Language use shapes cultural norms: Large scale evidence from gender

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Abstract

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Introduction

The language we use to communicate a message shapes how our listener interprets that message (Loftus & Palmer, 1974; Tversky & Kahneman, 1981; Fausey & Boroditsky, 2010). A listener, for example, is more likely to infer that a person is at fault if the event is described actively (e.g., "she ignited the napkin"), as opposed to passively (e.g., "the napkin ignited"). The formative power of language is perhaps most potent in shaping meanings that necessarily must be learned from others: cultural norms. In the present paper, we consider one type of cultural norm—gender—and examine the extent to which differences in language use may lead to cross-cultural differences in understandings of gender.

Gender provides a useful case study of the relationship between language and thought for several reasons. First, more abstract domains like gender may be more subject to the influence of language relative to more perceptually grounded domains like natural kinds (Boroditsky, 2001). Second, many languages encode the gender of speakers and addressees explicitly in their grammar. Third, a large body of evidence suggests that language plays a key role in transmitting social knowledge to children (e.g., Master, Markman, & Dweck, 2012). And, fourth, gender norms are highly variable across cultures and have clear and important social implications.

For our purposes, we define the hypothesis space of possible relationships between language and gender norms with two broad extremes: (1) language reflects a pre-existing gender bias in its speakers (*language-as-reflection hypothesis*); (2) language causally influences gender biases (*language-as-causal hypothesis*). We assume that the language-as-reflection hypothesis is true to some extent: some of the ways we talk about gender reflect our knowledge and biases acquired independently of language. For example, we may observe that most nurses are women, and therefore be more likely to use a female pronoun to refer to a nurse of an unknown gender. Our goal here is to understand the extent to which language may also exert a causal influence on conceptualizations of gender.

In particular, we explore two possible mechanisms by which the way we speak may influence notions of gender[1]. The first is through the overt grammatical marking of gender, particularly on nouns, which is obligatory in roughly one quarter of languages (e.g., in Spanish, "nina" (girl) and "enfermera" (nurse) both take the gender marker *-a* to indicate grammatical femininity; Corbett, 1991). Because grammatical gender has a natural link to the real world, speakers may assume that grammatical markers are meaningful even when applied to inanimate objects that do not have a biological sex. In addition, the mere presence of obligatory marking of grammatical gender may promote bias by making the dimension of gender more salient to speakers.

A second route by which language may shape gender norms is via word co-occurrences. Words that tend to occur in similar contexts in language may lead speakers to assume—either implicitly or explicitly—that they have similar meanings. For example, statistically, the word "nurse" occurs in many of the same contexts as the pronoun "her," providing an implicit link between these two concepts that may lead to a bias to assume that nurses are female. This second route may be particularly influential because the bias is encoded in language in a way that is more implicit than grammatical markers of gender and thus more difficult to reject.

An existing body of experimental work points to a link between language and psychological gender bias in both adults (e.g., Phillips & Boroditsky, 2003) and children (e.g., Sera, Berge, & Castillo Pintado, 1994). For example, Phillips and Boroditsky (2003) asked Spanish-English and German-English adult bilinguals to make similarity judgements between pairs of pictures depicting an object with a natural gender (e.g., a bride) and one without (e.g., a toaster). They found that participants rated pairs as more similar when the pictures matched in grammatical gender in their native language. While these types of studies

[1]These mechanisms are what Whorf (1945) refers to as phenotypes (overt) and cryptotypes (covert).

provide suggestive evidence for a causal link between language and psychological gender bias, they are limited by the fact that they typically only compare speakers of 2-3 different languages and measure bias in a way that is subject to demand characteristics.

In what follows, we ask whether the way gender is encoded linguistically across 31 different languages predicts cross-cultural variability in a particular manifestation of a gender bias—the bias to associate men with careers and women with family. We begin in Study 1 by describing cross-cultural variability in psychological gender bias using an implicit measure. In Study 2, we use semantic-embedding models to examine whether variability in lexical semantics predicts variability in psychological gender biases. In Study 3, we ask whether the presence of grammatical gender in a language is associated with greater implicit gender bias. Together, our data suggest that both language statistics and language structure likely play a causal role in shaping culturally-specific notions of gender.

Study 1: Gender bias across cultures

To quantify cross-cultural gender bias, we used data from a large-scale administration of an Implicit Association Task (IAT; Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998) by Project Implicit (Nosek, Banaji, & Greenwald, 2002). The IAT measures the strength of respondents' implicit associations between two pairs of concepts (e.g., male-career/female-family vs. male-family/female-career) accessed via words (e.g., "man," "business"). The underlying assumption of the IAT is that words denoting more similar meanings should be easier to pair together compared to more dissimilar pairs.

Meanings are paired in the task by assigning them to the same response keys in a 2AFC categorization task. In the critical blocks of the task, meanings are assigned to keys in a way that is either bias-congruent (i.e. Key A = male/career; Key B = female/family) or bias-incongruent (i.e. Key A = male/family; Key B = female/career). Participants are then presented with a word related to one of the four concepts and asked to classify it as quickly as possible. Slower reaction times in the bias-incongruent blocks relative to the bias-congruent blocks are interpreted as indicating an implicit association between the corresponding concepts (i.e. a bias to associate male with career and female with family).

In Study 1, we use the IAT to measure the bias to associate women with family and men with careers across different cultures. We find a gender bias in all countries. Replicating previous work (Miller, Eagly, & Linn, 2015), we also find that the magnitude of the bias is negatively correlated with percentage of female enrollment in STEM fields.

Methods

We analyzed an existing IAT dataset collected online by Project Implicit (https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/; Nosek et al., 2002). Our analysis included all gender-career IAT scores collected from respondents between 2005 and 2016 who had complete data and were located in countries with more than 400 total respondents ($N =$ 772,467). We further restricted our sample based on participants' reaction times and error rates using the same criteria described in Nosek, Banjai, and Greenwald (2002, pg. 104). Our final sample included 663,709 participants from 47 countries, with a median of 965 participants per country. Note that although the respondents were from largely non-English speaking countries, the IAT was conducted in English. We do not have language background data from the participants, but we assume that most respondents from non-English speaking countries were native speakers of the dominant language of the country and L2 speakers of English.

Several measures have been used in the literature to quantify the strength of the bias from participants' responses on congruent and incongruent blocks on the IAT. Here, we used the most robust measure, D-score, which measures the difference between critical blocks for each participant while controlling for individual differences in response time (Greenwald, Nosek, & Banaji, 2003). In addition to the implicit measure, we also analyzed an explicit measure of gender bias. After completing the IAT, participants were asked, "How strongly do you associate the following with males and females?" for both the words "career" and "family." Participants indicated their response on a Likert scale ranging from *female* (1) to *male* (7). We calculated an explicit gender bias score for each participant as the Career response minus the Family response, such that greater values indicate a greater bias to associate males with career.

To obtain country-level gender bias estimates, we first calculated residual implicit and explicit bias scores for each participant, controling for variables that are independent predictors of bias size (block order, participant sex, and age), and then averaged across participants within the same country.

We compared implicit and explicit gender biases to an objective measure gender equality that is measured for each country by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO): the percentage of women among science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) graduates in tertiary education (Miller et al., 2015; Stoet & Geary, 2018).

Results

Figure 1 shows residualized implicit gender bias by country (M = -0.01; 0.03). Implicit gender biases were moderately correlated with explicit gender biases both at the level of participants ($r = 0.16$, $p < .0001$) and countries ($r = 0.31$, $p = 0.03$). we also found that implicit gender bias was negatively correlated with percentage of women in STEM fields: Countries with a smaller gender bias tended to have more women in STEM fields (r = -0.54, $p < .01$). There was not a relationship between explicit gender bias and percentage of women in STEM fields ($r = 0.09$, $p = 0.63$).

Discussion

In Study 1, we replicate previously reported patterns of gender bias in the gender-career IAT literature, with roughly comparable effect sizes (c.f. Nosek, et al., 2002). The weak correlation between explicit and implicit measures is consistent with claims that these two measures tap into different cognitive constructs (Forscher et al., 2016). In addition, consistent with previous research (Miller et al., 2015), we find that an objective

Study 2: Gender bias and semantics

Study 2a: Validating embedding measure of gender bias

Methods.

Results.

Discussion.

Study 2b: Replication of Caliskan, et al. (2017)

Methods.

Results.

Discussion.

Study 2c: Cross-linguistic gender semantics

Methods.

Results.

Discussion.

Study 3:

Methods

Results

Discussion

General Discussion

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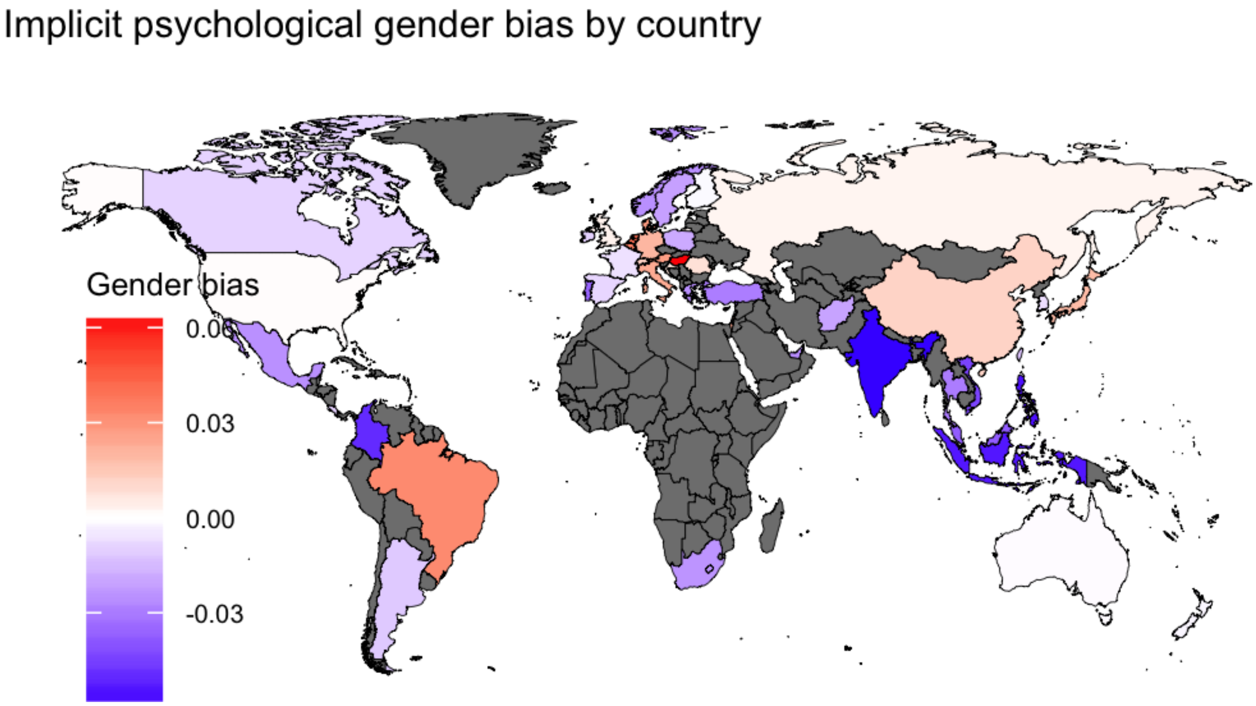

Figure 1. Study 1: Residualized gender bias by country. Larger values indicate a larger bias to associate women with family and men with career.