Gender stereotypes are often accurate but vary in magnitude depending on the criterion

by Mane Kara-Yakoubian

Research published in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* found that while gender stereotypes are often viewed as misleading, they are surprisingly accurate. People correctly guess whether men or women are higher on a given trait about 85% of the time.

The accuracy of social perception has been a longstanding question in psychology, particularly regarding stereotypes, which refers to widely shared beliefs about social groups. While some research suggests that stereotypes are often exaggerated or biased, others argue they contain a "kernel of truth."

Alice H. Eagly and Judith A. Hall conducted a comprehensive review of nearly 50 years of research on gender stereotype accuracy. They aimed to quantify how well people's beliefs about male-female differences align with actual data across a wide range of attributes.

Their search included studies that used two primary methods to assess stereotype accuracy: direct comparisons and sensitivity correlations. The search process included databases such as PsycInfo, Google Scholar, and Web of Science. They identified 57 studies from 27 research papers published between 1975 and 2021, each containing one or more relevant datasets for analysis. The studies included in the review involved diverse participant samples, ranging from college students to general population respondents.

These participants were asked to estimate gender differences in various domains, such as occupational distributions, personality traits, cognitive skills, attitudes, preferences, and leadership styles. Some studies relied on self-reported data, while others used archival sources like census data, university records, and large-scale surveys as benchmarks for comparison.

In total, 673 direct comparisons were made to assess whether participants' estimates correctly matched the real-world gender differences. Additionally, 41 studies provided sensitivity correlations, which measured how closely participants' estimates aligned with actual gender differences across multiple attributes. By including both direct comparisons and sensitivity correlations, the researchers were able to evaluate not only whether people accurately identified the direction of gender differences but also how well their perceptions tracked the magnitude of these differences.

In the majority of cases, people's gender stereotypes were highly accurate in identifying whether men or women were higher on a given trait or characteristic: 85% correctly matched the real-world direction of gender differences. However, accuracy varied across different domains. People tended to underestimate gender differences in areas such as cognitive abilities, occupational distributions, and

academic performance (e.g., GPA in different college majors). In contrast, they overestimated differences in personality traits, behaviors, and social attitudes.

The sensitivity correlations further supported the conclusion that gender stereotypes are largely accurate. When averaging across all participants in a given study, the mean consensual sensitivity correlation was .77, indicating a strong relationship between stereotypical beliefs and actual gender differences.

However, individual sensitivity correlations were lower (mean $r = .54$), suggesting that while collective group judgments were highly accurate, individuals varied in their ability to estimate gender differences correctly. Furthermore, when analyzing only the magnitude of gender differences (removing the influence of direction), accuracy decreased slightly, confirming that people were better at identifying which gender was higher on a given trait than they were at estimating the precise size of the difference.

Taken together, these findings suggest that gender stereotypes reflect genuine patterns in human behavior and social roles, but are not free from bias. People may misestimate the extent of gender differences, which can lead to both exaggeration and minimization depending on the domain.

The study, "The kernel of truth in gender stereotypes: Consider the avocado, not the apple," was authored by Alice H. Eagly and Judith A. Hall.