

## “The social psychology of gender“ by Laurie Rudman and Peter Glick<sup>1</sup>

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Why are certain forms of sexism still widely accepted but any kind of racism considered politically incorrect? And why are women generally liked but often not respected in counter-stereotypical contexts? These are the sort of questions “The social psychology of gender“ seeks to answer by diving into the dynamics that shape the ambivalence of gender relations. Without being simplistic the authors explain in an accessible way what makes relationships between genders so complicated and different in comparison to other relationships amongst other social groups. By unpacking the complexities of intimate and power relations we learn what leads men and women to embrace stereotypical gender roles in a time where equal opportunities have been in place for a long time.

Each chapter of this book picks up on a gender related inequalities in different contexts and illustrates the underlying social psychological mechanisms starting from childhood up to adulthood and across social contexts. A chapter usually starts with questions that ask the reader to reflect on his or her own experiences, observations from everyday life, or a classroom exercise to stimulate a link between the theoretical considerations and the practical life. In this way, the content of this book provokes from the reader not only the usual cognitive and rational responses, but also an affective and intuitive dimension of understanding.

Although the book is called “social“ psychology of gender the first chapter begins by outlining evolutionary and cultural approaches which the authors contrast with the social constructivist approach that is mainly followed in the book. The crucial theory explained and illustrated in this book is *Ambivalent Sexism Theory*, which has been developed by Glick and Fiske. In this vein, the reader learns in the second chapter about the status differences between genders with men taking a dominant position. In parallel, it is explained that men and women also engage in intimate (heterosexual) relationships that lead to an interdependence between women and men. As a consequence, sexism is not only hostile in nature, but also benevolent which creates a positive counterbalance to hostility. The remaining chapters of the book disentangle the effects of power and intimacy, and the two types of sexism in gender relations in everyday situations, in professional and romantic interaction, and for broader cultural or societal events.

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<sup>1</sup> “The Social Psychology of Gender: How Power and Intimacy Shape Gender Relations“ (2008) is published by The Guilford Press

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The third chapter concentrates specifically on gender relations in childhood. The authors investigate how hostile attitudes between female and male children develop into the ambivalent relationship and the power relations we know in grown-ups. The following chapter taps into the content and the origin of stereotypes, explaining how they develop, who facilitates this process, and what the specific characteristics of gender stereotypes are. An entire chapter is then dedicated to the descriptive and prescriptive functions of stereotyping and their impact on gender relations. The sixth and seventh chapter explain social psychological process that lead to the maintenance of cultural gender stereotypes in contrast to ethnic stereotypes that have changed more quickly over history. The effect of stereotypes on actors and perceivers and the effects of non-conformity to gender-related biases are lined out.

Chapter eight discusses sexism in the workplace thereby focusing on conflicting gender and professional role identities and citing Rudman's own work on backlash. The still legitimate benevolent (paternalistic) attitudes towards women are named as key factors that inhibit and undermine women's careers in contexts where they are supposed to be independent and strong actors. The following two chapters illustrate that especially love, romance, and sex are still closely linked to stereotypical views on the paternalistic gender roles that men and women are expected to take in such scenarios. A chapter on gender and violence investigates the asymmetries of violent behaviours. These are mainly committed and experienced by men but if a woman is the victim this is most probable to occur in intimate relations. Societal expectations that push men into actions of violence and status differences between men and women are elaborated.

The final chapter summarizes the progress that has been made concerning gender equality over the past decades. It also cites advantages that go beyond the improvement of the situation for women such as the implementation of more flexible working hours for everyone. However, this optimistic view is countered with a number of examples that show that there is a pervasive gender gap. Especially the stagnation of the gender revolution is described as potential danger to future advances in equal opportunities for men and women.

Overall, I experienced reading this book as refreshing. I liked that the authors often established reference to jokes, and social interactions from everyday life, as well as political events, and personal experiences. Many of the examples seemed to me very much on the point! Although, I could not anticipate all types of experiences referred to in this book, but this might be due to the fact that I have grown up in a distinct cultural context than the authors.

Although the book gives a very clear and accessible explanation of gender relations using social psychological theories there are some geographical and scientific limitations to this book. The book pursues a Western and especially North-American point of view. Other

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perspectives and a lot of gender research done by Europeans (and other parts of the world) have been neglected. Moreover, social identity and categorization theory (Austral-European approaches) were not treated in proportion to their importance in the social psychological study of gender. When writing a book that is called "The social psychology of gender" more diverse views in the field should earn consideration. However, the subtitle: "How power and intimacy shape gender relations" may account for some of the one-sided reporting.

I was further surprised to find a disproportionate part of the book discussing an evolutionary psychology perspective of gender relations. Considering that the book is identified as a work on social psychology I would have wished to hear more about other social psychological views instead. In concert, I would have expected less or at least a more critical perspective on the evolutionary explanations which has been mentioned but has not been further elaborated. The less informed reader may fall in the trap of hosting these ideas because they may appear more accessible to common sense in the first instance. For example, the assumption that change may not be possible since the power relations have been biologically enshrined in our bodies for a long time could have been a central point by contrasting it with social psychological research.

Nonetheless, I can only highly recommend this book to students who want to get a broad knowledge on how social psychology approaches gender issues. Scholars who are teaching gender will also find this book useful as a practical and theoretical guide. And researchers (even if you are an expert in gender studies yourself) will find useful overviews on powerful research and may discover some new insight. The book is not only rich in references and useful descriptions of the current state of research but it also contains a number of useful exercises and examples which links academic research to a common sense understanding.