The impact of context on gender social identities

AGUSTIN ECHEBARRIA ECHABE* and JOSE LUIS GONZALEZ CASTRO
Basque Country University, San Sebastian, Spain

Abstract

What follows is a quasi-experimental study aiming to analyse the influence of the social division of roles (especially the division between public and private spheres of activity) on gender social identities. Subjects were asked to describe themselves as well as their images of the 'perfect or ideal person' in the context of their professional activities or their close relationships. The order of presentation (self-description and the description of the 'perfect person') was balanced. We found that women and men perceived themselves according to the traditional gender stereotypes (women perceived themselves as more feminine while men describe themselves as more masculine). However the context in which subjects imagined themselves affected their self-perceptions as well as their images of the 'ideal person': A public context (professional activity) elicited more masculine self-images in women and men whereas private contexts (close relationships) led to more feminine images of themselves. Furthermore, the images of the 'perfect person' varied according to which context was salient: these images were more masculine in the public context and more feminine in the private one. Finally, the asymmetry hypothesis in social comparison was confirmed. Although there was a significant correlation between self-images and the image of the 'perfect or ideal person', this correlation was stronger when subjects described themselves first and described their images of the 'ideal person' before. This result was interpreted as reflecting the subjects' tendency to see themselves as prototypes in the social comparison. Copyright © 1999 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this study was to analyse the influence of contextual factors on gender identities. We conceived gender identities as highly dynamic and historically derived...
from the social division of activities. In our view, prevailing gender identities and stereotypes fulfil important ideological functions (they justify the social division of roles, the privileged position of men, and the subordinated status of women).

The psychology of gender has mainly been a psychology of gender differences (Banaji, 1993). Most studies have taken for granted the existence of gender differences and have tried to exemplify these differences in a large number of domains: achievement motivation and attributional styles (Löcher, 1983); perception and cognition (Frable, 1989; Katz, Silvenn & Coulter, 1990; Krahé, 1989; Murphy-Berman & Sharma, 1983); values (Feather, 1984; Langan-Fox, 1991); or psychological adjustment (Frable, 1989; O’Heron & Orlofsky, 1990; Parry, 1987).

A number of these studies have paid attention to male–female identity differences (Ashmore, Del Boca & Wohlers, 1986; Bem, 1972, 1974, 1978, 1981, 1982; Cross & Markus, 1993; Frable, 1989; Markus, 1977; Markus & Nurius, 1987; Markus & Wulf, 1987). They have contributed to the dominant stereotypes according to which women are defined by communal and expressive attributes whereas men are characterised by instrumental and agentic traits. However, these studies presented the same problems of those researches centred on discovering general male–female differences. They have contributed both to reify gender differences and to conceal the social (and ideological) origins of these differences. They have offered a relatively fixed image of masculine and feminine identities and stereotypes, and furthermore have not taken into account power and status differentials in men–women relationships (Doise & Lorenzi-Cioldi, 1989; Lorenzi-Cioldi, 1988, 1991, 1993; Messick & Mackie, 1989). An example of this reification is the uncritical use of instruments such as the BSRI or the PAQ in order to prove existing male–female differences.

GENDER IDENTITIES AND OCCUPATIONAL ROLES

Some authors have stated that the social divisions of roles (specially between public and private spheres) have contributed to the establishment of prevailing gender identities and stereotypes. As Edley and Wetherell (1995, p. 180) have stated, ‘the main way women have been subordinated is through the organisation of society around a private world of domestic work (the province of women), and a public world seen as the province of men’. Moreover, current gender stereotypes and identities are in part derived from this social division of work rooted in the Industrial Revolution (Durkheim, 1982; Parsons and Bales, 1955) and the ascription of women to the private sphere of activity (family) and men to the public one (work, politics, etc.).

As Thoits (1989) has shown, since the nineteenth-century Industrial Revolution in the USA (white) women have mainly assumed family and emotional roles whereas men have assumed instrumental (based on achievement) and professional roles. Concepts such as dependence, tenderness, expressiveness and self-abnegation have progressively become feminine concepts whereas autonomy, self-development, self-confidence, independence, etc. have become masculine ones.

This process could be described as follows. A person who holds a certain social position is expected to behave in specific ways. For instance, a salesperson is expected to be kind, polite and assertive with clients. A father is expected to be loving with his children, to support his family economically, to be non-aggressive with his wife and
children, etc. An executive is expected to be self-confident, aggressive, ambitious, etc. Roles associated with the public (work, etc.) and private (family, close relations, etc.) spheres must be regarded not as traits but as behavioural specifications. A person placed in these spheres has different goals. In the private sphere, the main goal is to establish a supporting and positive interpersonal relation. In order to attain this goal, subjects must display charming behaviour. Their behaviour must be empathic, inhibiting aggressiveness, loving, understanding, sensitive, etc. At work, people struggle to obtain achievement goals (improving the company’s sales, to get a better position, being competitive, productive, earning more money, etc.). In order to attain these goals people must behave in a competitive, aggressive, self-confident, independent, or ambitious way. Subjects are expected to develop different behavioural patterns in the two spheres (public and private). Behaviours that are functional at work could be dysfunctional in a family context, and vice versa. So the important question that arises is, what happens when men are seen systematically developing their work in the public sphere whereas women are seen behaving mainly in the private sphere? In other words, what happens when there is a high correlation between gender and the public versus private spheres of activity? Perceivers could conclude that behaviours displayed by men and women reflect their ‘real identities’. This process could, in part, explain the contents of current gender identities and stereotypes. Moreover, stereotypes influence the way a person is seen and is treated by others. This process has been termed the ‘self-fulfilling prophecy’ (Neuberg, 1994; Snyder, 1992) and was described by Levine, Resnick & Higgins (1993, p. 592) as follows: ‘an interesting consequence of assigning a person to a social position (or category) occurs when (a) the individual is assumed to possess certain characteristics . . . (b) others treat the person as though he or she possesses these characteristics, and (c) this treatment causes the person to exhibit the very characteristics he or she was (incorrectly) assumed to possess in the first place’. Katz (1986) has shown that adults develop different interaction styles depending on the perceived child’s gender (which was experimentally manipulated).

Several authors have stressed the role of occupation as a central element of gender stereotypes (Flament, 1989; Hartman, Griffeth, Miller & Kinicki, 1988) and as an important factor in the origin and/or maintenance of gender identities and stereotypes (Deaux & Lewis, 1984; Eagly & Steffen, 1984; Hoffman & Hurst, 1990). Conway, Pizzamiglio and Mount (1996) found that a target working in a high-status professional activity was perceived as more agentic (instrumental and assertive) than a target working in a low-status profession (in this case the target was perceived as more communal). Filardo (1996) found that the distribution of masculine and feminine identities among Afro-American adolescents was more egalitarian than among white adolescents. The author stated that these differences could be explained in terms of the distribution of work: Afro-American women work away from the family more frequently than white women. Thus, the division between the public and the private spheres of activity is better established among white women. Humphrey (1985) also stated that there is a tendency to attribute to a target personality characteristics which are coherent with his or her observed occupation. Smoreda (1995) found that observers attributed more agentic qualities to powerful targets and more communal traits to powerless targets. Blair and Banaji (1996) stated that sometimes the occupational information has a stronger influence on perception than gender information. Williams, Munick, Saiz and Formydival (1995) asked people to rate the diagnosticity
of several traits in two contexts: ‘work’ and ‘close relationships’. They found that the instrumental traits (ambitious, capable, efficient, industrious, etc.) were seen as more diagnostic in the ‘work’ context whereas the communal and expressive traits (affectionate, considerate, gentle, sensible, understanding, etc.) were more diagnostic in ‘close relationships’. Eagly and Steffen (1984) found that male and female targets working in a private context (home and family) were perceived as communal whereas those exercising their professional activities outside the family were described as more agentic and instrumental. However, most of these studies analysed the influence of occupational information on the target’s impression, but few studies analysed how the occupational context affects the images that people construct of themselves.

All these studies show that occupational and professional information may sometimes play a more determinant role in social perception and stereotyping than gender information. Thus, the increasing access of women to activities traditionally reserved to men and vice versa (the access of men to activities traditionally reserved to women) would contribute both to changing current gender stereotypes and to reducing the importance of gender categorial information. The problem is that up to now gender categorisation and professional categorisation have remained highly correlated.

MULTIPLE IDENTITIES AND THE INTERNALISATION OF AGENTIC AND COMMUNAL IDENTITIES

Social psychologists have long assumed the plurality of the Self and Identity (Mead, 1934; Stryker, 1977, 1983, 1987; Stryker & Statham, 1985; William James, 1890). Some of these identities (social identities) derive from processes of self and hetero-categorization through which individuals internalise the stereotypes of their ingroups (James, 1993; Lorenzi-Cioldi, 1988; Mackie, 1986; Tajfel, 1978, 1981, 1984; Turner, 1982, 1984, 1985; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher & Wetherell, 1987). Other identities derive from culturally shared expectancies (roles) about the appropriate behaviours associated with specific social positions: these identities are named ‘role identities’. Role identities are a reflection of society within subjects (Parsons & Bales, 1955; Wiley & Alexander, 1987). For example, the existence of a ‘masculine’ identity linked to agentic and instrumental traits and a ‘feminine’ identity linked to communal and expressive attributes reflects a central characteristic of a society: its occupational organisation around gender criteria. People have as many role identities as the social roles they assume (Burke & Tully, 1977).

These ‘role identities’ (McCall, 1987; Sarbin & Scheibe, 1983) are social because they reflect societal expectancies and are also socially shared. Moreover, several role identities co-exist within people and they are activated in different contexts (Wiley & Alexander, 1987). To a large extent, the process of socialisation includes the internalisation of these socially shared role expectancies. Individuals learn how an efficient person should behave in different contexts. They learn prototypes of ideal role performers. These prototypes guide people’s behaviours in different contexts. In other words, societies provide certain expectancies about which behaviours are related to an efficient role fulfilment. For example, if we ask people how an ‘efficient’ mother should behave we will find some consensus about the expressive and
The communal nature of this role. If we ask people to describe how an ‘efficient’ executive should behave we will also find some consensus about the instrumental nature of this role. People internalise societal role expectancies as ‘ideal selves’. These ‘ideal selves’ work as ‘ought self-guides’ (Higgins, 1996). People try to fit their actual selves to their ideal selves. Moreover, people have well-defined images of ideal role fulfilment (‘ideal role-selves’). These images work as contextual references or guides: people try to fit their own behaviours to these ideal images. Each context triggers off a specific ‘ideal role-image’. Thus, subjects could express different self-identities depending on the demands imposed by the context. From our perspective, gender identities could be regarded as role identities.

The application of these theses to the study of gender identities provides a more social approach to gender identity and allows us to avoid a reified view of male–female differences. Moreover, this perspective puts the greatest emphasis on the importance of gender categorisation per se in question and also affirms both the central role of occupation in gender identity and stereotypes and the ideological functions fulfilled by the traditional studies on male–female differences.

Most of the studies have analysed the influence of occupational information on the agentic or communal perception of a target. This research extends previous theoretical analysis to the study of the influence of different occupational situation on subjects’ own self-identities.

A quasi-experimental study is presented in which respondents were asked to describe themselves and their images of the ‘ideal-role performer’ or ‘ideal person’ in two different contexts: their close relationships (private context) and their ‘professional activity’ (public context).

**ASYMMETRY IN SOCIAL COMPARISON**

Although it was not a central aspect of our study, the order of the description (first to describe oneself and second a ‘perfect person’ image, as opposed to the other way round) was taken into account. Different studies have shown that it is not the same to ask a person to answer the question ‘how similar are other people to you?’ as it is to ask ‘how similar are you to other people?’ Nor is it the same to ask a person to evaluate him/herself first and later evaluate another person or to invert the order of evaluations (Codol, 1984a–c). In the first two cases, the self becomes the point of reference in the social comparison; others are compared with reference to the self. In the second two cases, other people are the point of reference in the comparison. The self is usually taken as the point of reference in social comparison; others are seen as more similar to the self than the self to others. People use themselves as a prototype in the social comparison (Kaminska-Fieldman, 1993; Vinsonneau, 1983). Those dimensions seen as relevant in evaluating oneself are taken as relevant dimensions to evaluate, perceive, and render meaning to the world (Durand-Delvigne, 1993; Kodilja & Arcuri, 1993). For example, a person who sets great store by masculinity when defining him/herself first and later evaluate another person or to invert the order of evaluations (Codol, 1984a–c). In the first two cases, the self becomes the point of reference in the social comparison; others are compared with reference to the self. In the second two cases, other people are the point of reference in the comparison. The self is usually taken as the point of reference in social comparison; others are seen as more similar to the self than the self to others. People use themselves as a prototype in the social comparison (Kaminska-Fieldman, 1993; Vinsonneau, 1983). Those dimensions seen as relevant in evaluating oneself are taken as relevant dimensions to evaluate, perceive, and render meaning to the world (Durand-Delvigne, 1993; Kodilja & Arcuri, 1993). For example, a person who sets great store by masculinity when defining him/herself will also give great importance to masculinity in the process of judging and perceiving other people. When self-identity is made salient people will use the dimensions that are relevant in their self-evaluation as prototypical dimensions in the social evaluation of other people. When people think about their own selves...
before describing a prototypical person, we are more likely to find a higher similarity between the self and the prototype than in the opposite condition.

HYPOTHESES

Several hypotheses were derived from the theoretical analysis:

(1) Starting with the gender main effect, we predicted that women would perceive both themselves and the ideal person as more feminine, communal and expressive than men, whereas men would describe themselves and the ideal person in more masculine and agentic terms.

(2) However, the gender effect was expected to be qualified by its interaction with the context. Both men and women would increase their perception in agentic and assertive terms in the context of their professional activities while their self-images would become more communal in the context of their close relationships.

(3) The images of the ‘ideal person’ were expected to be affected by context manipulation in the same direction: the ‘ideal person’ would be perceived in more agentic terms in the context of professional activity and in more communal terms in the context of close relationships.

(4) Given that the agentic and communal dimensions are more strongly linked to the context (public versus private) than the masculine–feminine dimension, we expected that context manipulation would have a stronger impact on the first dimensions (agentic and communal) than on the latter (masculine and feminine).

(5) The asymmetry effect in social comparison leads us to predict a higher similarity between subjects’ self-images and their images of the ideal person when they think about their own selves before describing their prototype of the ideal person.

SAMPLE

The sample was composed of 679 people: 294 (43.3 per cent) were men and 385 (56.7 per cent) were women. The average age was 30.28 years (SD = 11.10 years).

Job distribution was as follows: 150 university students (22.1 per cent), 62 housewives (9.1 per cent), 91 clerical workers (13.1 per cent), 49 specialised workers (7.2 per cent), 53 teachers (7.8 per cent), 22 engineers (3.2 per cent), 41 service workers (6 per cent) and the rest were distributed in 30 other jobs.

PROCEDURE

The study was presented as research on the images people have of themselves in the context of their jobs (or their close relationships, depending on the experimental condition), and their images of the ‘ideal or perfect person’ in the same type of job they have (or in close relationships, depending on the condition). Subjects were asked to describe the perfect person in their job, bearing in mind that the term ‘perfect person’ was applied to someone who is efficient in their work; the perfect person in
close relationships was defined as someone who contributes to the attainment of a positive and satisfactory relationship. The order of presentation was balanced: first, half the sample evaluated themselves and second, they described their prototype of the ‘perfect person’. The other half had to make their evaluations in the opposite order (first the prototype and second the self-image). Thus, we conducted a $2 \times 2 \times 2$ quasi-experimental design. The contexts (work versus close relationship), the order (first self-description and later the description of the ‘ideal person’ versus the opposite order), and respondents’ gender category (women versus men) were the between-subjects factors, while the description of the actual-self and the image of the ideal person (ideal self) were the within-subjects factors.

Subjects were asked to indicate the extent to which (format: $1 = \text{not at all}$ and $5 = \text{a lot}$) their own self-images and their images of the ideal person could be described through a list of 65 traits or adjectives. They rated each attribute individually. 16 adjectives (assertive, self-confident, defends one’s own ideas, independent, strong character, masculine, calculating person, take decisions, leadership, takes risks, impulsive, self-sufficient, dominant, ambitious, aggressive, and competitive) were taken from the BSRI Masculine scale and 13 from the Feminine scale (child lover, immature, tender, affectionate, aware of other people’s feelings, sympathetic, compassionate, understanding, sensitive, feminine, loyal, flatterer, shy). Thirty-six adjectives were neutral in terms of gender stereotypes (bright, self-demanding, hypocritical, concealer, interesting, humiliated, witty, sociable, arrogant, sexually attractive, depressive, brilliant, optimistic, jovial, sincere, selfish, responsible for my acts, untrustworthy, accepting social customs and norms, stubborn, avoids facing problems, narrow-minded, need protection (helpless), good-tempered, happy, well balanced, charming personality, unsatisfied with oneself, methodical, different, interested in sex, polite, lonely, religious, constant, and solidary). These items were not included either in the BSRI masculine or feminine scale. Twenty of these neutral adjectives were taken from Beckler, Pratkanis & McCann (1991) and 16 from Fierro (see Fernandez-Ballesteros, 1992). These 36 adjectives are attributes people use to describe themselves in natural situations and which are not clearly linked to traditional gender stereotypes. The reason for choosing these ‘neutral’ adjectives was to avoid constraining people to describe themselves only in gender terms.

RESULTS

First, two factor analyses (varimax rotation) were performed. The attributes used to describe oneself were entered into the first analysis whereas the same attributes used to describe the ‘ideal person’ were included in the second. Moreover, the alpha reliability coefficients for all the dimensions were computed after performing these factor analyses.

Starting with self description, the attributes were grouped into eight factors. The first factor (eigenvalue = 9.83, pct of var = 14.2 per cent) (alpha = 0.86) was labelled psychological adjustment. This factor was negatively defined by the following items: depressive ($-0.64$), shy ($-0.60$), narrow-minded ($-0.58$), unsatisfied with oneself ($-0.55$), humiliated ($-0.54$), lonely ($-0.53$), untrustworthy ($-0.53$), need protection ($-0.53$), stubborn ($-0.49$), immature ($-0.46$), arrogant ($-0.34$), and avoids facing
problems (−0.31). The following attributes positively defined this first factor: sociable (0.55), assertive (0.50), good-tempered (0.50), bright (0.48), happy (0.49), sympathetic (0.48), witty (0.42), brilliant (0.41), optimist (0.41), jovial (0.38), self-confident (0.37).

The second factor (eigenvalue = 4.92; pct of var = 7.1 per cent) (alpha = 0.78) (termed communal-expressive) was defined by: sensitive (0.69), aware of the feelings of others (0.63), understanding (0.59), affectionate (0.58), solidary (0.55), compassionate (0.53), child loving (0.48), sincere (0.46) and tender (0.46).

The third factor (eigenvalue = 4.56; pct of var = 6.6 per cent) (alpha = 0.75) (personal appeal/attractiveness) grouped the following adjectives = sexually attractive (0.73), interested in sex (0.68), interesting (0.56), different (0.53), charming personality (0.53), flatterer (0.50) and takes risks (0.37).

The fourth factor (eigenvalue = 2.90; pct of var = 4.2 per cent) (alpha = 0.70) (concealment) grouped: aggressive (0.56), hypocritical (0.53), concealer (0.50), untrustworthy (0.46), selfish (0.45), calculating person (0.42), dominant (0.37) and impulsive (0.31).

The fifth factor (eigenvalue = 2.11; pct of var = 3.1 per cent) (alpha = 0.69) (autonomy/independence) was defined by: strong character (0.60), independent (0.58), self-sufficient (0.43), take decisions (0.42), self-demanding (0.40), defends one’s ideas (0.38), leadership (0.37), responsible for my acts (0.37).

The sixth factor (eigenvalue = 1.52; pct of var = 2.2 per cent) (alpha = 0.60) (agency) grouped the following items: constant (0.63), well balanced (0.52), competitive (0.52), ambitious (0.50), and methodical (0.41).

The seventh factor (eigenvalue = 1.47; pct of var = 2.1 per cent) (alpha = 0.46) (conventionalism) was defined by accepted social customs and norms (0.60), religious (0.48), loyal (0.48), and polite (0.40).

The last factor (eigenvalue = 1.39; pct of var = 2.0 per cent) (alpha = 0.62) (femininity) was positively defined by feminine (0.66) and negatively by masculine (−0.59).

With regard to the second factor analysis (applied to the items used to describe the ‘ideal person’ which in fact are the same as those used to describe oneself), the results were similar to those presented above. Only minor differences were found. It is for this reason that only these differences will be mentioned. The first difference was found in the order of the factors. The first was the ‘psychological adjustment’ factor (alpha = 0.88). The main differences with the same factor applied to describe oneself were the following: arrogant was included in the ‘concealment’ factor and ‘bright’ in the ‘agency’ one. The ‘autonomy/independence’ (alpha = 0.64) factor appeared in second place instead of the ‘communal/expressive’ (alpha = 0.76) which appeared in third place. Both factors were defined by the same items which defined these factors in the first analysis. The fourth factor was ‘concealment’ (alpha = 0.72), the fifth factor was ‘personal appeal/attractiveness’ (alpha = 0.75), the sixth ‘agency’ (alpha = 0.67), the seventh ‘conventionalism’ (alpha = 0.52) and the final factor was ‘femininity’ (alpha = 0.40) (in this last case, the factor was positively defined by masculine and negatively by feminine). As we can see, the reliability coefficients of all dimensions were quite satisfactory. Only the dimension of ‘conventionalism’ in self-perception and ‘femininity’ in the ideal-person perception had alpha coefficients that were not completely satisfactory.

Moreover, these factor analyses provide some interesting results. First, they confirm that, in contrast to some taxonomies that include femininity and communality in one
single dimension and masculinity and instrumentality in another single dimension, communality, agency, autonomy, and masculinity–femininity formed independent dimensions.

Given the similarity of both factor analyses, we decided to use the results of the first analysis to compose the final scales of both the self-definition and ‘ideal-person’ definition. After reversing the scores of those items with negative loads in each factor, all the items grouped into the same factors were added and the total scores were divided by the number of items included in the factor. Thus, eight self-description and eight equivalent ideal-person sub-scales were created. The score range of all the subscales was the same (1 to 5).

Several MANOVAS were performed in order to test the main hypotheses. The participants’ description of themselves and their description of an ideal person in each dimension were integrated as a within-subjects factor whereas participants’ gender membership (male versus female), the context (profession versus close relationships) and the order of description (first oneself versus first the ideal-person image) were the between-subjects factors.

There were strong differences between the images that respondents had of themselves and their images of an ideal person. Subjects described the ideal person (ideal role performer) as more psychologically adjusted \( F(1,678) = 342.45, p \leq 0.002/0.001 \) \( (\text{Means} = 3.70 \text{ versus} 4.15) \); more communal \( F(1,678) = 20.73, p \leq 0.001 \) \( (\text{Means} = 3.78 \text{ versus} 3.87) \); more personally attractive \( F(1,678) = 72.34, p \leq 0.001 \) \( (\text{Means} = 3.08 \text{ versus} 3.26) \); more autonomous \( F(1,678) = 54.00, p \leq 0.001 \) \( (\text{Means} = 3.56 \text{ versus} 3.74) \); more agentic \( F(1,678) = 114.70, p \leq 0.001 \) \( (\text{Means} = 3.37 \text{ versus} 3.67) \); more conventional \( F(1,678) = 74.39, p \leq 0.001 \) \( (\text{Means} = 3.26 \text{ versus} 3.44) \), and less concealing \( F(1,678) = 153.24, p \leq 0.001 \) \( (\text{Means} = 2.30 \text{ versus} 2.01) \) than themselves. In contrast, there were no differences between the respondents’ images of themselves and their images of the ideal person in the feminine–masculine dimension \( F(1,678) = 0.75, p \leq 0.386 \).

The gender by dimension interaction effects are shown in Table 1. As we can see, men and women differed in all dimensions except conventionalism. Starting with those dimensions traditionally mentioned in the gender literature, women described themselves and the ideal person as more feminine and communal than men whereas men perceived themselves and the ideal person as more masculine, autonomous and agentic than women. Moreover, these differences were stronger in the self-description condition relative to the ideal-person condition (in other words, men and women’s ideal models were more similar than were their own self-images). With regard to the other dimensions, men and women did not differ in their self-images in terms of psychological adjustment and personal attractiveness but they differed in their descriptions of the ideal person in the same dimensions: women described the ideal person as more psychologically adjusted and more personally appealing than men. As far as the concealment dimension is concerned, men perceived themselves and the ideal person as more concealing than women. These differences were stronger in the ideal-person condition.

From our theoretical point of view, the context effects have special importance. The context by dimension effects are given in Table 2. First, we can see that except for the concealment dimension, in all other significant cases the differences between the respondents’ self-images and the ideal-person images were stronger in the close relationships than in the professional context. Moreover, context manipulation
provoked stronger differences in the perfect role-performer images than in the respondents' self-descriptions. With regard to the dimensions traditionally mentioned in the gender literature, the communality, autonomy and agency dimensions were affected by context manipulation whereas the masculinity–femininity dimension was not. This result could be interpreted as both a confirmation of the fact that the masculine–feminine and the agentic–communal dimensions are independent of each other, and the stronger dependence of these latter dimensions (agency and communality) on occupational factors than the masculinity–femininity dimension. In addition, the autonomy and agency dimensions (as well as concealment) seem to be

Table 1. Gender by dimension effects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Target</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>$F(1,678)$</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Psychologically adjusted</td>
<td>Self</td>
<td>3.70</td>
<td>3.70</td>
<td>5.09</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Ideal</td>
<td>4.09</td>
<td>4.20</td>
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<td>Self</td>
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<td>3.90</td>
<td>4.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ideal</td>
<td>3.80</td>
<td>3.95</td>
<td>$p \leq 0.03$</td>
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<tr>
<td>Attractiveness</td>
<td>Self</td>
<td>3.11</td>
<td>3.07</td>
<td>8.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ideal</td>
<td>3.22</td>
<td>3.30</td>
<td>$p \leq 0.003$</td>
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<tr>
<td>Concealment</td>
<td>Self</td>
<td>2.39</td>
<td>2.21</td>
<td>4.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ideal</td>
<td>2.14</td>
<td>1.86</td>
<td>$p \leq 0.04$</td>
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<td>Autonomy</td>
<td>Self</td>
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<td>3.52</td>
<td>4.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ideal</td>
<td>3.74</td>
<td>3.74</td>
<td>$p \leq 0.03$</td>
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<tr>
<td>Agency</td>
<td>Self</td>
<td>3.48</td>
<td>3.26</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Conventionalism</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Femininity</td>
<td>Self</td>
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<td>3.71</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ideal</td>
<td>2.90</td>
<td>2.84</td>
<td>$p \leq 0.001$</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Table 2. Context by dimension effects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Target</th>
<th>Context</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>$F(1,678)$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Psychologically adjusted</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Work</td>
<td>0.98</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Self</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>3.81</td>
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<tr>
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<td>3.77</td>
<td>3.98</td>
<td></td>
<td>$p \leq 0.001$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attractiveness</td>
<td>Self</td>
<td>2.87</td>
<td>3.30</td>
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<td>37.33</td>
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<tr>
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<td>3.60</td>
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<tr>
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<td>2.30</td>
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<td>27.58</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ideal</td>
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<td>1.87</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomy</td>
<td>Self</td>
<td>3.60</td>
<td>3.54</td>
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<tr>
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<td>3.67</td>
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<td>$p \leq 0.05$</td>
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<tr>
<td>Agency</td>
<td>Self</td>
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<td>3.34</td>
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<td>10.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ideal</td>
<td>3.80</td>
<td>3.55</td>
<td></td>
<td>$p \leq 0.001$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conventionalism</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Femininity</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>$p = n.s.$</td>
</tr>
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</table>

more important and/or diagnostic in the professional context while the communality (as well as the personal attractiveness) dimension seems to be regarded by our respondents as more important or diagnostic in the close relationships context.

In relation to other interaction effects, only the gender by context by dimension interaction had a significant effect on the masculinity–femininity dimension ($F(1,678) = 56.64, p \leq 0.001$) (see means in Table 4). On the other hand, males perceived the ideal person as more feminine than themselves both in the work and the close relationships contexts, females perceived themselves as more feminine than the ideal person in both contexts.

Although it was not a central hypothesis in our study, we stated that the order in which respondents had to describe themselves and the ideal person could have a significant effect on their answers. The order by dimension effects are given in Table 3.

As hypothesised, the perceived similarity between the self and the ideal-person image was higher when subjects described first themselves than when they had to describe first their ideal person image. The dimensions affected by order manipulation were the following: psychological adjustment, personal attractiveness, concealment, autonomy and agency. Thus, asymmetry in the social comparison was confirmed.

Moreover, some interaction effects involving order manipulation were also significant. Thus, the gender by order by dimension ($F(1,678) = 34.97, p \leq 0.001$) interaction had a significant effect on the masculinity–femininity dimension (but not in the other dimensions) (see means in Table 4). Although in general the perceived similarities between the self and the ideal person in the masculinity–femininity dimension were higher when the respondents described first their own image, these similarities were even stronger for men than for women.

The order by context by dimension interaction had significant effects on the personal attractiveness ($F(1,678) = 11.21, p \leq 0.001$) and concealment ($F(1,678) = 3.98, p \leq 0.03$) dimensions (means in Table 4). In both cases, the respondents’ self-images and their images of the ideal person were very similar and unaffected by order

Table 3. Order by dimensions effects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Target</th>
<th>Order of description</th>
<th>$F(1,678)$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>First-ideal</td>
<td>First-self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychologically adjusted</td>
<td>Self</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>3.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Ideal</td>
<td>4.22</td>
<td>4.07</td>
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<td>Communality</td>
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<td>1.14</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attractiveness</td>
<td>Self</td>
<td>3.01</td>
<td>3.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ideal</td>
<td>3.24</td>
<td>3.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concealment</td>
<td>Self</td>
<td>2.25</td>
<td>2.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ideal</td>
<td>1.91</td>
<td>2.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomy</td>
<td>Self</td>
<td>3.49</td>
<td>3.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ideal</td>
<td>3.72</td>
<td>3.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency</td>
<td>Self</td>
<td>3.36</td>
<td>3.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ideal</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>3.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conventionalism</td>
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<td>0.26</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Femininity</td>
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<td>0.50</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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manipulation in the work context. In contrast, the subjects’ perception of similarities between their own images and the ideal person was deeply affected by order manipulation in the close-relationships context: the perceived similarities in terms of autonomy and concealment were stronger when subjects had to describe first their own image. Furthermore, the order by gender by context by dimension interaction had a significant effect only on the femininity–masculinity dimension ($F(1,678) = 14.63, p < 0.001$) (means in Table 4). As we have seen above, the strongest differences between subjects’ self-images and the ideal person image in femininity–masculinity terms took place in the context of close relationships when subjects were asked to describe the ideal-person image before describing their own self-images. Although women described themselves as more feminine than the ideal person and men as less feminine than the ideal condition in all experimental conditions, the strongest self-ideal person differences took place in this last condition. In contrast, the lowest self-ideal person differences appeared among women placed in the work condition and describing themselves in the ‘work’ condition.

We have seen that our main hypotheses were confirmed. Context affected the images that men and women had about themselves and about the ideal person. Men
and women perceived themselves, and perceived the ideal person, as more agentic and instrumental in the context of their professional activities whereas these perceptions were more communal and expressive in the context of their close relationships. Thus, the context affected both men and women in the expected direction. However, there is a group within the overall sample that deserves special attention from our theoretical approach: the housewives' sample. This group is interesting because it represents the prototype of the so-called 'feminine occupation'. The behaviour expected to be displayed by an 'efficient housewife' is basically communal and expressive. People expect that a 'good' housewife will contribute to create an affectively supportive atmosphere, will be attentive to her family needs, etc. No differences in terms of communality and agency are expected between the images that housewives have of both themselves and the ideal person in the context of their occupations and their close relationships. The only anticipated differences could appear in the feminine or personal appeal dimensions which are closely linked to interpersonal relationships. Thus, they would be more relevant to women's close relationships than to their family duties. Additional analyses were performed entering only the housewives’ sample. Context manipulation was entered as a between-subjects factor and self versus ideal image perceptions in each dimension as a within-factor. As expected, context manipulation did not affect either housewives’ self-images or their ideal-person images in terms of psychological-adjustment ($F(1,60) = 0.30$), communality ($F(1,60) = 0.70$), concealment ($F(1,60) = 0.01$), autonomy ($F(1,60) = 0.59$), agency ($F(1,60) = 1.43$), or conventionalism ($F(1,60) = 0.09$). Context manipulation only had a significant influence on personal appeal ($F(1,60) = 8.03$, $p \leq 0.006$) and femininity ($F(1,60) = 8.91$, $p \leq 0.004$) dimensions. Housewives perceived themselves as more feminine (3.93 versus 3.56) and more attractive or personally appealing (3.13 versus 2.86) in the context of their close relationships than in the context of their family duties. As far as context by target (self versus ideal person) interaction is concerned, this had a significant impact only on femininity ($F(1,60) = 17.23$, $p \leq 0.001$). While women perceived themselves as more feminine in the context of their close relationships, their image of the ideal person was more feminine in the family context than in the close relationships (3.63 versus 2.01). Finally, the target (self versus ideal person) had a significant influence on the perceived psychological adjustment ($F(1,69) = 33.04$, $p \leq 0.001$), personal appeal ($F(1,60) = 7.56$), concealment ($F(1,60) = 21.24$), agency ($F(1,60) = 18.19$, $p \leq 0.001$), and femininity ($F(1,60) = 15.04$, $p \leq 0.001$). Housewives perceived the ideal person as better psychologically adjusted (4.19 versus 3.65), more attractive (3.24 versus 3.03), more agentic (3.61 versus 3.20) whereas they described themselves as more concealing (2.13 versus 1.74) and feminine (3.79 versus 2.63).

In the introduction we stated that there are culturally shared images of the 'perfect role performer' or role expectancies which describe the appropriate behaviours a person should display depending on the role he or she fulfils. These ideal images guide individuals’ behaviour in specific contexts. People try to approximate their own behaviour to those prescribed by these models. In other terms, we expect to find an association between the participants’ self-images and their images of the ideal role performer or ideal person. Although results from previous MANOVAS seem to confirm this thesis, a more direct contrast was performed. The average correlation between the application of the 69 attributes to oneself and to the prototype of the ideal person was $r = 0.48$ ($p \leq 0.001$).
CONCLUSIONS

There is an important controversy in social psychology regarding male–female differences and the size of these differences (Bettencourt & Norman, 1996; Buss, 1995; Eagly, 1995, 1996; Eagly & Wood, 1991; Hyde & Plant, 1995; Marecek, 1995). We do not deny the existing gender differences. However, those studies which are only interested in finding male–female differences without theorising about the causes of these differences contribute to a reified view of gender. These studies, explicitly or implicitly, fulfil ideological functions by contributing to the justification of the subordinate place of women in society (Banaji, 1993; Beall, 1993; Edley & Wetherell, 1995). Although there may be male–female differences based on biology, especially in certain areas such as physical strength or size, these differences are trivial in terms of the social organisation of activities. Most of the differences used to justify the unequal treatment of men and women can be explained in terms of social determinants. Thus, motivation (i.e. achievement motivation), emotional responsivity, personality, etc. are shaped by culture (Best & Williams, 1993; Edley & Wetherell, 1995; Katz, 1986). Two domains in which this affirmation is especially true are those of gender stereotypes and identities. An increasing number of authors (Eagly & Steffen, 1984; Flament, 1989; Hartman, Griffet, Miller & Kinicki, 1989; Kirchler, 1992; Thoits, 1989) have stressed the strong links between the traditional division of activities and duties based on gender criteria and the modern origin of gender stereotypes and identities. The identifications of femininity with communality and expressiveness and masculinity with agency and instrumentality are explained as the result of a strong correlation between the division of activity (private versus public spheres of activity) and gender. As stated above, gender categorisation and the social distribution of responsibilities are not two independent domains but have been traditionally correlated. The perceivers' tendency to infer traits from behaviours has led to the assumption that women ‘are’ communal and expressive whereas men ‘are’ agentic and instrumental. These theses have been confirmed in our study.

We have found that masculinity and femininity are not synonymous with communality–expressiveness and agency–instrumentality. Not only were they independent factors or dimensions they were also differently affected by context manipulation. Thus, communality (strongly associated with close relationships) and agency and instrumentality (strongly related to professional activities) were significantly affected by context manipulation but the masculinity–femininity dimension was not. Moreover, we have seen how both men and women had a more communal image of themselves in the context of their close relationships, whereas their self-images became more agentic-autonomous in the context of their professional activities. These changes were accompanied by the activation of different ideal-person or ideal-role performer images depending on the context. In other words, the communal versus agentic identities appeared as highly context dependent. They are strongly related to the social distribution of duties.

These results have two important implications. First, as several authors have stated (Burke & Tully, 1977; Sarbin & Scheibe, 1983; Wiley & Alexander, 1987), role identities reflect society within subjects. The more complex a society is, the richer in terms of number of identities people’s identities will be. The large-scale access of both women and men to domains from which they have been traditionally excluded will lead to the internalisation of a larger number of identities which will be selectively
activated in different contexts. There is some evidence according to which a large number of identities contribute to better mental health (Thoits, 1983). Second, the elimination of gender as a major criterion in the social distribution of jobs and duties will be a privilege mechanism in the modification of current gender stereotypes and identities. Similarly, Allison, Mackie and Messick (1996) have shown that there are strong outcome biases in social perceptions. For example, people are unaware of the social causes which explain men’s over-representation and women’s under-representation in the most powerful and prestigious social roles and occupations. These outcome biases lead to dispositional inferences about the personal attributes of role occupants. In turn, these dispositional inferences contribute to the reification of the perceived gender differences. As a practical conclusion, Allison et al. (1996) called for affirmative policies aimed to increase women’s presence in domains traditionally reserved for men. As a consequence of these outcome biases, the presence of women in prestigious and powerful occupations will contribute to the modification of traditional gender stereotypes. In contrast, an excessive emphasis on psychological factors (such as the differences in men’s and women’s self-images, cognitive capacities, etc.) could conceal the social and ideological dimension of gender differences. In other words, an excessive emphasis on the psychological differences between men and women could serve as a ‘modern’ justification of gender inequalities in the social structure.

Finally, we have also seen that there is an asymmetry in the social comparison. The self is usually taken as the point of reference in social comparison. There is a self-centred asymmetry. When people think about their own selves before describing a prototypical person the differences between the self- and other-perception are reduced.

REFERENCES


