

Polling data suggest gender stereotypes have significantly changed since 1940s

July 18 2019

Women have come a long way in the United States over the last 70 years, to the point where they are now seen as being as competent as men, if not more so, according to research published by the American Psychological Association.

"Challenging traditional claims that stereotypes of women and men are fixed or rigid, our study joins others in finding stereotypes to be flexible to changes in [social roles](#)," said Alice Eagly, Ph.D., of Northwestern University and lead author on the study. "As the roles of women and men have changed since the mid-20th century, so have beliefs about their attributes."

The research was published in *American Psychologist*, APA's flagship journal.

Eagly and her coauthors conducted a [meta-analysis](#) of 16 nationally representative public opinion polls involving more than 30,000 U.S. adults from 1946 to 2018. They looked at three types of traits—communion (i.e., compassion, sensitivity), agency (i.e., ambition, aggression), and competence (i.e., intelligence, creativity) - and whether participants thought each trait was truer of women or men or equally true of both.

Competence stereotypes changed dramatically over time. For example, in one 1946 poll, only 35% of those surveyed thought men and women were equally intelligent, and of those who believed there was a

difference, more thought men were the more competent sex. In contrast, in one 2018 poll, 86% believed men and women were equally intelligent, 9% believed women were more intelligent and only 5% believed men were more intelligent.

Communal stereotypes viewing women as more compassionate and sensitive than men strengthened over time. In contrast, agency stereotypes viewing men as more ambitious and aggressive than women did not significantly change over time.

"These current stereotypes should favor women's employment because competence is, of course, a job requirement for virtually all positions. Also, jobs increasingly reward social skills, making women's greater communion an additional advantage," said Eagly. "On a less positive note, most leadership roles require more agency than communion. Therefore, the lesser agency ascribed to women than men is a disadvantage in relation to leadership positions."

Eagly theorized that the considerable change in competence beliefs derives, in part, from the changing roles of men and women. Women's [labor force participation](#) has increased from 32% in 1950 to 57% in 2018, while men's participation has fallen from 82% to 69%. Women also now earn more bachelor's, master's and doctoral degrees than do men, unlike decades ago.

"Our interpretation of these findings is that women's increasing labor force participation and education underlie the increase in their perceived competence, but that occupational segregation and the division of domestic roles underlie the findings for communion and agency," she said.

As women entered paid employment in [large numbers](#), their jobs remained concentrated in occupations that reward [social skills](#) or offer

contribution to society. Women also spend approximately twice as much time on domestic work and child care as men on average, according to Eagly. In contrast, men are concentrated in [leadership roles](#) and in occupations that require [physical strength](#), competition, interaction with things, and analytical, mathematical and technical skills.

"Observation of these stark differences in the typical roles of women and men causes people to ascribe different traits to them, as shown in other research studies. Gender stereotypes thus reflect the social position of [women](#) and men in society but change when this social position shifts," she said.

More information: Gender Stereotypes Have Changed: A Cross-Temporal Meta-Analysis of U.S. Public Opinion Polls From 1946 to 2018," *American Psychologist*, July 18, 2019. [DOI: 10.1037/amp0000494](#)

Provided by American Psychological Association

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