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On gender: misperceptions about others can stifle women's empowerment

When it comes to gender roles, rights and responsibilities, different cultures abide by different beliefs that are handed down through generations and picked up through social learning. While some acquired beliefs reflect more egalitarian values, many others privilege the autonomy and wellbeing of men — and once established, this patriarchal ideology has proven difficult to change. Biases in how we learn beliefs from others may help to explain why.

“Recent studies across diverse cultural contexts reveal a common tendency to overestimate peer support for patriarchal beliefs about gender roles,” explained [David W. Lawson](#), a professor of anthropology at UC Santa Barbara. “This tendency is especially pronounced among men, and when combined with a well-known desire to seek social conformity, may be a substantial barrier to advancing women’s empowerment.”

In a pair of recent papers, Lawson and his team at UCSB’s [Applied Evolutionary Anthropology Lab](#) shed light on possible explanations for this bias. Their research was carried out in an urbanizing rural community in northwestern Tanzania, a dynamic setting where urbanization is increasing women’s education and men are slowly starting to adopt more egalitarian attitudes.

In the first paper, published in [Evolutionary Human Sciences](#), the research team confirmed that men tend to overestimate peer support for patriarchal beliefs. For example, while 17% of men were supportive of the statement “It is better to have more sons than daughters,” the average participant estimated that 40% of their peers would agree. This same pattern held for a wide range of beliefs about gender.

The team also considered which types of men are most likely to misjudge their peers. Co-first author [Zhian Chen](#), who recently completed his masters in anthropology, orchestrated the data analysis. “In communities experiencing ongoing cultural change, assumptions about the beliefs of others may be based on lagged social information,” Chen explained. “Consistent with this argument, we found that older men, who are more exposed to outdated information, made the largest overestimations of peer support for patriarchal beliefs.”

The second paper, published in the [Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute](#), further supports the idea that beliefs about gender roles are often rendered invisible among peer groups because associated activities, such as whether or not men contribute to domestic tasks or support or oppose women’s autonomy in decisions about sex and reproduction, happen behind closed doors.

First author [Alexander Ishungisa](#), a researcher at Muhimbili University of Health and Allied Sciences, drew this conclusion from a series of focus group discussions with local community members. “Participants made clear that what other men believe is not always easy to tell from publicly observed behavior,” he said. “If some men make first steps to supporting women in private, this will be invisible to others and leave other men misinformed about changing values.”

The study also revealed that men are open about strategically conveying adherence to traditional masculine stereotypes, even when it’s at odds with their personal preferences.

“Men told stories of hiding behaviors that support women and of exaggerating their authority in household decisions,” Ishungisa said. “By doing this they ensure that they are seen as strong men in their community and avoid potential costs of being seen as violating tradition.”

The team believes these results support theoretical accounts of gender roles as socially performed rather than reflecting rigid or innate preferences, in what is sometimes called the social “doing of gender.” From this perspective, social expectation exerts a powerful influence on behavior.

If misperceptions about others serve to make patriarchal norms resistant to change, then interventions encouraging women’s empowerment may benefit from creating more open dialogue between men. By doing so, problematic misperceptions can be overturned, and men may feel more comfortable embracing changing gender roles at home and in public.

“Our work certainly supports the idea that combating stubborn misperceptions about others in our communities could be a useful strategy in promoting women’s empowerment,” Lawson said. “We still have a lot to learn about the dynamics of social learning when it comes to gender roles, and anthropologists studying cultural evolution and social learning strategies have a lot of potential to contribute to these debates.”

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