

# Sexism Predicts Appeal of Gender Stereotypes from a Popular Book on Relationships

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College students and older adults had difficulty identifying the proposed gender differences from the book, although adults were somewhat more successful on feminine items. Only those students with higher sexism scores showed the proposed gender difference in preferences for feminine items. The masculine items appealed equally to everyone.

In her book on gender and language, Crawford, (1995) confronts the “two cultures” approach present in popular self-help books on heterosexual relationships. For example, Crawford describes *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* (Gray, 1992) as “dichotomiz[ing] and stereotyp[ing] women and men to extremes” (p. 89). Crawford further castigates the book as polarizing “every aspect of personality, motivation, and language” (p. 89):

Women’s speech is indirect, men’s is direct. Women respond to stress by becoming overwhelmed and emotionally involved, men by becoming focused and withdrawn. Women and men even lunch in restaurants for different reasons: for men, it is an efficient way to approach the task of eating; for women, it is an opportunity to build a relationship (Crawford, 1995, p. 89).

The quote above gives a good example of the types of claims found in popular books on gender. As many authors have noted, some of the behaviors identified may result from power differentials (e.g., Crawford, 1995) or the demands of gender-differentiated social roles (e.g., Eagly & Steffen, 1984; Tavis, 1992), and thus may vary across situations (e.g., Deaux & Major, 1987).

There is a related problem with many self-help books that has not received much attention in discussion of gender bias. Critics (e.g., Tavis, 1992) have noted that the symptom checklists in self-help books do not provide the base rate information needed for a valid interpretation of responses. For example, a list of vague symptoms may be presented to the reader as a test for a specific disorder. However, the diagnostic value of the test cannot be known without information on the frequency of the symptoms in the general population. This same problem may be present in books in which the author presents lists of characteristics identified by gender, but without accompanying base rate information. The reader is then led to identify with or accept his or her own gender’s items.

Therefore, in the present study, participants were presented with the list of supposed male and female preferences from Gray (1992), but without the gender labels. Participants were asked to rate what either most men or most women would appreciate in a relationship. We hypothesized that removing the gender labels result in less gender differentiation by the participants than is present in the presentation of the items in the book. We also hypothesized that the items identified in the book as for women would be more likely to be stereotyped by the participants than would the items identified in the book as for men. The latter items are much more

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ambiguous and contain fewer traditionally gender-stereotyped contexts than do the former items.

### Study 1

#### *Method*

*Participants.* The participants were 116 undergraduate students (53 female, 61 male) recruited from general psychology classes. An additional two were omitted because they did not indicate their sex and nine because they did not complete the questionnaire. Participants were volunteers who received class credit. Additionally, an alternative assignment, for equitable compensatory class credit, was offered to students who chose not to participate in the study.

*Materials.* The questionnaire was adapted from items identified by Gray (1992) as being appreciated by women ( $n = 101$ ; pp. 108-185) or by men ( $n = 26$ ; pp. 199-202) in heterosexual relationships. In order to test whether the explicit gender labeling of the items was affecting how the items are perceived, the items had to be rewritten so that they would be equally applicable to either sex. In essence, the items were rewritten using APA guidelines for nonsexist language (American Psychological Association, 1994, pp. 50-51)). Some of the items were also edited for clarity and to try to maintain some consistency in sentence construction across items. For example, the original item "Upon returning home find her first before doing anything else and give her a hug." (p. 180) was rewritten to say "When your partner returns home for the day he or she finds you first before doing anything else, and gives you a hug.." The other issue we struggled with was the stereotypic nature of many of the activities covered in the items (e.g., cooking). One option would have been to remove all references to contexts that are stereotypically masculine or feminine. We chose, however, to retain almost all activities as originally stated in order to have the option of comparing responses to items that were more or less stereotypic. There were two items, however, that we felt had to be made more neutral or else the item would be seen as clearly referring to one sex. The two items are as follows, with the original wording in parentheses: Your partner returns the toilet seat to its original position ("Leave the bathroom seat down" [p. 185]); Your partner buys you season passes to some event that you enjoy ("Get season tickets for the theater, symphony, opera, ballet, or some other type of performance she likes" [p. 183]). A complete list of items is available from the second author.

Two versions of the questionnaire were prepared, one for the female target condition and one for the male target condition. Both versions asked participants to indicate their sex. The instructions for the female target condition then read:

These items are suggestions for behaviors that partners in a relationship may appreciate. For each item, please circle **Yes** if you think that it would be appreciated by most women. If you do not believe it will be appreciated by most women, circle **No**. Please keep in mind that these are for women in general, not any one woman specifically.

The instructions for the male target condition were identical except that women and woman were replaced by men and man, respectively.

The 127 items were then listed in random order with the Yes and No response options to the left of each item.

*Procedure.* Participants were tested in groups by a female experimenter. The participants were randomly assigned within sex to either the male target or the female target condition. After completing the questionnaires, participants were given an explanation of the study.

## Results and Discussion

The questionnaire contained items that had been identified by Gray (1992) as either for women (F) or for men (M), and female and male participants had been assigned to either the female or male target condition. Each participant received two scores indicating the percentages of F and M items for which a “yes” response was given. Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations for F and M items. The first thing to note about these means is that they are generally quite high (from 77% to 89%), indicating that most participants of either sex thought that most items of either type would be appreciated by either sex.

Table 1  
*Mean Percentages of Yes Responses to Items for Women and for Men as a Function of Sex of Participant and Sex of Target*

Sex of Participant	Item Type	
	For Women	For Men
Female Target		
Women		
<u>M</u>	89	88
<u>SD</u>	11	10
Men		
<u>M</u>	82	77
<u>SD</u>	15	16
Male Target		
Women		
<u>M</u>	80	80
<u>SD</u>	15	17
Men		
<u>M</u>	81	83
<u>SD</u>	14	16

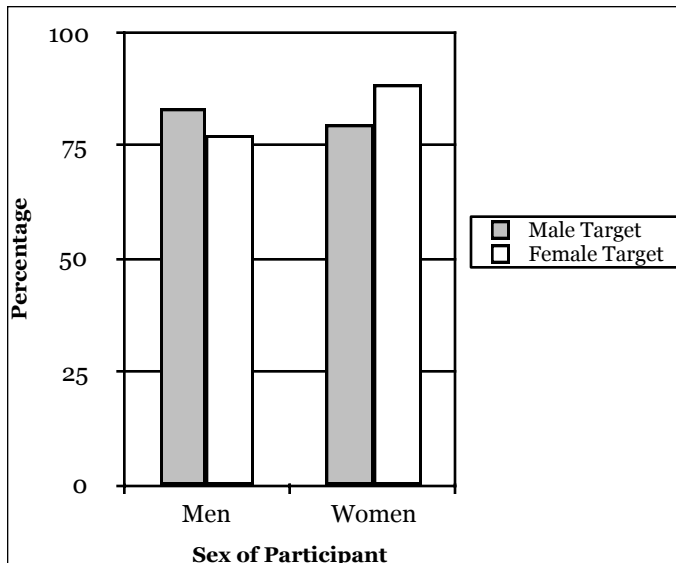
*Note:* There were 29 women and 37 men in the female target condition; 24 women and 24 men in the male target condition.

The F and M scores were each analyzed in sex of participant (men, women) X sex of target (female, male) between-subjects ANOVAs. The Bonferroni technique was used to control family-wise error rates across the two ANOVAs.

On the F items, there were no significant effects. On the M items, there was only a significant interaction,  $F(1, 110) = 6.1, p = .015$ , displayed in Figure 1. Contrary to Gray's (1992) contention that these items would be preferred by men, neither sex rated male targets as appreciating the

masculine items more than the female targets. Instead, simple effects tests indicated that women thought female targets would appreciate the items more than would male targets. Also, when rating female targets, women rated them as more appreciative of the items than did men.

The results of Study 1 failed to show that participants could identify the intended stereotyping of the items. Although there was some stereotyping of the masculine items, the direction of the stereotyping was counter to the labels of the items in Gray (1992). Even more surprising was the failure to stereotype the items originally intended for women, given the explicit gender-stereotyped context of many items (e.g., cooking, shopping). We intend to conduct further analyses by subtypes of items to see if the more explicit gender-stereotyped items were assigned to women. However, even if such an effect is uncovered, it still needs to be viewed in the context of the almost uniformly high means across items, participants, and conditions.



*Figure 1. Stereotyping of Male Items as a Function of Sex of Participant and Sex of Target*

Another issue to consider in interpreting the results of Study 1 is whether the instructions given to the participants were likely to elicit stereotyped judgments. Biernat and Manis (1994) have shown that stereotyped judgments are more likely to emerge when raters are given an objective rather than subjective scale from which to make the judgments. We believe that asking our participants to rate what “most women” or “most men” would appreciate represents a more objective judgment, and thus the failure to find the intended stereotypes is probably not because participants applied a sliding scale to their judgments.

## Study 2

It is possible that the failure of the college students in Study 1 to agree with the gender connections claimed by Gray (1992) was because of cohort differences. Therefore, a second survey was undertaken to see if older adults would be able to identify which sex is supposed to prefer the items.

### *Method*

**Participants.** The participants were employees recruited from two organizations: a university campus (clerical, technical service, and administrative staff members) and a federal social service organization (administrators, facilitators, and volunteers). Both organizations have more

females than males in the positions that were surveyed. Participation was voluntary and participants received no compensation for their involvement. Responses were received from 8 men and 27 women. The mean age was 49 (range 25 to 69 years).

*Materials.* The same questionnaires used in Study 1 for the two conditions (female target, male target) were used, with two additions. Respondents were asked to indicate, in addition to their sex, their ages and occupations.

*Procedure.* An anonymous mail survey was used to obtain the responses of the participants. Questionnaire packets with the informed consent form, instructions, questionnaires, explanation of the study, and a return envelope were distributed to employee mailboxes. One half of the packets contained the female target questionnaire and one half contained the male target, with order of condition randomized.

*Results and Discussion.* We were not able to fill all cells of the sex of participant X sex of target design. There were only two men in the male target condition who returned questionnaires, and thus we used only responses from the remaining three cells. The means and standard deviations are shown in Table 2. Again note the high percentages of agreement that these items would be appreciated (66% to 91%).

The M and F scores were analyzed in separate one-way ANOVAs, again using the Bonferroni correction across the two analyses. The three levels were women rating female targets, women rating male targets, and men rating female targets.

There was no significant effect on the M scores. The analysis on the F scores was, however, significant,  $F(2, 30) = 5.0, p = .013$ . Followup tests indicated that men and women thought women would like the F items better than women thought men would (see Figure 2).

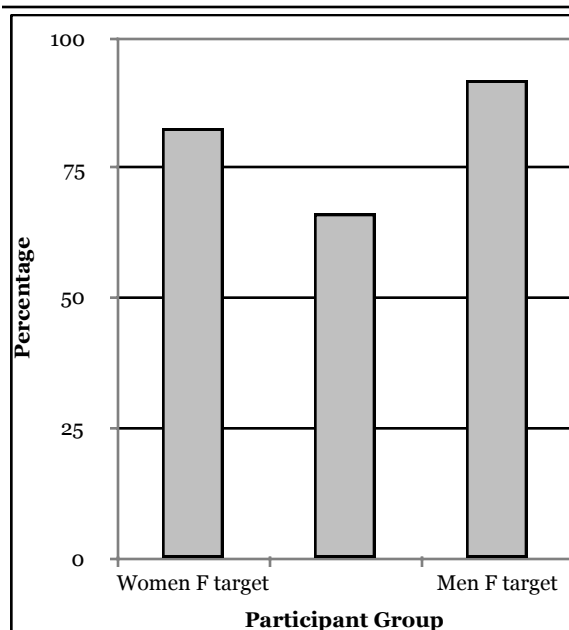
Table 2  
*Mean Percentages of Yes Responses to Items for Women and for Men as a Function of Sex of Participant and Sex of Target*

Sex of Participant	Item Type	
	For Women	For Men
Female Target		
Women		
<u>M</u>	83	85
<u>SD</u>	15	13
Men		
<u>M</u>	92	86
<u>SD</u>	13	8
Male Target		
Women		
<u>M</u>	66	71
<u>SD</u>	22	25
Men		
<u>M</u>	n/a <sup>a</sup>	n/a <sup>a</sup>
<u>SD</u>		

*Note:* There were 15 women and 6 men in the female target condition; 12 women and 2 men in the male target condition.

<sup>a</sup> Because of the small cell size for men rating a male target, this category was included in the analyses.

The adult sample again failed to support Gray's (1992) contention that the M items would be preferred by men. The F items, however, were perceived as preferred by women. It should be noted, however, that the pattern of responses on the M items, although not significant, was similar to that obtained on the F items, raising the possibility that the respondents were judging women in general as being more appreciative, rather than the items as being particularly appealing to women rather than men.



*Figure 2. Stereotyping of Female Items as a Function of Participant Group*

Taken together, the results of Studies 1 and 2 support the contention that the specific behaviors, when no longer tagged with explicit gender labels, do not have a strongly sex-differentiated appeal.

### Study 3

The failure to find consistent stereotyping of the items in either a college student or an older adult sample suggests that the labels for the items are affecting how readers of the book perceive the items. However, it could still be argued that even if individuals cannot link the items to one sex or the other, that they will still personally show gender-differentiated preferences. Therefore, the items used in the first two studies were presented to a sample of female and male college students who were asked if they would like it if their partner in a relationship did each behavior.

The second issue we explored was whether there are individual differences in preferences for the items. Specifically, we investigated whether only those individuals with more traditional attitudes about gender roles will respond differently depending on their sex. There are data suggesting an association between traditional gender role attitudes and more traditional roles in relationships (Huston & Geis, 1993; Pleck, Sonenstein, & Ku, 1993). Thus, participants were also given a measure of sexism in attitudes.

### *Method*

*Participants.* The participants were 56 students from psychology classes. Complete data were obtained from 51 students (23 men and 28 women). One person did not specify his or her sex and two persons of each sex did not complete the questionnaire. All participants were volunteers who received class credit for their participation in the study. Alternate assignments, with equitable class credit, were available to students who chose not to participate in this study.

*Materials.* The questionnaire used in Studies 1 and 2 was modified by changing the directions. All participants were asked to indicate their sex and were then told:

These items are suggestions for behaviors that partners in a relationship may appreciate. For each item, please circle **Yes** if you would appreciate that behavior, as displayed by your partner. If you would not appreciate your partner displaying the behavior please circle **No**.

The 127 items were then listed in the random order used in Studies 1 and 2, with the Yes and No response options to the left of each item.

The other measure used was the Modern Sexism Scale (MSS; Swim, Aiken, Hall, & Hunter, 1995; Swim & Cohen, 1997), which was used to provide a more subtle and less reactive indicator of sexism than what is provided in older measures (Glick & Fiske, 1997). The items were scored so that higher scores indicate less sexism in responses.

*Procedure.* Participants were tested in groups by a female experimenter. The participants first completed the preference measure and then the MSS. After completing the questionnaires, participants were given an explanation of the study.

### *Results and Discussion*

The questionnaire contained items that had been identified as either for women (F) or for men (M). In addition, female and male participants were classified as high or low in sexism based on their MSS scores. Those whose MSS score was at or below the median (35) were classified as high in sexism; those above the median were classified as low in sexism. Each participant received two scores indicating the percentages of F and M items for which a “yes” response was given. Table 3 presents the means and standard deviations for F and M items. As in the two stereotyping studies, the mean preference scores in the present study are also quite high (from 69% to 90%), indicating that most participants of either sex thought that they would appreciate most of the items if done by their partners. Even the group with the lowest mean (men with high sexism scores rating F items) endorsed an average of over 2/3 of the items.

The F and M scores were each analyzed in sex of participant (men, women) X sexism (high, low) between-subjects ANOVAs. The Bonferroni technique was used to control family-wise error rates across the two ANOVAs.

On the M items, there were no significant effects. On the F items, there was only a significant interaction,  $F(1, 47) = 5.5, p = .023$ , displayed in Figure 3. Gray’s (1992) contention that these items would be preferred by women was supported only among participants with high sexism scores. In contrast, men and women with low sexism scores showed no significant difference in preference for the F items.



Table 3  
*Mean Percentages of Yes Responses to Items for Women and for Men as a Function of Sex and Sexism of Participant*

Sex of Participant	Item Type	
	For Women	For Men
High Sexism		
Women		
<u>M</u>	90	88
<u>SD</u>	6	8
Men		
<u>M</u>	69	77
<u>SD</u>	20	19
Low Sexism		
Women		
<u>M</u>	86	84
<u>SD</u>	13	17
Men		
<u>M</u>	85	88
<u>SD</u>	13	12

*Note:* There were 11 women and 14 men in the high sexism category; 17 women and 9 men in the low sexism category.

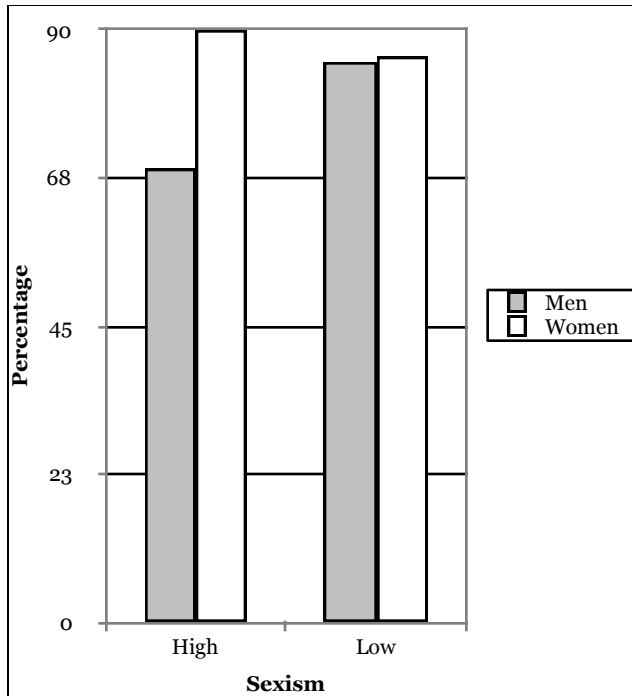


Figure 3. Preference for Female Items as a Function of Sex of Participant and Sexism

### Conclusions

The participants in these three studies did not consistently respond in traditionally gender-stereotyped ways. In contrast, the pattern that emerged across studies was the positive view participants had of all items. Thus, by including thoughtful acts that would be appreciated by most people, Gray (1992) may have evoked a positive response which was then attributed to a gender-specific label that appeared with the items. It should also be noted, however, that there is no empirical evidence on the effectiveness of Gray's (1992) suggestions or the degree of satisfaction felt by readers. Mere sales numbers do not answer this question.

It is important to empirically address whether self-help books are accurate guides because of the effect the books may have in reinforcing gender-stereotyped conceptions of relationships. Markman, Silvern, Clements, and Kraft-Hanak (1993) raised interesting possibilities when discussing their studies on relationships, in which complex and not always gender-stereotyped patterns were found. Markman et al.'s observations of couples who were not in conflict showed few gender differences in communication. In contrast, participants who were asked to rate current or failed relationships revealed more of the gender stereotyped patterns. They suggest that gender-stereotyped behavior patterns, similar to those described in self-help books such as Gray's (1992), may be a consequence rather than a cause of conflict in relationships, and that persons may perceive their relationships as more gender-role traditional than their behaviors actually are. Markman et al. further argue that therapists could draw the wrong conclusions about relationship problems if limited sources of information are used.

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May 2017 note: These three studies served as the pilot tests for a subsequent study by Signorella and Cooper (2011).

Signorella, M. L., & Cooper, J. E. (2011). Relationship suggestions from self-help books: Gender stereotyping, preferences, and context effects. *Sex Roles*, 65, 371-382. doi: 10.1007/s11199-011-0023-4

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