

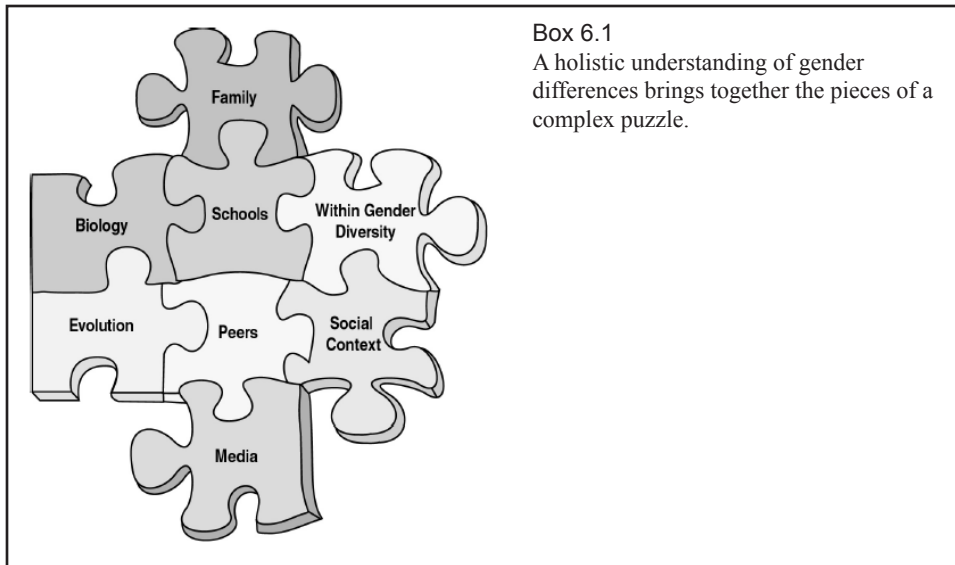
## *Chapter 6*

# Individuals and Social Contexts

## Looking Beyond Gender Differences

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Chapter Summary

Across the previous three chapters, we have been putting together a puzzle to better understand gender differences (see Box 6.1). Much of our emphasis has been on two distinct groups: biological girls/women and biological boys/men; girls socialized to be girls and boys raised to be boys; and women's and men's development across the life course. The remaining puzzle pieces come from personality and social psychologists whose work seeks to understand human thoughts, feelings, and behaviors by exploring contributions from both the person and the situation (Ross & Nisbett, 2011).

**Box 6.1**

A holistic understanding of gender differences brings together the pieces of a complex puzzle.

In this chapter, I first want to narrow our focus by looking inside the social category of female and male at both individuals and subgroups in order to make the point that neither gender group is homogeneous. Rather, there's great within-gender, **intragroup diversity** among women and among men both as individuals (**individual differences**) and as diverse subgroups formed by other social markers around the Diversity Wheel (e.g., race/ethnicity and sexual orientation). Although gender differences do capture some consistent **intergroup differences**, we shall see that individuals and subgroups can qualify (**moderate**) these group-level patterns.

Second, I want to expand outward to explore the social context in which each group operates. It is an obvious truism that all human behavior occurs within some **social context** (Rosnow & Rosenthal, 1989); that is, within a social environment that can produce or constrain behavior (Ross & Nisbett, 2011). Social constructionists remind us that we usually work hard to be sure that others know our gender so that gender is always present in our social interactions (Deaux & Major, 1987). Others' expectations about what gender means, as well as the social status we ascribe to gender, play a constant role in influencing how others perceive us. We'll see in Chapter 7 that these perceptions can become self-fulfilling, shaping women into what we expect for women; men, into what's appropriate for men.

## AN EXAMPLE: EMPATHETIC ACCURACY

This reasoning will be clearer if we consider a concrete example. The ability to read others' thoughts and feelings is a central part of human interaction, and in social psychology, how skilled people are at reading other people's minds is referred to as **empathetic accuracy**. In popular culture, jokes abound about men who fail to understand the needs and desires of their heterosexual partners, making this "gender difference" a mainstay in television sitcoms and movies.

Research evidence finds that women read their intimate partner's mind better than men do (Fletcher, 2002; Thomas & Fletcher, 2003). Women generally focus more attention on intimate relationships, have more elaborate ideas about what relationships should be like, and talk more about their relationships than do men. Even meta-analysts record a whopping gender difference ( $d = -.91$ ), confirming that women *report* being more empathetic than men (Hyde & Frost, 1993).

Geoff Thomas and Garth Fletcher (2003) conducted a study in which heterosexual dating partners were videotaped trying to resolve a problem with their relationship that both identified as troubling. Afterwards, each separately watched the video and recorded throughout what they were thinking and feeling at the time of the interaction. This provided the researchers with each target's actual thoughts and feelings. This videotape then was played for different viewers who were told to focus on one targeted person and to record what they thought that target was thinking and feeling. Empathetic accuracy thus was measured as how well these two ratings (target's reports and viewer's perceptions) fit together (correlated).

As you might have guessed, gender made a difference. Overall, women were more accurate than men. But individual differences mattered as well. In addition to viewing their own video, each member of the dating couple viewed a second video in which two strangers interacted. These ratings provided a second indicator for each person about their general skills in empathetic accuracy. Both women and men who were accurate in viewing the first video were relatively accurate with the strangers in the second video. Potentially explaining why this may be so, another study found that both women and men who form more complex attributions about what causes another's behaviors are better at mind-reading (Thomas & Maio, 2008). These **individual differences** in mind reading skills remind us that not all women are good at it and not all men are bad at it, even though women as a group outperformed men.

The social context of the relationship also had an effect. For these analyses, the same target was viewed by her or his dating partner as well as by a female or male stranger.<sup>1</sup> As you might expect, strangers were less accurate than dating partners (see Figure 6.2). But more relevant to the point I'm making here, there were contexts in which men (with a dating partner) were comparable mind readers to women (with strangers).<sup>2</sup> In fact, in other studies men were just as accurate as women when they were paid to be accurate (Klein & Hodges, 2001) and when they were motivated to be accurate (Hall & Mast, 2008; Thomas & Maio, 2008). Although men's accuracy never exceeded women's (Hal & Mast, 2008), men are capable of being more empathetically accurate—if the context is right.

Furthermore, women *believe* they are better mind readers than men. Using these expectations, William Ickes and his colleagues (2000) had women and men engage in the same coding task but varied the instructions they first read. When instructions made it clear that their responses indicated how good the respondent was at coding accurately, the **inter-group difference** in women's and men's performance was exaggerated. When the coding

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<sup>1</sup>Remember that there really are two parts to empathetic accuracy involving accurately reading and effectively displaying one's emotions. There's some evidence that men are better at telegraphing their emotions to dating partners and friends than women are (Thomas & Fletcher, 2003). Interesting, both women and men are faster and more accurate at detecting happy expressions on women's faces and angry expressions on men's faces (Becker et al., 2007).

<sup>2</sup>In marriages, women and men are similarly responsive to their partner's need for support, although wives appear more skilled at giving that support at the time it's most needed (Neff & Karney, 2005).

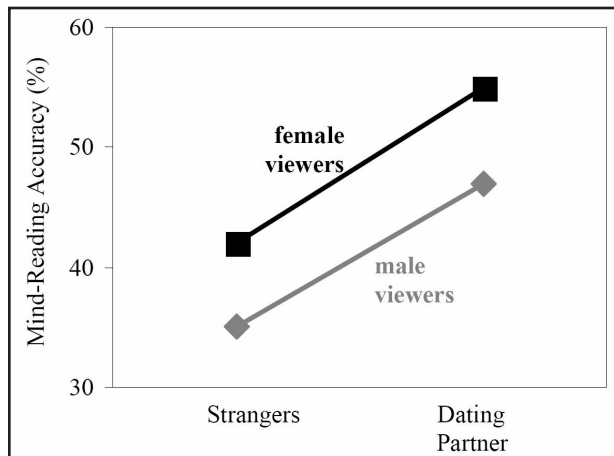


Figure 6.2

How skilled women and men are at judging the thoughts and feelings of others (empathetic accuracy) varies by gender (a gender difference) as well as across individuals (an individual difference) and depends, in part, on the nature of the relationship they have with the target (a social context effect) (Thomas & Fletcher, 2003). In this figure, the same target is viewed by her or his dating partner and by a stranger.

sheet disguised that mind reading was measured, women and men performed more similarly. Thus women's and men's expectations about their abilities affected how well they ultimately performed (also see Koenig & Eagly, 2005).

Across these different studies, individual differences in mind reading skills (particularly attributional complexity) **mediate** the relationship between gender and empathetic accuracy such that skilled women and skilled men performed similarly.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, variations in social contexts involving relationships, motivations, and expectancies served to both widen and minimize group gender differences in accuracy. These contexts served to **moderate** (or qualify) the relationship between gender and mind reading. (Take another look at Figure 2.2 to refresh your memory of moderation and mediation.) Thus by focusing on both individual differences and social contexts, we begin to move away from **essentializing** explanations that root gender differences inside women and men. As we'll see later in this chapter, this refocusing affects not only how we explain (**socially construct**) gender differences, but also what we might do to bring about social change.

## INTRAGROUP DIVERSITY

Starting in Chapter 2, I have presented effect sizes (*ds*) to summarize intergroup differences between girls/women and boys/men. Although this approach can tell us a lot, it also can gloss over important variations within each group; that is, among women and among men.

<sup>3</sup>Another example of mediation in person perception involves remembering others' appearance. Women as a group are better at this than men, but this relationship between gender and appearance recall is mediated by both how important an individual thinks appearance is and appearance knowledge (Mast & Hall, 2006). For example, as a woman I should be good at this task but I have to look down at what I am wearing to remember what I have on, and I can't seem to describe the physical appearance of even my friends. Individual differences ...

Take the example of height, a feature of people we observe regularly in everyday life. In 2002, the average height for American women aged 20 to 74 was 5' 4" and for men, 5' 9 ½" (Centers for Disease Control reported in Up and out, 2004). The  $d$  for height is a huge +2.0 (Hines, 2004b), much bigger than the  $d = \pm 0.8$  minimum that qualifies as very large for social scientists. Look around almost any gathering of adult women and men and you'll readily see this very big intergroup difference.

However, if you begin to focus in on individuals, you'll see some women who are taller than many men. You'll also see large variations among women: a distribution capturing 99% of all U.S. women spans 13 inches, a range that is significantly wider than the 5 or so inches that separate the average women from the average man. Additionally, consider subgroups of women, such as Asian women and basketball players. These comparisons make the average 5' 4" woman seem tall or short. This example illustrates two main aspects of **intragroup difference: individual differences** and subgroup diversity.

On every attribute we've examined, there is variability within women as a group and within men as a group. This makes intuitive sense. Just like knowing there are women who are taller than many men, we also know women who are very skilled at spatial tasks and men who read the thoughts and feelings of others quite perceptively. *Oftentimes the diversity within groups is greater than the difference between them.* Thus, if I had to bet money on who would be taller, a randomly chosen woman or a randomly chosen man, I'd be ill-advised to put my money on the woman (given the intergroup difference). But as  $d$ s shrink, so will my probability of winning any one bet. In this section, I want to step back and look at individual differences and subgroup diversity within women as a group.

### *Cognitive Abilities: The SAT-M*

Nowhere is the impact of group gender differences in math abilities more powerful than on the Scholastic Aptitude Test's math portion (the SAT-M). Men as a group scored as much as 40 points higher than women (Ramist & Arbeiter, 1986). Certainly it's not legal to indiscriminately admit men to college over women. However, if I stressed math abilities and relied on the SAT-M to measure those skills, these scores would make the admission of more men than women likely and arguably defensible (see Leonard & Jiang, 1995).

Not everyone takes the SATs. Rather, students taking the SAT-M self-select so that they come mostly from the high ability tails of various abilities distributions. Thus, our focus changes here from comparing group averages to comparing high-ability women with high-ability men. On this and other "gatekeeper" tests (like the GREs), more men than women score at the high extreme (Ceci et al., 2009).

M. Beth Casey and her colleagues (1997) explored what predicted high scores for women taking the SAT-M. They knew from prior work that **mental rotation skills**, the ability to mentally rotate a two-dimensional object in three-dimensional space, predicted math abilities. In addition, some psychologists suggested that both confidence in one's math abilities and math anxiety contribute to math performance. The purpose of their study was to explore which of these factors predicted how *individuals* scored.

Their data ruled out math anxiety. It also showed that when mental rotation and math confidence were considered, gender was *not* a direct predictor of SAT-M scores. Rather, mental rotation skill and math confidence directly predicted SAT-M scores such that more skilled and confident students, regardless of their gender, scored higher. The better predictor was

rotation skill, besting confidence by a 2:1 margin. So, if I wanted to bet my money (or my college scholarship) on the most likely high scorers, I'd be best off selecting names from a pool of students highly skilled in mental rotation rather than simply picking men.<sup>4</sup> Although picking someone highly confident about her or his math skills makes more sense than relying on simple sex, rotation competence would be a better choice than math confidence.

Although I improved my selection chances by choosing individuals based on their mental rotation score over their sex, I'm still relying on a test to make this determination. I might just as well give candidates the SAT-M and choose accordingly. However, if I persist, I can now turn to what predicts mental rotation skills, and again Casey (1996) chimes in. Casey explored the impact of biology (using handedness to predict right hemispheric specialization associated with spatial abilities) and socialization (spatial experiences and college major) to predict mental rotation scores. Indeed, both sets of measures sorted out the highest achieving women. Rather than just picking men, I could now ask a few pointed questions of both women and men and better my odds of selecting the candidates most likely to succeed.

### *Personality Traits*

One of the most widely used measures of personality traits is the NEO-PI-R, which measures self-reports about 30 traits that fall into the "Big Five" personality clusters of neuroticism, extroversion, openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness. Paul Costa and his colleagues (2001) measured all 30 traits with large samples across 26 cultures globally. They found two consistent patterns of gender differences across cultures, such that women reported being more *agreeable* (trusting, straightforward, altruistic, compliant, modest, and tender-minded) and more *neurotic* (anxious, depressed, self-conscious, impulsive, and vulnerable), on average, than men.<sup>5</sup>

Although the focus of Costa and his colleagues' work is largely on group gender differences, they concluded: "Gender differences, although pervasive [across cultures], appear to be relatively subtle compared with the range of individual differences found within each gender" (p. 326). This quote highlights exactly the point I am making in this section on **intragroup diversity** (also see Lott, 1997). There can be more variability among women than between women and men as groups.

Their data also raise fascinating questions about cross-cultural diversity. Group gender differences in both agreeableness and neuroticism are greater among Europeans and North Americans (in **individualist** cultures) than among Africans and Asians (in **collectivist** cultures). Costa and his associates speculate that this variation may be because their measures of traits fit with an individualistic emphasis on personal qualities and miss the role relationships, which are more central to collectivist thinking. Thus, African and Asian women might not see themselves as that different from men in terms of *traits*, but rather in terms of the different *roles* women and men fill. Indeed, when students read about role changes in a hypothetical society, they shifted their trait assignments for women and men, suggesting that role assignments do predict traits (Diekmann & Goodfriend, 2006).

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<sup>4</sup>Note that gender does predict both math confidence and mental rotation scores, favoring men so that my final pool of highest scoring students likely would still have more men than women.

<sup>5</sup>A more recent study involving 55 countries replicated these findings as well as found that women scored higher in extraversion and conscientiousness (Schmitt et al., 2008).

## INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES

We have seen above that intragroup diversity can be greater than intergroup differences, making differences among women sometimes larger than a difference between women on average and men on average. Some of this intragroup diversity comes from **individual differences** in how gender itself is viewed, including feminine and masculine gender identity, stereotyping accuracy, and conformity to feminine norms.

### *Femininity, Masculinity, and Androgyny*

We might expect that the most obvious personality traits to distinguish women from men are **femininity** and **masculinity** as forms of **gender identity**. Thus, we might think, quite simply put, that women are more feminine than men, and men, more masculine than women. These expectations, which form our **gender belief system**, originate in our society and rest on two fundamental assumptions that we'll see are faulty (Kite, 2001).

First is the assumption that feminine is defined as *not* masculine, and vice versa. Indeed, femininity and masculinity were once regarded as endpoints on the same continuum so that people (largely women and even gay men<sup>6</sup>) who were high in femininity were, by definition, low in masculinity (Spence, 2011). Notice that this logic reflects **dimorphic** thinking that we already rejected in our discussion of biological sex in Chapter 3. People do not neatly sort into female and male boxes based on biology yet alone psychological identity.

Second, it is assumed that these attributes come in coherent clusters so that nurturing people also are emotional, passive, and so on. As we'll see in what follows, whether there are clusters of traits that truly measure femininity and masculinity is largely open to debate.

**Measuring femininity and masculinity.** In the 1970s, these assumptions of gender belief systems were called into question by psychologists, leading to the independent development of two new scales. Sandra Bem introduced the *Bem Sex Role Inventory* (BSRI) in 1974, and it has become the most widely used measure (Beere, 1990). At the conceptual heart of the BSRI is the assumption that masculinity and femininity are separate and unrelated dimensions so that an individual can score high on both, low on one and high on the other, etc.

To create the BSRI, college students rated traits according to how desirable they felt each was for women and for men in American society. Twenty items considered significantly more desirable for men defined masculinity; 20 items regarded as more desirable for women described femininity; and 20 filler items were rated as equally desirable. To complete the BSRI, respondents simply indicated if each trait is “never or almost never true” to “always or almost always true” of themselves on 7-point scales. Those who described themselves more strongly on the masculine items than the feminine ones were considered masculine in their gender identity; feminine scorers did the reverse. To label those who described themselves equally strongly as both masculine and feminine, Bem introduced to

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<sup>6</sup>As amazing as it might now sound, the Mf subscale (Scale 5) of the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI) originally was validated using 13 gay men to establish the feminine pole of the scale (Beere, 1990).

TABLE 6.3  
Items in the Personal Attributes Questionnaire

<i>Masculine</i>	<i>Feminine</i>
independent	emotional*
active*	able to devote self completely to others
competitive*	gentle
can make decisions easily*	helpful to others*
never gives up easily	kind*
confident*	aware of the feelings of others*
feels superior*	understanding of others*
stands up well under pressure*	warm in relations with others*

\* Analyses by Prentice and Carranza (2002) suggest that students still record differences in how desirable these traits are for each sex.

psychology the concept of androgyny. This measure defines **androgyny** as the equal blending of masculine and feminine traits.

Simple to score and also widely used is the *Personal Attributes Questionnaire* (PAQ) developed by Janet Spence and Robert Helmreich in 1978 to measure femininity and masculinity. The PAQ comprises eight masculine and eight feminine items (see Table 6.3). Like the BSRI, separate feminine and masculine scores were calculated, and these were used together to categorize individuals as feminine, masculine, or androgynous (where androgyny involves high levels of both feminine and masculine characteristics).

When women and men actually completed these scales, some women scored high on the masculine items; some women scored low on the feminine items; some men scored high on the feminine items; and so on. *Masculinity, although stereotyped as occurring more frequently in men, was not confined to men nor femininity to women.* Reflecting the dispersion of masculinity and femininity across women and men, the intergroup difference between the scores of women as a group and men as a group was small. Furthermore, *PAQ classifications are unrelated to sexual orientation*; lesbians may be stereotyped as masculine, but there's nothing in the data about gender identity to support this myth (Kite, 2011).

As we saw in Chapter 2, the concept of androgyny took off through the late 1970s and into the 1980s. Androgynous people were expected to be more behaviorally flexible; for example, they played with kittens (a “feminine” task) and did not conform under pressure (a “masculine” task) (Bem, 1975). They were high in self-esteem and psychologically well-adjusted (Bem, 1977; Spence & Helmreich, 1978). Although it hasn't disappeared, the construct of androgyny has faded because of many serious measurement and conceptual problems.

**Construct validity.** Just what the BSRI and PAQ measure, that is, their **construct validity**, is open to debate. In 1981, Sandra Bem began to conceptualized gender identity in terms of **gender-schematicity** rather than masculinity-femininity. Gender-schematic people see themselves in gendered terms, such that gender-schematic men score high on the masculine items and low on the feminine ones; gender-schematic women do the opposite. In contrast, *gender-aschematic* women and men use a variety of adjectives to describe themselves, rather than relying on gender stereotyping. Note how Bem brings biological labels of women and men into this definition of gender identity.



Janet Spence and Robert Helmreich (1980) have come to think of the PAQ as a measure of **instrumentality** (those who score high on the M items take charge and actively do things) and **expressiveness** (the F items measure caring and nurturing tendencies). Alice Eagly (1987) considers a parallel dichotomy in terms of **agentive** (people who are independent, active agents) and **communal** (people who work with others) orientations. You may want to reexamine the items of the PAQ in Table 6.3 to see if you think they fit with these reconceptualizations.

Whatever the interpretation, these scales remain rooted in their original construction—they measure gender stereotyping (i.e., what people in the 1970s thought were desirable characteristics for women and men) (Morawski, 1987), many of which persist (see Table 6.3) (Prentice & Carranza, 2002). Thus, they may be useful to the extent that they measure how much we stereotype ourselves along gender lines; they may not be as useful as presumed measures of true “inner” femininity or masculinity (Morawski, 1987).

Furthermore, these concepts may be inextricably linked to power (Morawski, 1987). A message that comes through repeatedly in this literature is that masculine traits, alone or in combination with feminine ones, are better. Recent research finds that being **communal** is associated with low status (being female?), and being **agentive**, with high status (being male?) (Conway et al. 1996). For example, is decisiveness (a “masculine” trait) really a better trait than warmth (a “feminine” trait), or is one more closely connected to what we regard as powerful in our culture?

These measures also may mean different things to different people, in different cultures, and at different points in history. Hope Landrine and her colleagues (1992) found that women of color and White women attributed similar adjectives to themselves but interpreted their meaning differently. For example, for women of color, “passive” meant “not saying what I really think”; for White women, “passive” connoted “laid-back/easy-going.”

An analysis bringing together over 100 studies using the BSRI and PAQ revealed that the magnitude of differences between women’s and men’s scores narrowed between 1973 and 1994 (Twenge, 1997). Both women and men showed stability in expressive or feminine scores and increases in instrumental or masculine scores, with especially dramatic increases for women responsible for closing the gap between the sexes. Jean Twenge speculates that these shifts are accounted for by cultural changes resulting from the women’s movement and women’s participation in the labor force.

Gender identity shifts in importance depending on the situation and intersects with other aspects of identity (Deaux & Stewart, 2001). For example, a woman’s sex and gender are likely to be very salient when she is the only woman in her work group; gender may fade into the background when the same woman goes to a movie with her friends. Kay Deaux and Abigail Stewart (2001, p. 88) thus conclude that gender identity is “an inescapable societal process, in which other people, changing situations, and social norms play a major role.”

None of this complexity is captured in simple understandings of the BSRI and PAQ as measures of the *traits* of femininity and masculinity. Thus, these scales must be used with caution. You will see that these concepts and their measures continue to crop up in contemporary research, so it is important that you clearly understand what we know—and what we don’t know—about these elusive but ubiquitous constructs.

*Gender-Stereotype Accuracy*

Ironically, the BSRI and PAQ, which did dissociate gender identity from both sex (masculine women) and sexual orientation (feminine lesbians), originally drew on stereotyping about what is desirable for women and men. Judith Hall and Jason Carter (1999) offer an alternative construction that may prove useful. They measured how accurate individuals' gender stereotyping was by correlating participants' ratings of 77 behaviors and traits with data from meta-analyses either confirming or disconfirming these differences. As groups, people's ratings were quite accurate, mapping rather closely onto systematic research evidence. But individuals' accuracy varied widely, making this an **individual differences** measure of gender-stereotype accuracy.

Beginning use of this measure is intriguing. Women and men who were more accurate in their gender stereotyping were less likely to accept and use these stereotypes and were more interpersonally sensitive. As you might expect, more accurate people also possessed a less rigid cognitive style. These patterns suggest that what you are learning in this book may help you to avoid falling back on simplistic overgeneralizations about girls/women and boys/men, and instead to sensitively view individuals as individuals, not stereotyped representatives of social categories.

*Conformity to Feminine Norms*

Every culture has **social norms** about what constitutes appropriate femininity, and individual women and subgroups vary in how much they conform to these "rules." James Mahalik and his colleagues (2005) focused on dominant U.S. culture, arguing that even if subcultures challenged some of these standards, they still remained generally prescriptive. They asked focus groups of students and community members to describe cultural messages about "how women are supposed to act, think, and feel" (p. 419). Building on this base and after extensive testing (Parent & Moradi, 2010), nine norms emerged (see Table 6.4). My guess is that if you think about these for yourself or for women in general, you'll have individual beliefs about how much you endorse each of these factors. In this way, scores on the Conformity to Feminine Norms Inventory (CFNI) run along a continuum for women respondents from high agreement to high disagreement with traditional statements in each of the nine areas about how women might think, feel, or behave.

As you can see, the CFNI focuses specifically on femininity, not as a trait (like the original BSRI or PAQ), but rather as a cultural construction that may be endorsed to varying degrees by individual women. As a relatively new measure, the promise of this scale and its subscales remains to be seen. Although there is some evidence that the subscales work as projected (e.g., the Thinness subscale predicted symptoms of eating disorders; Green et al., 2008), this measure as a whole may give researchers an opportunity to explore how the set of interrelated feminine norms may function together to oppress women.

## SOCIAL CONTEXT

When we explore intragroup diversity, we shift our thinking away from gender as a single cause of intergroup differences between girls/women and boys/men. We begin to see that

TABLE 6.4  
Conformity to Feminine Norms Inventory

<i>Subscale</i>	<i>Sample Item</i>
Relational	“I believe that my friendships should be maintained at all costs.”
Sweet and Nice	“Being nice to others is extremely important.”
Invest in Appearance	“I spend more than 30 minutes a day doing my hair and make-up.”
Domestic	“It is important to keep your living space clean.”
Romantic Relationship	“Having a romantic relationship is essential in life.”
Modesty	“I tell everyone about my accomplishments.” (reverse scored)
Sexual Fidelity	“I would feel guilty if I had a one-night stand.”
Thinness	“I would be happier if I was thinner.”
Care for Children	“I find children annoying.” (reverse scored)

*Note.* Do you 1 (*strongly disagree*), 2 (*disagree*), 3 (*agree*), or 4 (*strongly agree*) with each item? Higher scores indicate greater conformity to feminine norms. Items taken from Mahalik et al. (2005) using the factor structure suggested by Parent and Moradi (2010).

a phenomenon is more complex than simply saying women do, think, or feel this and men do, think, or feel that. The above exploration took us inside the group of *all* women to focus on individual and subgroup diversity. In this next section, we’ll expand our vision outward to the social environment in which girls/women and boys/men operate, and we’ll return to our debate about what *causes* gender differences.

### *Causes and Consequences of Difference*

Usually when we search for the possible causes of a reliable intergroup gender difference, two possibilities immediately come to mind: biology and socialization (experiences from childhood). As we saw in Chapter 3, this nature versus nurture distinction typically is artificial because in real life they are inseparably intertwined (sex&gender&sexuality).

At a philosophical level, we can think about comparisons between women and men in one of two opposing ways: from a viewpoint that assumes that differences are real (**alpha bias**) or from a perspective that minimizes differences and stresses similarities (**beta bias**) (Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1988). Here again we seem to have an either/or choice. However, rather than choose between the two and argue over which is correct or more useful, another often overlooked possibility exists (Yoder & Kahn, 2003).

Let’s return to the research on empathetic accuracy with which I began this chapter. A biological explanation might suggest that women are better at reading the thoughts and feelings of others because of some better developed regions of their brains (biology), perhaps evolved through thousands of years of rearing children whose survival depended on their mother’s ability to recognize the child’s needs (evolutionary psychology). Another explanation might be that men are discouraged from getting involved with the feelings of others by socialization practices that punish them for emotional displays (socialization theory). Again, **psychobiosocial models** may focus on the interplay of biology and socialization such that the effects of each are so intertwined that they become functionally inseparable (see McClure, 2000). Whatever the approach, the assumption is that many

women possess this ability and men don't because of something *within them*—something that is a part of them and that is relatively permanent. The unavoidable implication is that many men lack this capability so that either they need remedial training to compensate for their restrictive socialization, or they can never truly make up for their biological or evolutionary inadequacy.

Think of the ramifications of this analysis. If empathetic accuracy is something we value in our culture,<sup>7</sup> men are viewed as severely disadvantaged in this arena. If we assume that men's poor mind reading resides exclusively in their biologies (or evolutionary histories), then change becomes virtually impossible, (or frighteningly surrealistic).

Even if we assume that differences in empathetic accuracy are learned, fully or in part, isn't childhood socialization over for adults—so that we then are stuck with whatever we have become? Or we might ask, because socialization explanations acknowledge the role of learning, can adults unlearn and/or relearn? When we speak of such remedies for a gender difference, aren't we implying that the gender to be changed is deficient? Are we blaming members of one gender for their “inadequacies” (Halpern, 1997)? This last process has been dubbed **blaming the victim** (Ryan, 1972).

We see examples of victim blaming in everyday justifications for misfortune: Women are raped because they dress provocatively, and poor people are lazy. This process has at least two noteworthy side effects. First, it serves an **ego protective function**—if I avoid doing whatever the victim presumably did, I will avoid her or his fate. Second, blaming the victim deflects criticism away from larger social forces by pinning the blame squarely on the shoulders of presumably defective individuals. Whatever the reasons for engaging in victim blaming, the result is a victim who may be victimized multiple times. Once we decide an individual caused her or his misfortune, it's a logical step to continue to victimize them because they deserve it (Glass, 1964).

There's a possible explanation for intergroup gender differences beyond biology and socialization that we haven't yet considered and that avoids the pitfalls of victim-blaming. What could make women and men *appear* different are the circumstances or social context in which they find themselves. Our beliefs about sex and gender come into play often as part of this social context.

### *Thinking Intuitively about Social Context*

As I write this chapter, I am 58 years old with many of the responsibilities associated with adulthood in my culture. Along with my partner, we fully support one adult child (paying college tuition!), have another adult child who is largely self-supporting, maintain a house and cars, manage two demanding careers, care for a dog and a cat, etc. Yet I instantly become a child when I visit my parents. There, I sleep in a room surrounded by the white bedroom set from my childhood; I sit down to a dinner my mother prepared and I dry dishes with her afterwards; and I never, ever drive. For better and for worse, I am a kid again, dependent on my parents, with few responsibilities, and with little freedom to structure my own day. They even ask me how things are “at school”!

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<sup>7</sup>I am making an assumption here that could be easily reversed; that is, one could reasonably argue that we live in a culture that values ignoring the thoughts and feelings of others. The same points follow from this starting point, and these form the crux of the subsequent arguments I make. I purposively elected to put women's behavior at the normative baseline of my argument to reverse more typical **androcentric bias**.

Is this “me”? Yes and no. Away from my routine context, I become a different person, at least for a few days. Put me in a more intense and long-term changed context, and in all honesty, I don’t know what I’d become. Indeed, these glimpses into such possibilities form the mainstays of most social psychology classes. Some psychologically well-adjusted college students transformed into submissive prisoners or cruel guards in Phil Zimbardo’s (1972) famous prison study, and average adults in New Haven, Connecticut gave dangerous shocks to errant “learners” in Stanley Milgram’s (1963) classic shock box studies. As a social psychologist, I can’t help but scrutinize photos in newspapers that capture pieces of other people’s everyday lives and wonder what I would do if I found myself in their circumstances. This is the power of **social contexts**.

So what if women and men, by simple virtue of their gender, live in different worlds? We already have seen that gender is an omnipresent marker that automatically divides us into two presumably distinct social categories: female and male. What’s the social baggage that attaches itself to these designations of female or male?

### *The Logic of Social Contextual Explanations*

This logic of social contextual explorations for a known intergroup gender difference is diagrammed in Figure 6.5. Hypothesis 1 assumes that there is something about women that makes them produce Behavior A (such as superior mind reading), and something about men that leads to a different behavior, Behavior B (such as poor mind reading). Hypothesis 2 proposes that women and men operate in two different *gendered* social contexts. The social context typically associated with women (Social Context W) causes women to do Behavior A, whereas a different social context generally impinging on men (Social Context M) evokes Behavior B.

Hypothesis 2 is supported if the results show the hypothetical pattern diagrammed in Figure 6.4(c). When women and men are exposed to the same social context, they both exhibit the same behavior. Thus, Behavior A is not a “women’s reaction,” but rather is a human reaction to a contextual factor more typically encountered by women (Social Context W). Similarly, what looks like men’s behavior is really a function of the circumstance in which men more commonly find themselves (Social Context M). When we hypothetically “de-gender” (neutralize) the context, the gap between women and men closes. (Alternatively, we could reverse contexts by showing that women “act like men” when in Social Context M, and men behave like women in Social Context W—for example, by motivating men to be empathetic.)

Notice how our focus has shifted. We have moved away from considering internal, dispositional characteristics of women and men (Hypothesis 1) to thinking about the social circumstances in which they find themselves (Hypothesis 2). The key to doing this type of analysis is to identify a contextual factor that is **confounded** with gender; that is, a factor that goes with being female or being male. The critical test is to equalize this factor either by neutralizing it (as in Figure 6.4c) or by exposing men to what typically occurs for women, and vice versa. The keys to this probing of gender comparisons are contextual **moderators** (so that statistically we see their impact in interactions with gender). They *qualify* the conditions under which intergroup gender differences wax and wane.

My overriding point here is that finding a gender difference may be just the start of one’s exploration, not the end. To say simply that sex or gender is the cause of the difference ignores other possibilities (James, 1997). The next step should be to explore *why* the

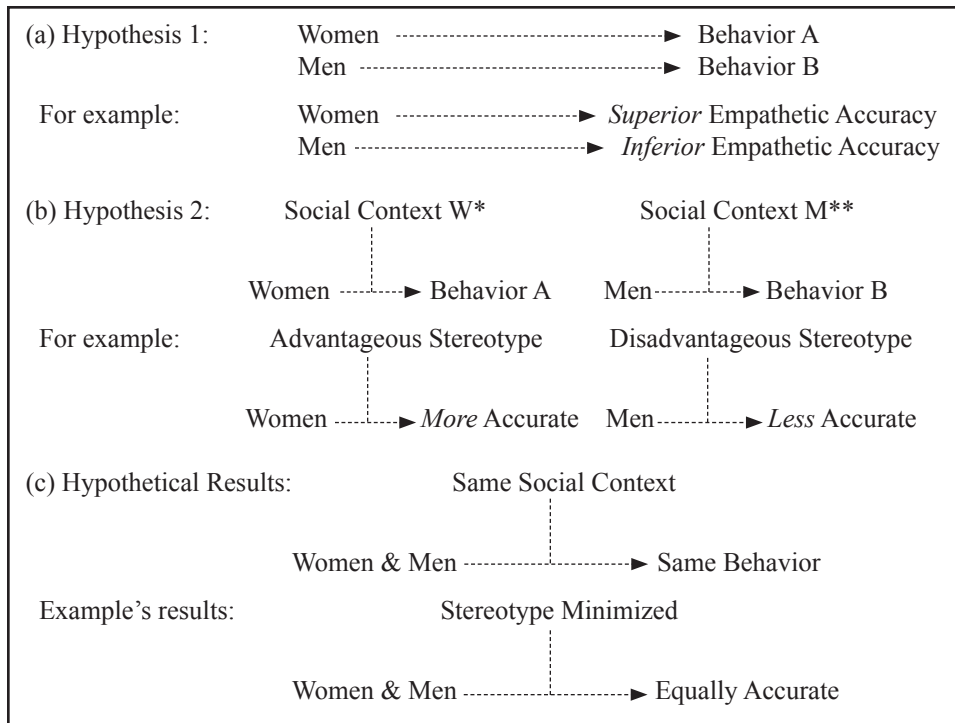


Figure 6.5 The logic of exploring contextual factor (moderated) explanations of apparent gender differences.

\*Social Context W = a social context typically encountered by women; \*\*Social Context M, by men.

“difference” exists. All too often, we psychologists have limited our explorations to possibilities internal to women and men—that is, to biology and to past learning (socialization).

Some of this limitation may result because focusing on the presumed internal dispositions of others is a general psychological tendency, referred to by social psychologists as the **fundamental attribution error** (Ross, 1977). One way to avoid this tendency is to think about how you yourself might act and why, because we tend to regard surrounding circumstantial contexts as more salient when we think about ourselves (Taylor & Fiske, 1975). Indeed, research shows that taking the perspective of the other reduces the expression of stereotyping (Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000) and can help make men more empathetic about the sexist daily hassles women experience (Becker & Swim, 2011). Overall, *a complete understanding of what we think, feel, and do must take into account a combination of biology, socialization (and other historical experiences), as well as present social context* (Riger, 2000a).

## THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL CONTEXTS ON WOMEN AND MEN

Now that we understand both intuitively and logically about the reasoning behind social contextual explanations for gender differences, it's time to turn to the growing research

evidence about the impact of social contexts on women and men. This research focuses on two different sources for gender-typing social contexts: stereotyping and social status. The literature on **stereotyping** examines how our *expectations* about what is appropriate for women and men affect what women and men ultimately think, do, and feel. Similarly, research on **social status** suggests that women and men operate from different value bases of status and power. Although popular books claim that women are different from men because one comes from Venus and the other from Mars (Gray, 2004), our social contextual approach here explores how women and men may be living day-to-day on different planets—planets made different by our own ways of thinking about and valuing gender.

### *Stereotyping about Social Variables*

Meta-analytic summaries of research in Chapter 2 (Table 2.7) identified a variety of social variables on which intergroup differences were confirmed. Although the possibilities for future research on social contextual explanations remain open since I last revised this text 5 years ago, more and more social contextual research has appeared. In addition to the work on empathetic accuracy with which I began this chapter, the social contexts of women's and men's aggression, helping, and sociability have been explored.

**Aggression.** Social psychologists define **aggression** as behavior intended to inflict harm (as opposed to accidental injury). Generally, adults' aggression comes in two varieties: **physical aggression** (including delivering shocks and noxious noise in the laboratory as well as outright assault) and **psychological aggression** (including verbal, nonverbal, and written forms). Alice Eagly and Valerie Steffen (1986) uncovered a small difference between women and men on psychological aggression ( $d = +0.18$ ) and an expected moderate effect for physical aggressiveness between strangers ( $d = +0.40$ ).

Eagly and Steffen also found that women and men have different *beliefs* about the consequences of their own physical aggression. Women reported higher fears that their aggressiveness will pose dangers to themselves, perhaps reflecting their awareness that such behavior violates gendered expectations (which indeed exist; Basow et al., 2007; Weaver et al., 2010) as well as attracts retaliation. Women also expected to feel more anxiety and guilt than men as a consequence of behaving aggressively. Thus, women may exercise more control over their expression of aggression because they anticipate more negative consequences (Harris, 1995), or they may seek more indirect outlets. Consistent with this reasoning, systematic observations of soccer games concluded that on those less frequent occasions when women players were aggressive, referees penalized women more than men (Coulomb-Cabagno et al., 2005; Souchon et al., 2009). Overall, this evidence suggests that women are more inhibited than men in expressing aggression.

What would happen if we equalized their inhibitions by lowering women's? College women and men played a violent videogame under anonymous conditions; the experimenters' expectation was that being unidentifiable would make women feel just as comfortable to aggress as men (Lightdale & Prentice, 1994). Indeed, under these circumstances, women opted to drop as many bombs as men. However, women's and men's reports of their own aggressiveness differed—women described significantly less aggressive self-behavior. This pattern is consistent with an explanation based on inhibitions. When inhibitions were lifted, women aggressed like men; but being aware of societal inhibitions based

in stereotyping about female nonaggressiveness, women failed to acknowledge their own aggressiveness.<sup>8</sup>

All this argues that a stereotype of nonaggressive women exists (White & Kowalski, 1994). This stereotype comes up as one of five traits believed to distinguish between women and men by respondents from 30 different countries (Williams & Best, 1982).<sup>9</sup> Does this mean that women really are nonaggressive? We all can cite instances when women acted aggressively so that a better summary of this literature is that *women will aggress given the appropriate circumstances* (Richardson & Hammock, 2007). The myth of women's nonaggressiveness sustains men's power by encouraging women's dependence on more powerful men; by bolstering the preconception that women always will lose out to a man's greater strength (misleading women to believe that "resistance is futile"—see Chapter 13); by discounting the potential of assertiveness and competitiveness (believed to be related to aggressiveness); by labeling aggressiveness by women as deviant; and by deflecting research away from understanding the conditions under which women will act aggressively.

What does it take to provoke aggressive behavior in women? Physical attacks, verbal insults, and frustrations (such as cutting ahead in line, losing a competitive game, blockage by a stopped car, and difficult puzzles) all reduce but don't close the gap in aggressive responses between women and men (Bettencourt & Miller, 1996).<sup>10</sup> Moreover, trained women and men coders rated the procedures used in research studies according to the intensity of the provocation used and the likelihood of retaliation. Women perceived less provocation in the procedures and felt more endangered by retaliation. These findings suggest that it may take more to induce aggression in women and that women may exercise greater control over their own aggressiveness because of fears of retaliation.

Extrapolating these findings beyond what is traditionally done in social psychological experiments of aggression, it seems that with significant provocation and reduction of women's stronger inhibitions against aggression, the gap between women's and men's aggressiveness can be narrowed. Indeed, when both violent cues and aversive provocation exist together, women will respond as aggressively as men (Bettencourt & Kernahan, 1997). (A preferable alternative might be to understand the factors that increase men's aggressiveness, with research pointing to the likely roles of higher fear of retaliation and reduced inhibitions in men, not gender differences in anger; Campbell, 2006).

**Helping behavior.** A hitchhiker stands on the side of a highway, a man collapses on a subway, a brutal fight breaks out—who comes to the rescue? In all likelihood, it's a man. Indeed, when we think about public "heroes," we are more likely to think about men, especially men who perform heroic rescues (Rankin & Eagly, 2008). When we look across a variety of helping studies, there is a small-to-moderate tendency for men to offer help more often than women ( $d = +0.34$ ) and for women to receive help more often than men ( $d = -0.46$ ) (Eagly & Crowley, 1986). Given that the nurturing role is typically ascribed to women, and (as we'll see in Chapter 8) more caregiving is done by women, the finding about who helps seems odd.

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<sup>8</sup>This reasoning also is consistent with findings of a positive association between alcohol consumption and aggressive behavior in women, indicating that drinking may lower inhibitions (Dougherty et al., 1996).

<sup>9</sup>The others are dominance, autonomy, achievement, and endurance.

<sup>10</sup>Bogus negative feedback seems to make women, but not men, feel unhappy instead of aggressive.



**Box. 6.6**

When photographed women are not smiling (so that they deviate from our expectations about women's sociability), evaluators rate them negatively by describing nonsmilers as less happy, warm, relaxed, and carefree than the average woman (Deutsch, LeBaron, & Fryer, 1987).

Much of the social-psychological literature on helping behavior relies on settings involving interactions with strangers in short-term relationships. Of course, it is these circumstances that provoke wariness in women and that are likely to reduce their willingness to intervene (Erdle et al., 1992). As women's comfort levels go up, so does their helpfulness. For example, in studies conducted on campus, a presumably safer-feeling environment for women, the gender difference virtually disappears ( $d = -0.04$ ) (Eagly & Crowley, 1986). This difference also evaporates when the appeal for help comes in the form of a direct request ( $d = +0.07$ ). We might expect people to be more responsive to stereotyped expectancies when they are watched than when they act unnoticed by others. Consistent with this reasoning, the gender gap in helping fades when potential helpers feel unobserved ( $d = -0.02$ ).

**Sociability.** We expect women to be more sociable: to talk about themselves (self-disclosure), to smile, to stand closer, to be sensitive to what others feel and want, to openly express their emotions, and so on. Women's speech is believed to be less direct and more emotional, talkative, and trivial than men's (Popp et al., 2003). As with all stereotyping, a visible way to become aware of their operation is to see what happens when they are violated (see Box 6.6).

As you might have guessed though, there is more to understanding gender and sociability than thinking women are more sociable than men. Campbell Leaper and Melanie Ayres (2007) conducted an extensive meta analysis of different types of speech—including affiliative speech; that is, talking meant to connect with others. They found the overall effect we'd expect ( $d = -0.12$ ), along with specific types of affiliative speech favoring women: active understanding ( $d = -0.41$ ), socioemotional ( $d = -0.35$ ), and supportive ( $d = -0.16$ ). However, they also uncovered some **moderators** that qualify this general pattern. Women engaged in more affiliative speech with strangers than did men ( $d = -0.18$ ), but there was no gender difference with close relations, including partners, children, and friends ( $d = -0.02$ ). There was a gender gap in same-sex groups ( $d = -0.33$ ), but not in mixed-sex groups ( $d = -0.01$ ). The topic of conversation also mattered, with wider gender differences when discussing nonpersonal topics (small talk;  $d = -0.44$ ) and one's self ( $d = -0.20$ ).

An interesting single study showed that even the context in which speech takes place can be important. People tend to dislike both the woman and the man in an intimate couple in which the woman talks a lot and the man is relatively silent (Sellers et al., 2007). In contrast, when the man is more effusive, he is both liked and regarded as more competent. It

seems that although women are generally expected to be more sociable than men, women also need to know their “place.”

### *Stereotyping Roles and Occupations*

As we’ll see in the next chapter, **stereotyping** proscribes what the appropriate roles should be for women and men, and we’ll see in Chapter 9 that the workforce (like the school playground we saw in Chapter 4) is characterized by significant gender segregation. Here we’ll look at how these expectations for women and men create gender-typed tasks, can be exaggerated by the gender composition of work groups, and can affect people’s actual performances on cognitive as well as other gender-typed tasks.

**Gender-typed tasks.** Before we examine the impact of gender stereotyping on tasks, let’s take a quick look at the basis for task stereotyping. We need to be wary of overgeneralizing about women’s and men’s task abilities, a trend that is especially common for cognitive tasks. For example, if we asked people to identify who is better at math, girls or boys, most would say “boys,” even though the effect size for gender differences in overall math performance among Americans is now negligible ( $d_s = +0.05$ – $.07$ ; Lindberg et al., 2010) and in math achievement across 69 nations is quite small ( $d_s < +0.15$ ; Else-Quest et al., 2010). Additionally, math abilities themselves are not so simply defined. For example, U.S. women benefit when math tests include more algebra items and disadvantaged when they contain more measurements items (questions about measures such as area, perimeters, volume, and angles; Lindberg et al., 2010).

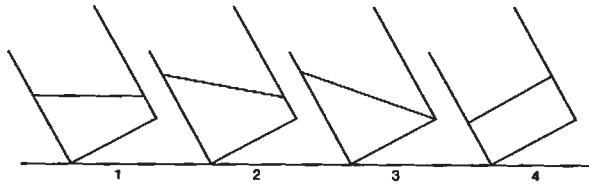
Furthermore, gender differences in U.S. math performance actually vary by age. No differences are documented across elementary and middle school, but small differences favor males in high school ( $d = +0.23$ ) and into college ( $d = +0.18$ ) (Lindberg et al., 2010). As we already noted, more boys and men scored at the extreme high tail in distributions of math scores; among the few studies that have used high-level, difficult test items, a gender difference favoring males appears (Lindberg et al., 2010). In sum, although there is some basis for stereotyping math as a male domain, the evidence in support of this conclusion is not all that convincing.

A similar overgeneralization can happen with spatial abilities. Common laboratory tests of spatial abilities tend to tap three specific skills. On **spatial perception** tasks, research participants are asked to determine spatial relationships with respect to the orientation of their own bodies. **Mental rotation** tasks involve the ability to rotate a two- or three-dimensional figure rapidly and accurately. Finally, **spatial visualization** tasks include complicated, multi-step manipulations of spatially presented information. Try doing examples of each of these in Box 6.7.

Here we find the largest and most consistent gender differences in cognitive abilities (Voyer et al., 1995). A  $d = +0.44$  was found for spatial perception, and  $d = +0.56$  for mental rotation (reported elsewhere as  $+0.90$ ; Masters & Sanders, 1993). Both effects are in the moderate to large range and favor men and boys. The biggest jump in spatial perception differences occurs around age 13 ( $+0.33$  for children under 13;  $+0.43$  for 13 to 18 year-olds;  $+0.48$  for adults over 18). The gap in mental rotation widens consistently with age ( $+0.33$  for children under 13;  $+0.45$  for 13 to 18 year-olds;  $+0.66$  for those over 18). On the

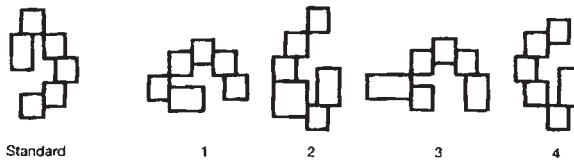
**Spatial Perception**

Which of the following four tilted glasses has a horizontal water line?



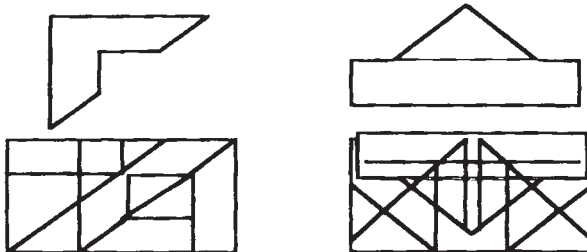
**Mental Rotation**

Which two of the four choices below show the standard in a different orientation?



**Spatial Visualization: Embedded figures**

Find the simple shape above within the more complex pattern below.



Source: M. C. Linn and A. C. Petersen (1985). University of Chicago Press. Reprinted with permission.

Answers: (1) glass #1; (2) Figures #1 and #4.

other hand, there is only a small gender difference on spatial visualization tasks ( $d = +0.19$ ) (also see Feingold & Mazzella, 1988).

When we turn away from the laboratory to examples of using spatial skills in the real world, a widely cited example describes men's superiority at wayfinding (using maps) (Lawton et al., 1996; Schmitz, 1999).<sup>11</sup> Although most widely used spatial abilities tasks

<sup>11</sup>Here again is an example of the impact of context. Although women more often use landmarks and men

favor men or find no differences, there are some exceptions, such as mirror tracing, in which women typically outscore men (Halpern, 1997).

As we noted earlier, some of what turn up as math differences may actually reflect differences in spatial performances, with meta-analytic findings more supportive of a spatial stereotype that favors boys and men over a math stereotype. Yet we will see that although less well grounded, math stereotyping is quite consequential for girls and women.

**Task stereotyping.** Given that tasks can acquire gender-typing, as we have just seen, we need to watch closely which specific tasks are used to test specific phenomena. A classic example has to do with *influenceability*. Researchers generally concluded that women conformed more readily than men, and eventually meta-analysts found small effect sizes ranging from +0.16 to +0.32 (Eagly & Carli, 1981). Further probing revealed that although masculine, feminine, and neutral content was used across these studies, more masculine topics (such as sports, the military, and technology) produced greater female influenceability. In sum, some of this apparent gender difference had something to do with the task used to measure conformity.

This finding even extends to what participants *believe* the task is measuring. When a task was presented as a spatial task, women who scored as masculine on the BSRI scored high (Massa et al., 2005). When that same task was described as assessing empathy, the performance of feminine women was superior. In another study with a mental rotation task, men for whom the task was described as testing skills necessary for the navigation of naval vessels outperformed men who thought the task had to do with handicrafts (Sharps et al., 1994). When instructions for a mental rotation test stressed accuracy, men outperformed women, but when these instructions were deleted, women's scores equaled men's (Scali et al., 2000). Finally, memory for the same shopping list varied as we'd expect when the list was called a grocery or hardware list and instructions either identified women or men as good at the task (Colley et al., 2002). A sound conclusion then may be that task stereotyping rests more in beliefs than necessarily in documented evidence.

**Composition of groups.** Like tasks that can arouse gendered expectations, who we are *with* when we perform a task can make gender more or less salient. There is a long-standing body of research exploring what happens when women are in groups of mostly men (see Yoder, 2002, for a review). When **token** women make up 15% or less of a work group, they experience heightened visibility, performance pressures, social isolation, and **role encapsulation**; that is, being perceived as stereotypic women (Kanter, 1977). Thus, a condition that makes it more likely that stereotyping will occur has to do with these contexts of underrepresentation (or **tokenism**).

**Stereotype threat.** What we know about the gender-typing of tasks and group composition comes together in fascinating and burgeoning work on **stereotype threat**. Stereotype threat is a situational (contextual) threat that generally affects members of any group about which negative stereotyping is aroused (Steele, 1997). For those who seek success in a domain, stereotype threat predicts that negative stereotyping will disrupt performance. Notice that we are not talking about specific tasks, but rather a **domain** or cluster of similar

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use cardinal directions ("go north") to give route directions, cardinal directions are favored by people from the Midwest and West and by people living in areas with grid-like road arrangements.

tasks (potentially an overgeneralization about a category, such as all spatial tasks). *It's what test takers believe, and the activation of this stereotyping, that matters.*

For example, stereotype threat posits that for girls and women who have some vested interest in performing well in math, the societal expectation that women aren't good at math will work to undermine their performance on challenging tasks and thus confirm the stereotyping. This cycle can become self-sustaining, leading girls and women to disidentify with math, to withdraw from further testing, and to forego further skill development.

The pattern of activating stereotyping to generate feelings of threat with subsequent disrupted performance has drawn largely on: (1) task beliefs, (2) group composition, and (3) priming a threatened identity. We have seen that even subtle changes in *task beliefs* via instructions given about the task can make a difference in how women and men perform on that task. When experimenters tell test takers straight out that the math task they are about to take is one that can detect men's superiority (Walsh et al., 1999) or is simply diagnostic of true ability (Brown & Josephs, 1999), women do worse than men. This same pattern was found for visuospatial ability, with women's and men's performances equalizing when the stereotype was nullified by telling participants that women generally outperform men on the task at hand (Campbell & Miller, 2009).

When negative stereotyping is pervasive in the domain (as in "men are better at all math"), researchers don't even need to state the stereotype to see its impact. Jessi Smith and Paul White (2002) created three experimental conditions in which they told one-third of the women outright that men do better in math; another third that women and men perform the same on this test; and the last third were told nothing. The last "uninformed" group scored just as poorly as the first group for whom negative stereotyping about women and math was explicitly aroused (and less well than the second, same performance condition). Another part of this study extended the impact of stereotype threat beyond women and math by activating negative stereotyping in White men about Asian men's superior abilities.

Individual differences research also links stereotyping activation to performance. Women who endorsed traditional stereotyping about women's math abilities (and generally regarded women's lower status as legitimate) were more susceptible to stereotype threat than more nontraditional women (Schmader et al., 2004).

Notice in each of the examples above, stereotyping was activated either implicitly or subtly. If stereotypes are boldly made explicit, **stereotype reactance** can be raised so that people will bend over backwards to behave in ways inconsistent with the stereotyping

#### Box 6.8

Research on stereotype threat tells us that if this woman is taking a math test, both the composition of this group and any instructions that would activate stereotypes about men's superiority in the domain of math will likely undermine her performance. In this way, the presumed objectivity of the test itself is compromised by the context in which it is taken.



(Kray et al., 2001). We'll see this point raised again—highlighting that the power of stereotyping is in its subtlety.

Extending the subtlety of stereotyping activation to *group composition*, simply completing a task in the presence of others can arouse stereotyping. When women and men completed math problem-solving and verbal tasks in the presence of two other students (of either the same- or other-sex), only women's scores in math and in the presence of two men were negatively affected (Inzlicht & Ben-Zeev, 2000). In a similar study, women were exposed twice to the spatial Ponzo illusion, and the gap between women's and men's scores was greatest when women were with more men (Miller, 2001). Given what we know about **tokenism** and **stereotype threat**, it is likely that being one woman among men is all it takes to arouse debilitating stereotyping.

Denise Sekaquaptewa and Mischa Thompson (2003) brought these two strands of research together in one study by varying both task stereotyping (by describing women as poor performers) and group composition (a lone woman within a group of men). As we'd expect, each condition alone led to performance deficits. Moreover, the combination of both sources of threat resulted in even worse performance. In the everyday world where women encounter all sorts of negative stereotyping about their cognitive abilities, the additive impact of multiple sources of stereotype threat becomes even more troubling.

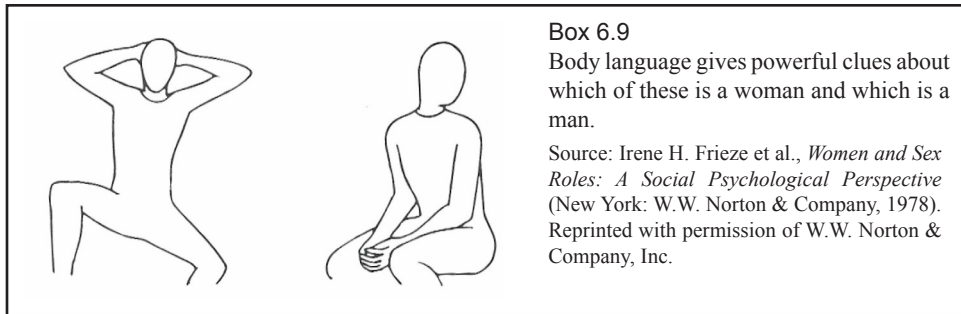
Finally, researchers have *primed the identity* threatened by a stereotype to explore stereotype threat effects. For example, when women and men were primed to think about the positive characteristics of women, women scored worse than men on a spatial mental rotation task (Ortner & Sieverding, 2008). However, this gap closed when both groups were primed to think about the positive qualities of men. Capturing the subtlety of gendering cues, Sapna Cheryan and her colleagues (2009) demonstrated that college women's interest in computer science was negatively affected by simply having masculine-typed objects (Star Wars posters and tech parts) in the room—objects that made salient the masculine-typing of computing. Even the prospect of working on all-women teams did not erase the chilling impact of these masculinizing objects.

In another study, women's leadership aspirations were undermined by prior exposure to gender stereotypic television commercials (Davies et al., 2005). Drawing on task instructions to make women feel safe about their identity (even after watching stereotypic ads) restored women's aspirations to be a leader. Finally, in one of my favorite priming studies, Asian American women primed with their gender identity performed less well than control women on a math test, whereas other Asian American women primed with their ethnic identity did better (Shih et al., 1999).

Note that in this last study (as well as in others) *stereotype "threat" effects can be negative, nullified, or even positive* (beliefs that Asians are good at math) depending on the stereotype activated. This last point raises questions not only about who is unknowingly harmed by stereotyping but also about who is unwittingly benefitted (privileged).

## STATUS AND SOCIAL CONTEXT

Stereotyping clearly set up different social contexts for women and men, potentially oppressing or privileging both women and men depending on the stereotype activated. A second way that social contexts can oppress or privilege girls/women and boys/men has to do more directly with the **social status** we culturally ascribe to gender.

**Box 6.9**

Body language gives powerful clues about which of these is a woman and which is a man.

Source: Irene H. Frieze et al., *Women and Sex Roles: A Social Psychological Perspective* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978). Reprinted with permission of W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.

**Status construction theory** posits that being male, along with other more valued states (e.g., being White and heterosexual), is regarded as both superior in capabilities and **instrumental** (as opposed to **expressive**) in role quality (Berger & Webster, 2006). Thus the social meaning we give to gender includes hierarchical higher status associated with men. We can see the effects of status at work when interactions between peers of equal status and power show few gender differences in behavior, in contrast to most interactions between women and men that are rooted in inequalities in status (Ridgeway & Smith-Lovin, 1999). Because status is so confounded with gender, and because we don't have parallel equal-status interactions with which to compare these unequal relations, we often fail to even notice this fundamental difference. Furthermore, even if we do notice, we are more likely to write it off as differences between women and men than differences between lower- and higher-status individuals.

One of the most researched areas linking hierarchical status to gender in psychology has to do with nonverbal communication—or what Nancy Henley (1977) described as “body politics.” This line of reasoning argues that women and lower-status others stake out less territory, wait more, are touched more and touch less, seek eye contact, and smile more in nonintimate relationships. Meta-analysts do find evidence of small-to-moderate differences between women and men on several nonverbal indicators—including recognizing faces ( $d = -0.17$ ), social smiling ( $d = -0.30$ ), greater distance maintained from others ( $d = +0.27$ ) and by others ( $d = +0.43$ ), and expansiveness (taking up space) ( $d = +0.46$ ) (Hall, 1984). Additionally, there is some evidence that these nonverbal signs are linked to dominance (high status) and submissiveness (low status).

For example, Marie Helwig-Larsen and her colleagues (2004) observed attentive head nodding as a gesture of submissiveness. When these researchers observed students interacting with professors and with other students, both women and men students nodded their heads more when professors, than when students, spoke. As we'd predict if status and gender are related, men nodded less when their peers spoke than did women.

Although it is clear that women smile more than men, whether this pattern is related to hierarchical status is less clear. On the one hand, the pattern of women smiling more than men did not completely map onto actual or perceived status (Hall et al., 2002). On the other hand, smiling is more optional among higher-status and more obligatory among lower-status people so that status affects the *propensity* to smile more than actual displays of smiling (Hecht & LaFrance, 1998). For individual women, smiling was related to their dominance preference such that women who wanted to appear subordinate, smiled more (Mast & Hall, 2004).

Status and gender can combine to affect how people are perceived by others. Michael Conway and his associates (2003) examined how people perceived the maladaptive worrying of others. As we might expect, participants both rated and described more worry by women than men. In a follow-up study, participants judged the worry of others who were described, not by their gender, but by their status. Low-status individuals, just like women, were perceived as experiencing more nonproductive worry.

Status construction theory also identifies associations between **status** and **agency** (that is, someone who actively takes control). Michael Conway and his colleagues (1996) asked college students to rate hypothetical characters “Mary Smith” and “Robert Jones,” along the dimensions of the Personal Attributes Questionnaire indicating *communal* (warm and able to devote self to others) and *agentic* (aggressive and independent) attributes. Some students read about targets in gender-traditional jobs (Mary as a filing clerk); others, about nontraditional employees (Robert as a filing clerk). The jobs varied by status: high (surgeon) and low (nurse on a surgical ward). The job status of both Mary and Robert made a difference: high-status workers were regarded as more agentic and less communal than low-status workers.

Jobs in the real world are not neatly dispersed for researchers; Higher-status jobs tend to be dominated by White men, and jobs vary according to how much agency and communality they connote. (For example, our expectations that high-status surgeons will help people are unlike our expectations for high-status stockbrokers.) Conway and his colleagues (1996) got around these problems in follow-up studies in which they described fictitious people whose status was varied with social cues such as clothing and access to resources. The pattern noted above persisted: low-status individuals were described using communal/sociable terms in contrast to agentic high-status people.

Other studies systematically vary status cues by gender. I think more research along these lines needs to be developed. My personal favorite is Mary Hogue’s and my (2003) study of “depressed entitlement” that we read about in Chapter 2. When women were explicitly told that women typically outperform men on the upcoming task, and even when they were told that the task is usually done by lower-status high school students, these status-enhanced women paid themselves for their work similarly to men. In the control conditions when women and men simply did the task then allocated their self-pay, women gave themselves less than men, reproducing the depressed entitlement effect. Control women didn’t know they underpaid themselves, and we didn’t know that status played a role until we manipulated these factors in our study.

## CHAPTER SUMMARY

The main point that runs across this chapter is that finding a gender difference between women and men, no matter how convincing even a meta-analysis is, doesn’t let us automatically jump to the conclusion that intergroup difference is the best way to talk about this finding.

First, the difference between women and men itself may be dwarfed by individual and subgroup diversity that makes intragroup diversity among women greater than the intergroup difference between the average women and the average men. Making this interpretative mistake can restrict individuals and subgroups to living within gender-defined barriers, rather than freeing each of us to realize our own potentials. For example, we have seen that



although boys generally are better at spatial tasks than girls, there's no reason to think an individual girl can't excel in this domain.

The stereotyping that can evolve from this misinterpretation of intergroup gender differences though can produce stereotype threat that itself can come to limit individuals. Understanding the power of stereotyping and status takes us to the second point of this chapter that social context is gendered and matters. Stereotyping about social behaviors, roles, and occupations, along with status differentials, can socially construct different worlds for women and men. Thus, what appear to be differences rooted within women's and men's biology and/or socialization histories actually may disappear when the playing field is leveled.

## SUGGESTED READINGS

Levitt, H. M., Gerrish, E. A., & Hiestand, K. R. (2003). The misunderstood gender: A model of modern femme identity. *Sex Roles, 48*, 99–113.

Heidi Levitt and her colleagues conducted interviews with femme-identified lesbians about their identity development. Grappling with stereotyping about women and lesbians, their analysis enriches our understandings of femininity, relationships, and privilege.

Lott, B. (1997). The personal and social correlates of a gender difference ideology. *Journal of Social Issues, 53*(2), 279–298.

Bernice Lott makes a case for viewing gender differences with an eye to both within-gender variation and social context. She then takes the next critical step and links this common failure to understand the full complexity of gender differences to a broader political agenda that supports systems of inequality. Her examples help apply my chapter here to the more topical chapters coming up later in this text.

Yoder, J. D., & Kahn, A. S. (2003). Making gender comparisons more meaningful: A call for more attention to social context. *Psychology of Women Quarterly, 27*, 281–290.

This paper actually grew out of this chapter in the second edition of this textbook (then Chapter 5), and it in turn shaped my richer discussion of social context here. Thus, I think it helps contribute to a fuller understanding of a social contextual approach and how it fits across the previous chapters of this text.

Halpern, D. F., Benbow, C. P., Geary, D. C., Gur, R. C., Hyde, J. S., & Gernsbacher, M. A. (2007). The science of sex differences in science and mathematics. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest, 8*, 1–51.

Diane Halpern and her distinguished co-authors respond to then-Harvard University president Lawrence Summers's (2005) speculation that there are few distinguished women in math, science, and engineering because there aren't enough women with the innate abilities necessary to develop the needed advanced skills in these areas. This long and detailed article gives no easy answers but rather provides sound evidence that understanding these patterns requires much more complex thinking than writing off women's potential in these core science domains.

Steele, C. M. (1997). A threat in the air: How stereotypes shape intellectual identity and performance. *American Psychologist*, 52, 613–629.

Claude Steel presents a general overview of stereotype threat in a compelling and reader-friendly form in this important article. Although examples involving gender are peppered throughout this paper, it also provides a broader understanding of how stereotype threat works across different social categories across the Diversity Wheel.

Bohan, J. S. (1993). Regarding gender: Essentialism, constructionism, and feminist psychology. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 17, 5–21.

Using the terminology and ideas of essentialist and constructionist thinking, Janis Bohan makes a case for feminist psychology that fits well with the social contextual framework developed in this chapter. Thus, this paper helps integrate the ideas presented in Chapter 2 with our discussions of gender differences and power across the first half of this text.