

Comparing Men's and Women's Definition of Success

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ABSTRACT

Are the differences observed between men and women in business and corporate world a function of biological and psychological differences between the genders or are they mostly a function of cultural learning and cultural definition of gender roles? The author, using data collected on how men and women define success and the source of such definitions has found negligible differences between the two genders. These observations are explained by the fact that, as data indicates, most of such values and norms are learned in schools and universities, and the observed lack of difference among genders may be a reflection of the remarkable change in gender bias in these institutions in the past few decades. However, there are a few areas that can be interpreted to point to the existence of stronger “nurturing instinct” among women.

Keywords: Gender differences, Definition of success,



INTRODUCTION

When John Gray's book, "*Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*" was published in 1992, its success was guaranteed for all practical purposes and intends, because it hit a certain attitudinal cord in the American readers which was bound to make them respond strongly. In this society, as in almost all other societies, there seems to be a certain cultural belief, implicit or explicit, that men and women are different. Anyone who articulates this cultural belief is certain to be rewarded by public approval, and other more tangible rewards. If an explanation is also offered as to why such differences exist, and the practical implications of their mechanisms, approval and rewards are several folded proportionally.

This is an age-old belief. Whatever its origin, this belief has persisted throughout centuries in almost all civilizations. It can be argued that the most important function of this notion, which may explain its longevity, is the justification it has provided for discriminative treatment of women in the society. Discrimination against any group of people, and prejudice that follows it, seek and develop their justification in the very notions that separate such groups and differentiate them from the rest of the society. David G. Myers (1994) presents a very interesting and concise discussion of discrimination and prejudice. Based on his idea, without justification, affective attitudes of men towards women be they mothers, wives, sisters, lovers, etc. would not allow their treatment as less than equal. Psychological dissonance created by the conflicting attitudes of love, affection and general attraction and the socially determined discrimination (prejudice, sexism) against women can only become tolerable by a culturally shared belief that women are at some level essentially different from men. Such socially sanctioned beliefs (almost myths) can be observed, even to day, in many cultures where they serve as the justification for such inequitable treatment of women.

Although recent studies show that prejudice against women is "far less common today than it was" even a few decades ago (Myers, p.228), there are many articles, research papers and books that are being published every day that argue otherwise. For example see Cynthia B. Costello and others (1998), who through a series of articles examine the dynamic position of women in the American society in the twentieth century. The overwhelming argument put forward, and sentiments presented, along with data and other documentation is that there is no difference between men and women, and therefore, there is no justification for discrimination.

There is, however, a growing body of recent studies that point to the existence of some differences. Some of these articles point out differences in the biological functioning of the two genders, such as the recent report from the University of Indiana that proposed that while women use both sides of their brain while listening, men use only the left side of theirs in similar situations (LA Times), or the newer article in the *Neurobiology of Learning and Memory*, that proclaims that men and women process emotional memories in opposite sides of the amygdale region of the brain (Cahill, 2001). Others concentrate more on finding different patterns of behavior among men and women. These studies generally argue that there are different patterns of leadership behavior (see, for example Deaux, 1985; Eagly, 1990; Helgesen, 1990), or patterns of management behavior and types of relationship with subordinates and/or superiors and attitude toward life in the corporate world and place of women in it. See, for instance,

Brody, 1993; Grossman, 1993; Hall, 1984; King, 1998; LaFrance, 1992). Attitudes are learned and, therefore, are very susceptible to influence from the culture. In fact, as individuals grow up in a society many of these so called cultural attitudes are learned through the process of socialization. Many institutions are involved in this process: family, church, school, clubs, etc. Through this process of socialization/acculturation individuals learn a society's shared values, beliefs, norms, mores as well as world-view and attitudes. Thus, it is reasoned that girls and boys learn to respond to different expectations, aspire to different ideals, and hope to fulfill different roles in their lives by example, differential treatment and injection of a value system which teaches them their expected roles. Most of these processes, it is further argued, have overt or subtle sexist biases. They treat boys and girls differently and as they grow up they consider this unequal treatment not only natural but also expected and appropriate.

While all feminists (i.e., active proponents of women's equal rights in the society) agree that there are few, if any, psychological differences that would make the work place the exclusive domain of men, most opponents of feminist activism in the job market reason that women approach life and work in a totally different framework, and that these differences are more biological and psychological than cultural, and therefore, women should not be given the same opportunities, let alone special considerations--pregnancy and child care benefits notwithstanding.

An argument put forward by many feminists is that the subtle differences observed in the behaviors of male and female managers are all learned through many years of socialization. Thus, for instance, girls are brought up to become nurturing women, who pay attention to relationships and consensus building, while boys learn to become assertive, task oriented men who are more interested in solving problems than building relationships. In other words, should the society treat boys and girls as they grow up, on an equal basis, without regards to any anticipated gender-defined roles for either, the differences that are observed between genders would be less important than differences within genders. That is to say, if the acculturation process is kept constant, the cultural values, mores, norms and world views acquired by men and women in a society would be similar. Under these conditions, effects of bio-psychological factors, which presumably affect men and women differently, should be isolated and observable.

In the United States an accelerated move towards equal treatment of both genders, especially in schools and colleges, has been taking place in the past few decades. It can be observed in the increasing number of admissions of women to universities, in the growing number and type of courses that are being offered in such areas as women's studies, legal studies of gender roles, and in the shifting content of many social science courses. Thus, American universities and other institutions of higher learning are moving rapidly towards equality of treatment and expectation between genders, both in their structure as well as in their teachings. As far as gender roles and expectations are concerned, they are transmitting a different culturally determined attitude to their students. This is especially more patent in the business education and the attitude of the society towards business and corporate world.

In earlier studies this author was able to postulate that a large part of business related attitudes and cultural values are transmitted to newer generations while attending institutions of higher learning and receiving university education. If a major portion of beliefs and attitudes regarding women and their place in the economy is transmitted to

them as they attend college, it is reasonable to expect to see similar aspirations and expectations among women and men graduating from the same institutions. Women and men who have completed the same type of education should express similar attitudes towards social norms and values.

Using the data that were collected in a survey of business alumni (BBA and MBA) of an American private university in California, a hypothesis was formed which stated: There is no significant difference between women’s and men’s definition of success, its elements and its origin. That is to say, since the culturally determined attitudes taught at the universities are similar for men and women, any differences detected between the attitudes of male and female alumni can be attributed to factors more fundamental than just the power structure of a “paternalistic” society.

METHODOLOGY

As a part of a large research project on transfer of culturally defined values through institutions of higher learning, a large sample (2,000 from a population of 12,000) was drawn from alumni, who had graduated between January 1, 1994 and December 31, 1997, of the School of Business of a large, private, California university. A letter and a three page questionnaire was sent to them. A total of 247 questionnaires were returned with usable data, of which 114 were female and 133 were male respondents.

The questionnaire provided an opportunity for respondents to rate themselves, using a five-point Likert scale, how successful they felt in their life generally and in their careers. Closed-ended questions, with opportunities for additions, were then used to explore how they defined success, what they had yet to do to be successful, from whom did they learn these elements of success, how the university affected this definition, and what they learned at the university that contributed to their success. The questionnaire concluded with both standard demographic questions and questions about their national origins, those of their parents, and where the respondent completed their K-12 education. To add an additional level of information in the questionnaire, several of the questions required the participants to choose their top five choices and rank those choices

RESULTS

Analysis of data revealed that first, both men and women in response to question # 1 stated that by and large they consider themselves more successful than not. Table 1 summarizes these results.

Table 1: Percentage of response to question # 1 and # 2

Question	Males (Successful or very successful)	Females (Successful or very successful)
Do you consider yourself Successful in life in general?	78%	82%
Do you consider yourself successful in your career?	72%	78%

Differences in both categories are significant at 0.05 level.

Question 3 is composed of many parts. It asks: “What is success to you?” Several response categories with numerous options in each were provided. The most frequently chosen

categories were: job/career; family and friends; nature of work; and respect of others. Table 2 presents a summary of responses.

Table 2: Most frequently chosen responses to Question # 3

What is Success to you?	Males	Females
Category One: Job/career	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Personal growth 2. Career goals 3. Personal goals 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Career goals 2. Personal growth 3. Personal goals
Category Two: Family/Friends	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Balance between family and career 2. Taking care of family 3. Raising children well 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Balance between family and career 2. Taking care of family 3. Raising children well
Category Three: Nature of Work	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Satisfaction from work 2. Meaningful work 3. Challenge 4. Contributing to organization 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Satisfaction from work 2. Meaningful work 3. Challenge
Category Four: Respect of Others	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Family 2. Peers 3. Superiors 4. Friends 5. Subordinates 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Family 2. Peers 3. Superiors 4. Friends 5. Subordinates

Question 5 asked: “From whom did you learn your definition of success?” Of fifteen options provided the five most frequently chosen answers are shown in Table 3. Note that If the mentoring role of the military service is also taken into account, the two sets of responses will be exactly the same.

Table 3: Most frequent responses to Question # 5:

Males	Females
1. Observing successful people	1. Observing successful people
2. Work Experience	2. Work experience
3. Professors/Teachers	3. Parents
4. Parents	4. Professors/Teachers
5. Military	5. Mentors

How did university education change a student’s definition of success? This was question # 6. Table 4 is a summary of the top three choices by each group.

Table 4: Most frequently chosen responses to question # 6

Males	Females
1. Reinforced that I was capable	1. Helped in setting and reaching goals
2. Improved my analytical ability	2. Improved analytical ability
3.Reinforced what I already believed	3. Reinforced that I was capable

Question 7 asked: “what did you learn at the university?” The top five choices are presented in Table 5.

Table 5: Most frequently chosen responses to Question # 7

Male	Females
1. Communication skills	1. Communication skills
2. Teamwork	2. Self-motivation
3. Commitment	3. Self-management
4. Self confidence	4. Knowledge is changing
5. Knowledge is changing and Value of degree	5. Value of degree

DISCUSSION

Several points stand out from this analysis which underline basic assumption that men and women, in spite of a few variations, may not really be that different from each other, at least as far as graduates of business school are concerned.

1. The majority of the respondents, men and women, considered themselves successful can be interpreted at least in two ways, either receiving university education is highly associated with success both in life and at work, or the more successful alumni of the university are more likely to respond to the survey. Although university education is positively associated with career success, this author tending towards second and the more conservative interpretation believes that probably a self-selection process was taking place in this instance. The question begging to be asked is whether successful women are more likely than successful men to respond to inquiries such as the present survey. There may be a possibility that since women, in large numbers, are relatively newcomers into career and business world, and since there is still, objectively or subjectively, a perception of existence of a variety of obstacles barring women from entering and advancing in the corporate world, successful women seem to feel a sense of pride, and maybe an obligation towards all women in the workplace, to announce, advertise and even boast their success.
2. Definition of success by women and men seem to follow more or less the same pattern, with a few notable differences that will be discussed below. This overall similarity between the two groups can be explained essentially in the context of the cultural environment in which they have been raised, and especially the similar higher education, (i.e., business education) that they have received.
3. Career men and women seem to define family and its inclusiveness in different ways. Data suggest that while men, as do women, tend to place balancing between career and family quite high as an integral part of success, they do not consider raising children well as important as women. It is possible that men define family to be inclusive of raising children and taking care of the needs of family members, while women separate these elements from the larger concept, and give them separate and distinctive space in their lives and their definition of success. Another explanation may rest in the traditional (and biological?) roles of women in the American society. They are regarded as nurturers of their family and provider of care to the other members of the family. This perception may be still lingering in the attitude of women towards family and, thus, may affect their definition of success. It is important to remember that there are still many aspects of the traditional culture which are defining roles and expectations of women, including traditionally defined “suitable” causes (such as children, education and the elderly) that even women in politics are expected to champion.
4. There are not many studies that points to the different approaches that men and women have in regards to friends and friendship (Grey). Data in this study suggests that women do not seem to assign as much importance to having good friends as an element of success as men do. It seems that men have learned through centuries of work outside the home that they need to have good friends in order to succeed, as well as to be considered successful. Is it possible that women, being relatively new in

the workplace, have not yet learned the value of friends and friendships in the work, career and corporate world?

5. It is interesting that while men, in two different instances, make reference to team-work, women do not give the same importance to this concept. Among the items chosen by men as part of their definition of success, men chose “contribution to organizational success”, as a “nature of work” related item. Men also refer to learning team-work as one of the things that they learned at the university. Women who chose this item were very few. This question becomes even more intriguing when we consider that women mentioned “self-motivation” and “self-management” rather than “team-work” and “commitment” in their response to question 7.
6. Role of professors and teachers in teaching definition of success to students cannot be exaggerated, although it should not be surprising. They stand side-by-side with parent to transfer cultural norms and values to new generations. In the process of acculturation educational institutions seem to be as important as family settings. Data suggest that this role is played more or less equally for men and women.
7. A closer examination of responses to question # 6 brings out a very intriguing point. Women’s most frequently chosen response to the role of the university education in determining their definition of success was “helped in setting and reaching goals”. This response was not among men’s three most frequently given responses. Could this indicate that American women, at the beginning of this new millennium, are still not certain about their careers and goals by the time they enter university? Could this data be pointing to the lingering effects of centuries of tradition and cultural development or is it indicating something more biological than cultural?

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