it. Let's be careful!

More articles on stereotypes are available at kulczykfoundation.org.pl/en/education



Stereotypes. A mini guide for the conscious user

Where do stereotypes come from? This is a side effect of our mind's "shortcuts" and using heuristics instead of logical rules in our thinking. Stereotypes interfere with the adequate perception of oneself and others, but they can be minimised by noticing their automatic appearance. Read how to do it!



Mom is cooking? No - we cook together!

Rules are important, but when they are too rigid, they can be very restrictive. Stereotypes are easily reproduced by children, but they can also be harmful. To ensure that a child develops in accordance with their own potential, it is important to build a safe atmosphere that allows them to get to know themselves. Children need help in expanding their field of choice: thanks to their imagination and curiosity, they test their own possibilities in new activities, tasks, and areas.



"Good girl" or "rascal"? Avoid labels because they stick for a long time!

Labels stick for a long time and a child's potential and interests may change. Trying new things, testing, and experimenting are activities that help you find your way. A teacher is a natural and important guide. It is important that they encourage children to walk their own paths, not the beaten track.



Flexibility of mind is flexibility of choice

Who do I want to be? What am I striving for? What's right? Students ask many questions and the answers are rarely unambiguous. Social limitations, as well as those imposed by their own minds, can block students' development and choices. This is why the role of a teacher is so important – to inspire, to support, and to show that an open mind means a much greater chance for self-fulfilment.



A conversation with your own mind

The mind is a genius tool for exploring the world, provided we update the software. We should show students how to keep the mind updated and to correct the conclusions it draws. We should teach logical thinking and a critical approach to information sources. This will help students think about the world, about others, and about themselves.

10 ways of promoting girls' self-esteem and self-confidence



1. TAKE THE TIME TO UNDERSTAND THE GIRL'S CURRENT PROBLEMS AND NEEDS.

These problems may change. Talk to her about them, without judging, comparing and imposing your vision of femininity and how "it should be". Let no topics, even difficult ones, become taboo.

2. FOCUS ON THE GIRL'S INTELLECT AND SKILLS.

Suggest activities and classes in which she will learn new things, will have the opportunity to demonstrate courage and self-sufficiency, will be responsible for the whole and appreciated for the effort.

3. GIVE HER SIGNALS THAT YOU BELIEVE IN HER AND THAT SHE'LL MANAGE.

The road to achieving a goal isn't always easy and simple. It is filled with various challenges. Your support, but not doing their work for them, can be extremely helpful in maintaining motivation to carry on.

4. APPRECIATE THE SUCCESSES AND ACCOMPANY CALMLY IN FAILURES.

Teach the girl that difficulties and failures are part of learning and the way to success, and that it's worth being persistent in carrying out your plan.

5. GIVE THE GIRL A CHOICE AND SPACE TO EXPRESS HER OPINION.

Let her voice and decisions be carefully heard and respected. Encourage the girl to share her views and knowledge, present her own perspective and come up with her own solutions. Ask for her opinions. Believe what she says.

6. DON'T CRITICISE GIRLS OR WOMEN FOR THEIR APPEARANCE.

And don't talk about yourself and/or your body in an offensive way.

7. SUPPORT, SUGGEST AND ACCOMPANY THE GIRL IN VARIOUS FORMS OF PHYSICAL ACTIVITY.

Teach her how to take care of her health and fitness. Don't treat her body as a project, though.

8. ENCOURAGE CRITICAL SCRUTINY OF THE PATTERNS THAT CULTURE OFFERS GIRLS AND WOMEN.

Talk about the consequences of following fashion as well as unhealthy, risky and destructive behaviours related to adapting to patterns.

9. HELP THE GIRL UNDERSTAND WHAT BOUNDARIES ARE, BOTH PHYSICAL AND MENTAL.

Teach her how to create safe boundaries for herself, how to recognise and react assertively in the event of violations of boundaries, and seek help when she experiences harm. Convince her that safety and a life without violence are her rights. Be attentive and alert to all signs of sexual harassment – do not underestimate any signals, believe what the girl says, be on her side, act decisively.

10. SHOW POSITIVE PATTERNS.

Offer girls books, films, meetings with women who are successful in various areas of life, including those that are considered stereotypically "masculine". Give special support to the girl when her interests, activities or behaviour don't fit into the traditional, socially expected gender patterns.

Let her be herself!

If you meet a girl

– you don't need to describe her by saying that she is sweet and nice like a princess, or that she looks pretty. Also, watch out for „compliments” that suggest that, for example, she is strong like a boy. You can use many different words that relate to her various characteristics and behaviors. You can say that she is:

ENTHUSIASTIC
FUNNY
INTELLIGENT
DETERMINED
RESILIENT
STRONG
BRAVE
INSIGHTFUL

ATTENTIVE
POWERFUL
CURIOUS OF THE WORLD
COURAGEOUS
HEALTHY
CREATIVE
FULL OF ENERGY
FULL OF STRENGTH

ORIGINAL
SENSITIVE
GENEROUS
INVENTIVE
RESPECTFUL
FOCUSED
SELF-CONFIDENT
TALENTED



SPECIAL
COMPASSIONATE
CHEERFUL
SMART
NICE
CARING

HONEST
RELIABLE
ENERGETIC
OPTIMISTIC
DETERMINED
IMAGINATIVE

TRUSTWORTHY
RESOURCEFUL
BRILLIANT
ENTERPRISING
FIT
FAST

**YOU ARE A TRUE LEADER, AN ARTISTIC SOUL,
A GREAT FRIEND, A YOUNG SCIENTIST!**

If you meet a boy

– you don't need to describe him by saying that he is tough as a superman, that he must not show weakness and must always win. You can use many different words that relate to his various characteristics and behaviors. You can say that he is:

OPTIMISTIC
PROTECTIVE
RESOURCEFUL
RESPECTFUL
BRILLIANT
INTELLIGENT
JOYFUL
ORIGINAL

SENSITIVE
KIND
GENEROUS
INGENIOUS
HONEST
RELIABLE
ENTERPRISING
ENERGETIC

PERSISTENT
ENTHUSIASTIC
BRAVE
QUICK-WITTED
ATTENTIVE
POWERFUL
CURIOUS ABOUT
THE WORLD



COURAGEOUS
HEALTHY
CREATIVE
RESOLUTE
RESILIENT
TRUSTWORTHY

FULL OF ENERGY
FOCUSED
SELF-CONFIDENT
CAPABLE
UNIQUE
DELICATE

FUNNY
DETERMINED
IMAGINATIVE
ATHLETIC
FULL OF STRENGTH
FAST

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