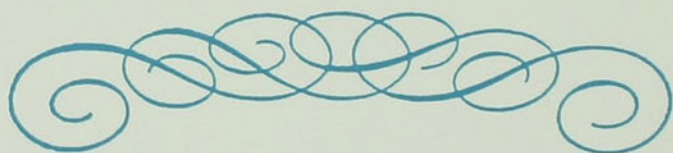


**SEX DIFFERENCES
IN SOCIAL BEHAVIOR:
A SOCIAL-ROLE
INTERPRETATION**



ALICE H. EAGLY



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For Bob, Ingrid, and Ursula

JOHN M. MacEACHRAN MEMORIAL LECTURE SERIES

**Sponsored by The Department of Psychology, The University of Alberta
in memory of John M. MacEachran, pioneer in Canadian psychology.**

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Preface

It is an honor to contribute to the series of volumes based on the MacEachran Memorial Lectures sponsored by the Department of Psychology at the University of Alberta. I delivered my lectures in October, 1985, and in the ensuing months prepared a book manuscript based on the lectures. The opportunity to present a preliminary version of the manuscript to an interested audience at the University of Alberta is very much appreciated. Professors Brendan Rule and Eugene Lechelt were responsible for the many arrangements that were made for my visit. I am grateful for their efforts as well as for the hospitality of the other faculty and the graduate students at the University of Alberta.

For some time I had thought about writing a book presenting a social-role theory of sex differences and incorporating some of the new meta-analytic work in this research area. I had not undertaken such a project because I was always in the midst of one project or another that seemed essential to developing my understanding of sex differences. Because the invitation from the University of Alberta fortunately came at a time when several of these projects were nearing completion, I was able to respond to the invitation by preparing the overview that this book contains.

Part of this book presents my own research, which I carried out in collaboration with several persons when they were graduate students. Wendy Wood and Linda Carli were my main collaborators on this research when I was on the faculty of the University of Massachusetts, and Valerie Steffen was my main collaborator during the more recent years when I have been on the faculty of Purdue University. Maureen Crowley, Patricia Renner, Carole Chrvla, and Mary Kite also made important contributions to this research while I have been at Purdue. The efforts of these individ-

uals are greatly appreciated. I have also been fortunate to have support from the National Science Foundation for my research on sex differences and gender stereotypes. I held Grants BNS-7711671, BNS-7924471, BNS-8023311, and BNS-8216742 while I carried out the research described in this book. Chapters 2 and 3 are based on parts of this research that were published in the *Psychological Bulletin*, copyrighted by the American Psychological Association, and adapted with their permission (Eagly & Crowley, 1986; Eagly & Steffen, 1986a).

Some weeks after delivering the lectures at the University of Alberta, I produced a draft manuscript that a number of people read in part or in its entirety. The comments that these people provided contributed to the quality of the final manuscript. For this help I express my appreciation to Shelly Chaiken, Kay Deaux, Judith A. Hall, Michael Harvey, Blair Johnson, Tom Johnson, Mary Kite, Donald Kuiken, Martha Mednick, Brendan Rule, Sandra Tangri, Barbara Wallston, and Wendy Wood. During the project, I also benefited from James Franklin's competent assistance with library work, Holly Norman's excellent secretarial help, and Anna Fairchild's painstaking help with proofreading.

My husband Bob has been very supportive during this project, both intellectually and personally. He has listened patiently as I gave frequent reports on the progress of what was first the lectures and then the book. In addition, he read the entire manuscript and gave many valuable suggestions for improved exposition. My enthusiasm for producing an overview of modern research on sex differences in social behavior was also shared with our daughters Ingrid and Ursula. In fact, their insights about sex differences have stimulated my interest in the topic over the years. There was, for example, the day I told Ingrid (who was then 15) about the main findings of the research review on sex differences in aggression that is reported in Chapter 3 of this book. Ingrid calmly stated that, "Everyone already knows that" and thus provided yet another illustration of one of the main themes of this book—that gender stereotypes and actual sex differences are not nearly as discrepant as most psychologists have been assuming that they are.

I hope that the quantification used in this book for synthesizing research on sex differences will not place a barrier between this presentation and some potential readers. Although I believe that the quantitative methods illustrated in this book represent an important advance in the social sciences, these methods are not a sure route to the truth. The findings they generate should be carefully scrutinized and judged for robustness by comparing them with the findings that emerge from using other methods. Methodological diversity has much to recommend it—for the study of sex differences as well as for other topics.

A. H. Eagly
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Prologue

In the mid-1970s a consensus about psychological sex differences began to emerge in the writings of research psychologists. A central tenet of this consensus held that sex differences are usually either unproven or nonexistent, even for those attributes that are popularly believed to be more characteristic of one sex than the other. It was also claimed that those few sex differences that had been adequately documented in the psychological literature are quite small in magnitude and therefore relatively unimportant in natural settings.

While this assessment of sex differences was evolving, a research literature also grew up concerning popular beliefs about women and men. This research on *gender stereotypes* (see Ashmore, Del Boca, & Wohlers, 1986) forced psychologists to confront the fact that non-psychologists believe that women and men are different. Faced with evidence of widespread gender stereotyping, sex-difference investigators of the 1970s were often cast in the role of crusaders against the misguided societal stereotypes that portrayed women and men as differing in their skills, personalities, and social behaviors.

In the first half of the 1980s, the assertion that sex differences are minor and perhaps even better termed *sex similarities* has been reiterated by a growing number of psychologists (e.g., Belle, 1985; Deaux, 1984; Hyde, 1981; O'Leary & Hansen, 1985; Wallston & Grady, 1985), some of whom suggested that it is puzzling and surprising that gender stereotypes have persisted among the general public in the face of an apparent absence of research support for sex differences in the psychological literature. The major response to this seeming disparity between scientific evidence and popular beliefs has been an increased emphasis on biases and rigidities in

processing social information. The contention was offered that the views of the general population were wrong, because of biases in the way that information is processed (e.g., Hamilton, 1979; Jones, 1982).

It is now time to reconsider the average person's view of women and men. Perhaps it is not entirely reasonable to dismiss as misguided the beliefs held by the majority of the people in a society and to suggest that these beliefs be replaced by generalizations ostensibly based on research findings. A more valid view of sex differences may give more credit to people as largely accurate observers of female and male behavior and incorporate a more sophisticated awareness of the limitations of psychological research and of the methods that traditionally were used to draw conclusions from large research literatures. The apparent mismatch between research findings and popular beliefs may originate, not primarily in the biases of the perceiver, but much more importantly in the narrow focus of experimental research and the nonsystematic methods used to summarize research findings.

Maccoby and Jacklin's pivotal review, *The Psychology of Sex Differences* (1974), was the touchstone for diagnoses of sex differences in the 1970s. This influential review shaped the consensus about sex-difference findings. Because of its central position in the literature, the Maccoby and Jacklin work is inescapably the central focus for criticism of the 1970s approach. This criticism has its scientific basis in the new scholarship that has sprung from dramatically improved methods for aggregating and integrating research findings.

Despite my current stance as a critic of 1970s scholarship on sex differences, I count myself among the many psychologists who offered descriptions of sex differences that, like the Maccoby and Jacklin (1974) work, reflected the *Zeitgeist* and the tools of analysis of that decade (Eagly, 1978). To understand these descriptions, scholars should focus on the shared interpretations that developed among psychologists who possessed a given set of methods that they conscientiously applied in a particular historical context.

In this book, I confine my analysis to social behaviors. This focus is narrower than that of Maccoby and Jacklin (1974), who attempted to review the entire psychological literature on sex differences and thereby included cognitive abilities and social behaviors in a common framework. However, there is good reason to believe that descriptions of sex differences should be different for the two domains. Because cognitive abilities are generally assessed by a limited number of standardized tests administered under highly controlled conditions, these sex-difference findings should be relatively stable (see Linn & Peterson, 1985). In contrast, social behaviors are assessed in diverse ways in far more varied settings. Therefore, sex differences in social behaviors are likely to be inconsistent across studies,

and accounting for variability between studies becomes a fundamental aspect of integrating research findings. Because the definition of the situation in which behavior occurs must be considered in order to account for this variability between studies, the theoretical analysis for social behaviors should be somewhat different than it is for cognitive abilities.

To account for sex differences in social behaviors, social psychology is favorably situated: As a field that deals with social interaction, it should offer important insights. Yet most social psychologists have not paid much attention to the subject, despite the great popular and scientific interest in it during the past fifteen years. Moreover, many investigators in the inner circles of social psychology regard the study of sex differences as theoretically uninteresting.¹ This opinion is not capricious but reflects the focus of contemporary social psychology on cognitive processes. True enough, sex differences in social behaviors have been uninteresting in terms of most of the cognitive theories that have been popular in social psychology during the past fifteen years (see Fiske & Taylor, 1984; Markus & Zajonc, 1985). Social psychology's current view of the person as an active and constructive information-processor, who creates social realities from the information at hand, does not, in and of itself, yield effective analyses of sex differences. Disappointingly, the main currents of contemporary social psychological theorizing have so far contributed relatively little to this research area.

To provide a credible analysis of sex differences in social behaviors, I have found it necessary to reach back to earlier theoretical traditions. I have drawn upon certain concepts provided by social-role theory and theories of social influence. Within this framework, selected aspects of recent theorizing about social cognition and attitudes prove useful. Yet, the overall emphasis of this analysis is on the person as a recipient of social pressures, albeit a person who actively collaborates in creating and reacting to these pressures. Although the emphasis of my analysis on social pressures and norms tends to go against the constructivist grain of contemporary social psychology, I think the analysis is eminently appropriate for the study of sex differences. Thus, to account for differences in the behavior of social groups, it is necessary to determine what the members of each group possess in common. Once it is realized that they share a certain position within a social structure, the social pressures that group members experience begin to become evident and emerge as the most likely source of their distinctive social behaviors. This book examines differences in the social position of the sexes and contends

¹In this book the term *social psychology* refers primarily to the varieties of social psychology that are practiced in departments of psychology. Sociologically trained social psychologists have somewhat different intellectual and methodological traditions (see Stryker, 1983).

that these differences expose women and men to systematically different role expectations.

The analysis of sex differences provided in this book is *not* eclectic, even though explaining sex differences is a task that may seem to lend itself to considerable eclecticism. Many theories of sex differences have been proposed, based on biological factors, early childhood socialization, and other perspectives. Yet the class of explanations that seems most compelling to me—explanations based on the social roles that regulate behavior in adult life—has so far not received a sufficiently unified and forceful presentation to make it a distinctive theory of sex-typed behavior. Even textbooks in the psychology of women (e.g., Hyde, 1985; Williams, 1983) do not acknowledge such a social-normative perspective as a general theory of sex-typed behavior. On account of this lack of recognition of the importance of this class of social psychological explanations, I decided to interpret sex differences in social behavior in terms of a single social-normative perspective. Although this viewpoint accounts for a considerable range of research findings, it inevitably oversimplifies the complex realities of sex differences to some extent. Some simplification must occur in the service of achieving a coherent conceptual representation. I hope that the benefits of stating a consistent theory of sex differences will include the stimulation of new research that displays the theory's predictive power and reveals its limitations. Greater understanding of sex-typed behavior should emerge from the interplay of this theory with competing theories.

The idea that women and men manifest distinctive social behaviors may make many psychologists anxious because of what they perceive as the risky social consequences of acknowledging group differences or even discussing them at all. The controversial nature of debates about racial differences (Herrnstein, 1973; Jensen, 1973) is still very much in the minds of many psychologists. Yet if investigators avoid scientific scrutiny of issues with far-reaching social and political consequences, the science of psychology would have to ignore many concerns that people regard as important and risk losing relevance as a discipline. Moreover, avoidance of the controversies taking place in our society over the nature of sex differences leaves the debate to be waged mainly in terms of ideology. The ideological alternatives are already spelled out: Many traditional ideologies foster belief in sex differences rooted in biology, and feminist ideologies typically either minimize sex differences or foster belief in certain of them as indicators of women's oppression or superior moral qualities. Psychological research cannot supplant ideological debates about sex differences. Nevertheless, in the long run, maximally valid descriptions of sex differences should follow from the application of the scientific method. In the short run, the scientific method may yield incomplete and even misleading descriptions, but these are generally corrected as tools of analysis are

refined and scientists criticize each other's theories and research methods. In fact, the objectives of this book include the criticism of some of the conclusions that psychologists have offered about sex differences.

Discerning the social consequences of new generalizations that social scientists provide concerning sex differences is no doubt an impossible task because it would require understanding of future as well as present social conditions. Therefore, it is incautious to presume that acknowledgment by social scientists of existing sex differences invites discrimination against women or any other particular consequence. Even in the case of generalizations that may be regarded by some people as unfavorable to women, it is difficult to predict whether such generalizations would foster change-oriented compensatory education, discriminatory treatment, or some other reaction. In my view, the links between research findings and social policy are varied, often complex, and seldom very direct. Nevertheless, the chances that societies evolve sensible and humane social policies are usually increased by social scientists' presentation of valid, scientifically derived descriptions of social reality. The presentation of such descriptions of sex differences is a central purpose of this book.

Finally, a comment is needed about how the words *sex* and *gender* are defined in this book. Following usage suggested by Unger (1979) and Deaux (1985), *sex* refers to the grouping of humans into two categories—females and males. This grouping is based on biological differences between the two categories of people and is culturally elaborated in all societies. When female and male behavior differs, I refer to this difference as a *sex difference*. Consistent with the traditional usage of the term *sex difference* by psychologists, the term denotes that females and males have been shown to differ on a particular measure or set of measures. The term should not be taken to imply any particular causes of such differences. Although in recent years some psychologists have suggested that *sex difference* refer only to biologically caused differences and *gender difference* only to environmentally caused differences (e.g., Macaulay, 1985; Sherman, 1978), issues of causation are far from settled and should be left open for investigation.² Such issues cannot be solved or even usefully addressed by merely labeling a behavioral difference as biologically or environmentally caused. Moreover, the fact that my use of the term *sex difference* does not imply biological causation should be very clear on the basis of this book's consistent social psychological perspective about the causation of sex differences.

²In agreement with this preference to avoid prejudging the causes of sex differences, Sherman (1978) proposed and used the term *sex-related differences*. Although I share Sherman's intent, I prefer to adopt the simpler term *sex difference* and to make clear that the term has no causal implications in this book.

The term *gender* is useful and in this book refers to the meanings that societies and individuals ascribe to female and male categories. Thus, I refer to the social roles a society defines for women and men as *gender roles* and the stereotypes that people hold about women and men as *gender stereotypes*. These concepts are appropriately defined in terms of the meanings ascribed to the sexes.

1 The Analysis of Sex Differences in Social Behavior: A New Theory and A New Method

This book presents a body of new scholarship on sex differences in social behavior. The theoretical orientation that is proposed considers sex differences to be a product of the social roles that regulate behavior in adult life. In the process of examining the empirical implications of this new theoretical perspective, new methods are employed for integrating sex-difference findings from the large research literatures on social behaviors. This combination of theory and method is illustrated by applying it to some classes of social behaviors, and it is shown that the new approach makes sex differences substantially more predictable and amenable to interpretation than they have been in the past.

The study of sex differences has not been an area of rapid progress. Although slow progress may not be atypical in psychology (Meehl, 1978), some specific features of research and theory in this area may have made it difficult to develop an understanding of the conditions under which the behavior of women differs from that of men. First of all, progress might have occurred more quickly had psychologists not relied primarily on theoretical perspectives with only indirect relevance to adult behavior. In particular, approaches based on childhood socialization have provided the most popular interpretations of sex differences (e.g., Chodorow, 1978; Huston, 1983; Jacklin & Maccoby, 1983; Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974). To be sure, sex differences have interesting developmental histories that are worthy of study in their own right. Yet, understanding development does not necessarily enlighten us about the factors that maintain a sex difference among adults. Biological theories have also proven to be popular (see Bleier, 1984; Fausto-Sterling, 1985), but also feature causal variables that for