

Delta bias in how we celebrate gender-typical traits and behaviours

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Cognitive biases and distortions are a common feature of the human condition. In gender research, two biases are well established: *alpha bias* which is the tendency to highlight sex differences and *beta bias* which is the tendency to minimise or play down sex differences (Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1988). Last year we introduced the theory of *gamma bias*, which is the simultaneous shrinking and magnifying of gender differences (*alpha* and *beta bias* combined) resulting in the distortion of public perceptions of masculinity towards the negative and femininity towards the positive (Martin Seager & Barry, 2019). We now build on this theory by introducing a further concept: *delta bias*. Delta bias may be defined as the simultaneous denigration or celebration – depending on the gender of the performer – of an archetypal masculine gender behaviour or characteristic. This is similar to the ‘celebration’ aspect of gamma bias, except that delta bias emphasises how celebration tends to occur where the behaviour is gender atypical.

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Delta bias may be defined as the simultaneous denigration or celebration – depending on the gender of the performer – of an archetypal masculine gender behaviour or characteristic. This is similar to the ‘celebration’ aspect of gamma bias, except that delta bias emphasises how celebration tends to occur where the behaviour is gender atypical. Delta bias can be illustrated in terms of the three male archetypes as defined by (M. Seager et al., 2014). Each of these archetypes can be shown in contemporary public media and political discourse to be simultaneously celebrated if exhibited by females but denigrated if exhibited by men.

Fight-win

Competitiveness combined with an aggressive ambition to win or succeed is currently valued publicly as an attribute in women and girls (as positive ambition and achievement) but simultaneously devalued in men and boys (as dominating, macho or ‘traditional’ behaviour). Delta bias could partly, therefore, offer one explanation for society’s obliviousness to the significant underperformance of young men and boys in schools and university entrance since the 1980s (Liddon & Barry, in press). However, in everyday life, it is not clear that women are ceasing to find men competitive and successful men attractive.

Provide-protect

In the same way, traditional masculine attributes of hard work, career aspiration, supporting families, promotion, leadership and earning power are currently celebrated and encouraged in women as highly positive qualities but simultaneously are viewed with great suspicion in men as likely signs of a dominant, selfish or ‘patriarchal’ attitude. Again, however, while such a distorted narrative may be operating in public discourse and policy, it is not at all clear that this has changed the dynamics and preferences of women in their everyday lives relating to attraction, mate selection, and the acceptance of male protection.

Mastery-control

Similarly, the archetypal masculine attribute of keeping emotions under control and focusing on task performance (especially under pressure) is increasingly valued and celebrated in women, for example in sport and business circles. However, what is now valued in women as strength is increasingly denigrated in men as ‘macho’ and a character flaw. At the same time, men are consistently criticised in contemporary Western societies for not ‘opening up’ and showing their emotions.

The same level of delta bias does *not* generally apply to the three female archetypes (Seager et al., 2014) which retain respect and value. These archetypes are now still celebrated in women more than men. Men are not highly valued if they encroach in these domains, but they are also criticised for not aspiring to them.

Beauty-glamour

The beauty ideal continues to be valued primarily as a feminine attribute. Beauty is usually revered, though the aspiration to beauty as a sole aim in women has been increasingly questioned. However, the female beauty or glamour archetype is still celebrated, as most obviously evidenced by supermodels. Even males who copy the extreme feminine ideal (‘drag queens’) are celebrated and not denigrated.

Child-rearing/caring/nurturance

Childcare is still valued as a primarily female attribute, as enshrined in terms of legal rights and social policy relating to child access. While motherhood as a sufficient aspiration in itself has been increasingly questioned, motherhood *per se* has not typically been denigrated. While women are increasingly expected to seek paid employment outside the home, many women gravitate to careers in childcare and the caring professions. Though men are increasingly criticised for not entering the domain of childcare, they are often not highly valued if they do so, and may also attract suspicion.

Family harmony/home-making

This archetypal behaviour is valued less in women than in previous generations. Men are increasingly criticised for not aspiring to this archetype, but also are not highly valued if they do exhibit such behaviour

CONCLUSION

Male archetypes (often misrepresented as stereotypes) are still accepted in today's Western culture but are celebrated most noticeably when these traditional male behaviours are exhibited by women and girls. In effect, this means we, as a culture, are reversing our attitudes and expectations of the genders rather than changing anything fundamental or 'progressing'. Even if this were a successful enterprise it would result in nothing more than a mirror image of traditional gender patterns. Male archetypes are now socially and politically devalued or questioned if pursued by males but celebrated if pursued by women. Female archetypal behaviour is still largely valued. The role of 'housewife' may now be said to be devalued for women but men who perform this role are not highly valued either.

The impact of all this could at first glance be seen as simply the equivalent of making guitars sounding more like pianos and vice versa, as according to *The Beatles'* drummer Ringo Starr, was attempted in the making of their iconic album *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (Cable News Network, 2014). This probably seemed like a great idea at the time and was at great cost to studio time but arguably added little to an otherwise inspired record. In gender terms, then, the archetypes are still there in the mix, as is inevitable if they truly are evolved archetypes. Socially and politically, we have simply reversed how we attach value to these archetypes. However, musically we do not devalue guitars or pianos by swapping them, however wasteful the enterprise. In the domain of gender, however, we no longer see masculinity and femininity as equal and essential elements in a harmonious musical palate (Yin and Yang) but have valued some (feminine) sounds above others (masculine), thus creating potential and actual disharmony. We are valuing a guitar *only* if it sounds like a piano.

The net impact is a constant pressure to split men from their evolved archetypes while largely allowing women to aspire to male archetypes and at the same time largely preserving their female archetypes. Women can therefore remain *archetype-congruent* and at the same time be celebrated for venturing into characteristically male behaviours. Men on the other hand are under pressure to move away from male archetypes while being offered no equivalent honourable admission to female archetypes. This is damaging for us all, men, women and children but especially men and boys. There is a crisis but not of masculinity itself, but rather in terms of society's stigmatisation of masculinity as 'traditional', 'rigid', and 'dominant'. Men can no longer fit comfortably even within their gender archetypes while women can enjoy increasing freedom and comfort within both sets of archetypes. In musical terms, the guitar is in effect being lowered in the mix and the piano made louder; the guitar is still there to be heard, but only celebrated and turned up if played by a pianist. We might speculate on the implications for the well-being of men and boys of experiencing restrictions on the expression of their masculinity. For example, if a boy grows up sensing that his competitiveness is frowned upon, how does he cope with this? What happens to his competitive energy if he tries to reign it in to comply with the wishes of others?

Perhaps the real question is how far these attitude changes penetrate through all layers of society. Are they mainly beliefs that affect those who have influence and power, in other words, journalists, politicians, lawmakers, teachers, and academics? And are these attitudes as evident in the private actions of these influencers as they are in their public speeches? Are people who attend university more vulnerable to these views? Do older people share these views, and do people retain these views to the same extent as they grow older?

If the delta bias hypothesis is correct in its reference to gender archetypes – as opposed to stereotypes – there will be a large body of men and women who find their archetypal gender instincts and gender differences far less problematic – and perhaps much more life-enhancing – than suggested by the prevailing narrative encouraging gender-atypical behaviour. To the degree that the currently prevailing narrative is promoting a social construct of gender, it might be expected that evolutionary imperatives

will cause the pendulum of gender role erasure to sway back to something more inclusive and accepting of archetypal masculinity.

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