

New research: Women like women more than men like men

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Even though men are often perceived to be at the top, especially in the corporate world, new gender research from Purdue University shows that men are not generally the preferred gender.

This new research shows that when adults' automatic attitudes are measured, they have more positive feelings about women as a group.

"This seems contradictory to other research out there, because men generally enjoy higher status," said Stephanie Goodwin, an assistant professor of psychological sciences who studies the social cognitive effects of biases and prejudices. "Even today, men are generally the ones in positions of power in the family and the workplace, and they tend to make more money."

Goodwin, also a member of Purdue's Women Studies Program, teamed with Laurie Rudman, professor of psychology at Rutgers University, to conduct four studies measuring implicit attitudes of 379 adults. Their results show that women prefer women, and men, on average, don't have a preference toward either gender. Although men, on average, did not show in-group favoritism, individual men's responses varied widely, with some men showing a preference for women and others showing a preference for men. The study appeared in the October issue of the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. This research was funded by the National Science Foundation and Purdue's Department of Psychological Sciences.

"Gender relations are very complex," Rudman said. "So every little piece

of the puzzle brings us closer to understanding one another."

Previous research has asked people to self-report opinions on gender, but these are some of the first studies to measure people's preferences without asking a person directly, Rudman said.

Subjects at Purdue and Rutgers participated in computerized tasks that measure automatic attitudes based on how quickly a person categorizes pleasant and unpleasant attributes with each gender. For example, the tasks could determine if people associated pleasant words — good, vacation, and paradise — with women, and unpleasant words — bad, slime and grief — with men.

The results showed that women showed in-group favoritism four times greater than men. Those figures are based on an average of separate studies that involved research groups of varying sizes.

"Yes, this research goes against what people think they think, but that is the advantage of collecting data in manner where people can't control their responses," Rudman said.

For example, these studies measured if people automatically favored their mothers over their fathers, or associated male gender with violence. These experiments suggest that maternal bonding and male intimidation influence gender attitudes.

"We know that if a person has more positive experiences with women, such as their mothers, friends or co-workers, then a person is more likely to have a better attitude toward women," Rudman said. "For example, if you have a positive attitude toward your mom, which most people do because the mother tends to be the primary caregiver, then a person is more likely to like women."

However, Goodwin and Rudman were not able to investigate whether this association has more to do with caregiving than gender, because in their pool of subjects few adults were primarily raised by their fathers.

In another study, adults' attitudes were measured based on their reactions to categories associated with sexual relations.

"Sex is one of the most fundamental experiences we can have in cross-gendered relations," Goodwin said. "In the sex study, our most provocative finding revealed that the number of sexual encounters could affect men's gender preference. Heterosexual men who liked sex also like women, and that correlation would improve the more they automatically think about positive things when they think about having sex. However, it was the opposite for men who reported they were not sexually active."

This negative correlation could be related to the number of young adults who composed the average age for this sample. Some of these men may not have had a sexual experience, Goodwin said. Therefore, their attitudes could change over time.

"Or, their automatic responses could be the result of men being sensitive to others perception of their sexual orientation," she said. "Men are socialized to avoid liking men for fear of the stigma associated with being homosexual, and that may affect their automatic responses in gender preferences."

The results for all of the studies support Goodwin and Rudman's belief that learning and individual experiences contributes to a person's attitudes.

"Your biases are not really what you think as an individual," Rudman said. "You may consider yourself a good person who likes all groups of

people, but if you have had a bad experience, then that can affect your beliefs about men and women, or any other group of people."

Goodwin and Rudman said the next step in this area of research is developing a better understanding about where these kinds of biases may come from and if they affect behavior, such as conduct in the workplace.

"Applying our findings to the workplace is complicated," Goodwin says. "Other research shows that implicit attitudes regarding race do affect behavior, but we still need to evaluate if gender preferences affect attitudes and behavior. Based on this other research, we think there could be favoritism. We could assume employers are more likely to promote someone who is part of their in-group.

"But, if someone does like women at the automatic level, will they then treat men poorly? We don't know. Either way, we need to be careful about sexism. It is not limited to one form."

Goodwin's current research is looking at the implicit attitudes toward working mothers in comparison to stay-at-home moms and working fathers.

Source: Purdue University

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