

Exploring Gender Stereotypes in Taiwanese Society

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Abstract. This study aims to investigate whether there is a shared gender stereotype in Taiwanese society. The author proposes that even in modern society in Taiwan, a gender stereotype toward women still exists, especially within certain social groups. The subjects in this study include 45 adults who make a living in the traditional market. The research was conducted using a self-report questionnaire and a structured interview to elicit whether there is a shared gender stereotype among the same social group. The results of the study suggest that there is still a shared gender stereotype toward women. The motives and factors beyond the gender stereotype seem to be pragmatic and harmless.

Keywords: stereotype, gender, cultural model, cognition

1. Introduction

Gender stereotypes might occur across different cultures on the basis of race or ethnicity. In Taiwan, it is found that people who run small businesses in the traditional markets appear to perceive and address their customers, especially females, in a particular way. They seem to possess a shared stereotype or a cultural model toward their female customers based on their knowledge and experience. Allport (1954) indicated that “A stereotype is an exaggerated belief associated with a category. Its function is to justify (rationalize) our conduct in relation to that category” (p. 191). Furthermore, Snyder (1981) elaborated a stereotype by giving more specific explanations and definitions.

In stereotyping, the individual: (1) categorizes other individuals, usually on the basis of highly visible characteristics such as sex or race; (2) attributes as a set of characteristics to all members of that category; and (3) attributes that set of characteristics to any individual member of that category.

(p. 415)

Based on shared beliefs, people are likely to separate members of society and thus form different social categories or groups. This type of social categorization may serve functions such as simplifying incoming information, assisting in recognizing identification, and predicting and organizing behaviors (Hewstone and Giles, 1997).

However, a stereotype may result in categorizing positive or negative traits toward the target groups. Therefore, when researching stereotypes, it is essential to look at the possible effects they bring to the social world. For example, Greenwald & Banaji (1995) pointed out,

Whereas an attitude implies a consistent evaluative response to its object, a stereotype may encompass beliefs with widely diverging evaluative implications. For example, the stereotype of members of a certain group (e.g., cheerleaders) may simultaneously include the traits of being physically attractive (positive) and unintelligent (negative). (p. 14)

That means stereotypes could determine a social group’s judgments and actions to a certain degree. If a group has similar beliefs, they would perceive or treat others as if they have the same traits or characteristics in the stereotype.

Ungerer & Schmid (2006) suggested that “cultural models can be seen as cognitive models that are shared by people belonging to a social group or subgroup” (p. 51). People who are from the same social background or grow up in the same culture seem to rationalize their behavior. Holland and Quinn (1987) described cultural models in the following.

Cultural models are presupposed, taken-for-granted models of the world that are widely shared (although not necessarily to the exclusion of other, alternative models) by the members of a society and that play an enormous role in their understanding of that world and their behavior in it. (p. 4)

In this study, a gender stereotype possessed by people who belong to the same social group was discussed to see if they have similar ideas or beliefs toward women.

In an attempt to investigate Taiwanese people’s shared stereotypes and culture models toward women in their society, the researcher conducted a study to explore a specific shared gender stereotype in Taiwan

toward women. According to Chambers (2003), the topics we talk about in our daily lives are related to our culture, so the way we talk about them is strongly tied to our culture. It is also applicable to Taiwanese people because in Taiwan different communities share different values and thus form different stereotypes. The stereotype toward women is embedded in the language people use in everyday conversation.

Holmes (2008) indicated that a lot of words describing females seem to derive from males, such as actor/actress, hero/heroine, and male/female. Therefore, it is argued by feminists that English is not a neutral language; it is a sexist language. A similar thing can be said about languages in Asia, and Chinese used in Taiwan is no exception. For example, it is noticeable that Taiwanese people tend to address women as a Lao-pan-niang (proprietary) instead of Lao-pan (proprietor). In their society, when Taiwanese people address a married woman, they often use “Tai-tai” (Mrs.), or “Po-mu” (uncle’s wife) instead of her own title or name. Taiwanese tend to judge married women in terms of the social status of their husbands, but not of the women’s own social status. This might date back to forty or fifty years. At that time, the average woman didn’t receive enough education so men had more power than women in the workplace or in society in general. Due to this reason, rich and successful business males were called Lao-pan. It was rare for women to be in important positions or to own their own businesses. In this social context, Taiwanese would not associate a woman with an image of Lao-pan but they would rather think of women as a wife of Lao-pan. Another example of this type of gender stereotype could be found when addressing a doctor’s wife. In Taiwan, more males are doctors, so a doctor’s wife would be “Yi-sheng-niang” but there is no such term for the husband of a female doctor.

In recent years, even though the number of women starting their own businesses has increased, conventionally people still call women Lao-pan-niang instead of Lao-pan. This type of social categorization is still prevalent in certain parts of Taiwanese society. The researcher therefore considers it would be insightful to investigate shared gender stereotypes by looking at how Taiwanese from a specific social group address females in their everyday conversation.

2. The Design of the Study

2.1. Research Purposes

In order to identify shared gender stereotypes and cultural models in Taiwanese society, a study was conducted with two groups of adults of lower social-economic backgrounds in a local traditional market. The purpose of the study is to test whether people from the same social background share a similar belief within their social group. It also attempts to identify the factors or motives of such a social stereotype in Taiwan and to examine whether the people in the group actually have this shared gender stereotype.

2.2. Research Questions

- What are the shared gender stereotypes in Taiwan?
- Do Taiwanese within the same social group possess the same gender stereotypes?
- Are there any motives or pragmatic factors beyond the gender stereotypes?

2.3. Research Method

Subjects

A total of 45 subjects participated in this study. The subjects consisted of 45 Taiwanese adults (females=23, males = 22), ranging in age from 20s to 70s. All subjects were chosen randomly in a traditional market in downtown Taipei, Taiwan. The subjects were all vendors who sold a variety of goods, including vegetables, seafood, meat, cookies, dishes, stationery, groceries, and fruits. These subjects only received compulsory education according to their ages and some received limited or no education. Therefore, their social status and educational backgrounds were comparatively low in the society.

2.4. Instruments

The research method in this study combined a questionnaire and an interview. By adopting mixed research methods, the researcher tried to generate more comprehensive data. Before the questionnaire was administered to the subjects, a pilot study was utilized on a group of 14 people with different social and

education backgrounds. The results of the pilot study helped to determine which stereotypes subjects of similar backgrounds held. Consequently, based on the pilot survey, the researcher revised the questionnaire and then added one new instrument, a structured interview, to gather more in-depth information.

2.5. Materials and Procedures

One questionnaire and one structured interview were conducted with the subjects. The researcher got all the subjects' consent before including them in the study. The 45 subjects were divided into two groups. Group 1 contained 20 people (11 males, 9 females) and Group 2 contained 25 people (14 females, 11 males). Group 1 was given a questionnaire. The questionnaire was only one-page so it was easier to administer to the target group. The subjects in Group 1 were instructed to write down their personal information first. After that, they completed the rest of the five parts of questions. Part I asked whether or not the subjects would address women as Lao-pan-niang. By asking the question, the researcher could immediately categorize the subjects into two groups: a pro group and a con group. Part II was designed to elicit whether the subjects who addressed women as Lao-pan-niang had a definition for the term. In Part III, Lao-pan-niang's appearances and qualities were discussed. The next part focused on the motives or reasons of the subjects when they addressed a woman as Lao-pan-niang. The final part was about how female customers responded when being addressed as Lao-pan-niang. Each questionnaire took about 5 minutes. While the subjects were filling out the forms, the researcher was there to assist them with any questions or issues that arose.

Group 2, by contrast, was given a structured interview face-to-face. Each interview took about 3 minutes. Before the interview, the researcher selected the subjects randomly and got their consent before starting the interview. The interviewer was the researcher herself, who presented six printed pictures of women on A4 size paper to all the subjects in Group 2. The subjects were asked to identify which pictures they would classify as a Lao-pan-niang. The interview utilized various photographs of women, aged from their 20s to 50s, with different appearances and styles of dress (see appendix B). Picture A is a young woman in her 20s looking intelligent and pretty. In Picture B, a lady in her 30s is wearing a formal suit. Picture C and Picture D are women who are both in their 40s but their appearances and the way they dress are completely different. One is wearing expensive clothes and the other is wearing inexpensive clothes. The women in Picture E and Picture F are in their 50s but they are also dressed differently. One woman is dressed formally while the other is dressed casually. After the subjects finished choosing the pictures, they were told to explain why they chose the particular pictures. All the data collected from the subjects were then categorized and analyzed by the researcher.

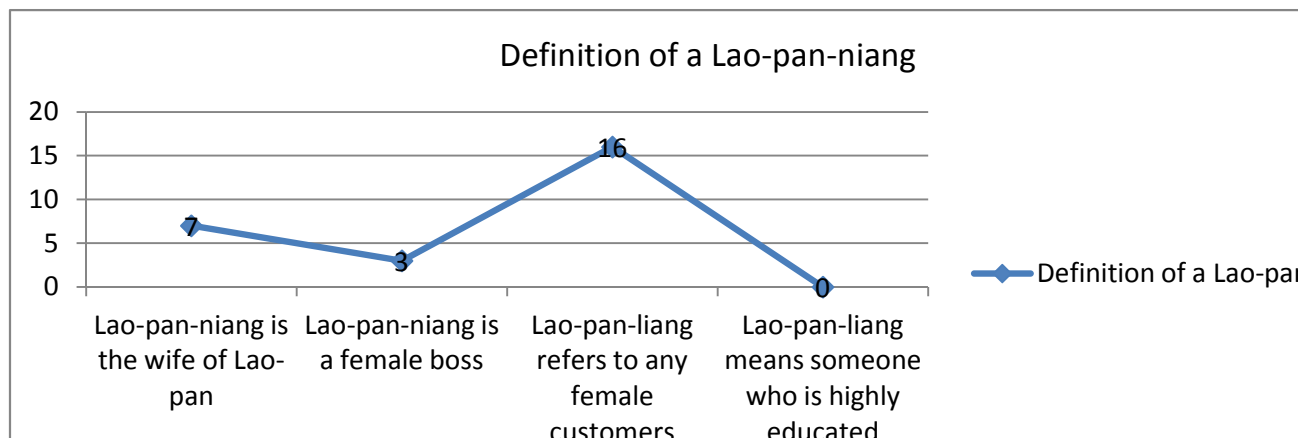
3. Results and Discussion

In the first part of the questionnaire, only 10 % of the subjects reported that they would not address women as Lao-pan-niang. Eighteen out of twenty subjects in Group 1 reported that they would call their customers as Lao-pan-niang. This finding is consistent with the hypothesis that this particular social group still had a gender stereotype toward women. They did not associate women as a Lao-pan but they addressed women as the wife of a Lao-pan.

According to Ministry of Education's online Chinese dictionary, the meaning of a Lao-pan-niang is the wife of a Lao-pan. Based on the definition, the subjects should have chosen Lao-pan-niang's semantic meaning. However, only seven chose the response "Lao-pan-liang is the wife of Lao-pan." Moreover, when examining the second part of the questionnaire, the researcher found that subjects gave an unclear definition of a Lao-pan-niang. They tended to choose a definition which was not its original semantic meaning. The data showed that sixteen out of twenty subjects selected the response "Lao-pan-niang refers to any female customer." This type of culture model is formed and shared by this social group of people for a reason. The author would argue if Lao-pan-niang referred to any female customer, then why wasn't there an appropriate term which was neutral to describe female customers? Why did this group of people still treat women as a wife of a boss? There were just three subjects thought that "A Lao-pan-niang is a female boss." The data derived from the questionnaire showed that the majority of the subjects still did not think women were independent individuals separate from males. Interestingly, no one considered education to be an important

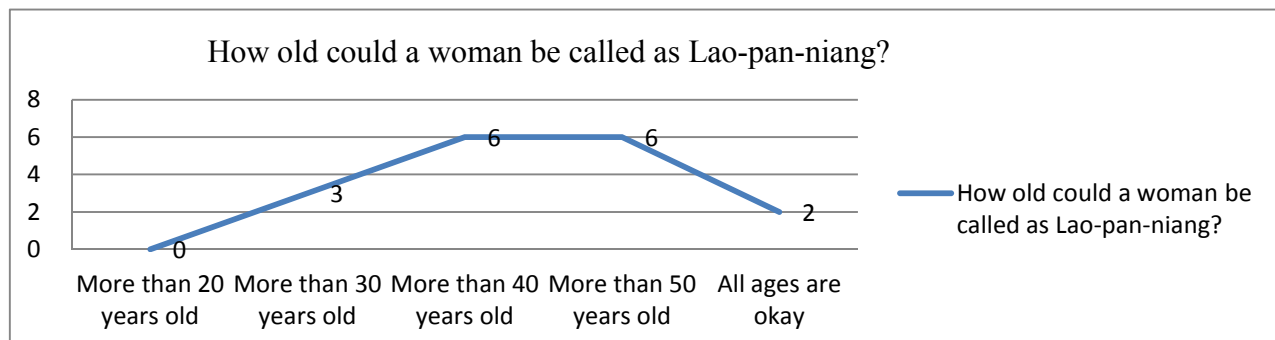
factor when giving a definition of a Lao-pan-niang. This suggested that a Lao-pan-niang did not have to be someone who was professional.

Figure 1



As for a particular age requisite in determining a Lao-pan-niang, the subjects did not have a consensus. Six out of twenty thought a Lao-pan-niang had to be forty years or older. Another six thought a Lao-pan-niang had to be fifty years or older. Nevertheless, almost all subjects thought a woman should not be addressed as Lao-pan-niang if she were in her twenties. The data is presented below.

Figure 2



In Part III, the subjects were asked to describe the appearance or qualities of a Lao-pan-niang. When asking the subjects about what appearance a Lao-pan-niang had, the data elicited from the questionnaire showed that eight subjects gave vague answers. They said that “A Lao-pan-niang just looks like a Lao-pan-niang.” The results proved to be consistent with what Ungerer & Schmid (2006) wrote: “cultural models have an enormous influence on the conceptual structures of categories” (p. 55). In defining a Lao-pan-niang, Taiwanese might simply state “kan chi lai” (looks like) but give no specific explanations. Other subjects chose expressions related to visible characteristics to describe a Lao-pan-niang as someone who had “chi’chih” (an aura of elegance), had a tasteful dressing style or wore expensive accessories. However, there were ten subjects who would not look at women’s appearances at all when deciding whether or not the women were Lao-pan-niang. There were some character traits or qualities that the subjects thought a Lao-pan-niang should have. For example, a Lao-pan-niang should be cautious, professional, capable and easygoing. However, thirteen out of eighteen subjects did not think a Lao-pan-niang would have any defining personal qualities.

Data from Part IV revealed an interesting phenomenon in that 77% of the subjects had not previously met the women they greeted as Lao-pan-niang. That means they called women Lao-pan-niang based solely on their background knowledge about what a Lao-pan-liang should be. This indicates there was a cultural model involved when deciding who should be a Lao-pan-niang. The subjects would address a woman as

Lao-pan-niang even when they just met her for the first time. According to the subjects, their motives to address women as Lao-pan-niang were positive. The reasons included respecting female customers, creating chances of doing businesses or making them feel pleased. As a matter of fact, while using the address form of Lao-pan-niang might be an instance of gender stereotyping, the motives behind it were not malicious. Instead, it was positive because the subjects did not intend to derogate women. On the contrary, they believed it was showing their respect to the customers, and that by using the term, they would benefit by attracting more business.

The responses from the final section provided viewpoints from the subjects about what they thought about their customers' reactions. The first question in this part was particularly arranged here to see whether female customers were aware of being called Lao-pan-niang instead of Lao-pan. Only 16% of women objected when being called Lao-pan-niang instead of Lao-pan. That implied female customers were used to being called Lao-pan-niang. Therefore, it could be concluded that this stereotype was accepted in society. Seventy-seven percent of the customers did not object when being called Lao-pan-niang. Also, 44% of the subjects believed that when being called Lao-pan-niang, the female customers were happy, but 22% of the subjects disagreed with that. When asking the subjects to describe what facial expressions female customers had when they heard the subjects call them Lao-pan-niang, 66% of the subjects said the female customers had smiles. It indicated that this gender stereotype was generally perceived as innocuous because more than half of the female customers seemed to respond positively and showed no offence when being called Lao-pan-niang. In fact, 38% said their female customers had no facial expressions. This suggested that female customers were neither responding positively nor negatively to the address form they received.

For Group 2, the results of the interview were recorded and analyzed with the subjects' personal information. The researcher wrote down everything the subjects said in the interview. However, it was found that when conducting the interview, the subjects all gave very short answers about why they selected certain pictures. The researcher asked further questions but the responses were still quite truncated. Therefore, the responses were only written down by the interviewer. Every picture was picked by at least one subject. Nevertheless, Picture E was most often selected, chosen by 72% of the subjects. The second most often selected was Picture C, which was chosen by 28% of the subjects. The third most often selected was Picture D, which was chosen by 16% of the subjects. The other three pictures were chosen by an equal number of the subjects, 8%. Of the eighteen subjects who chose picture E, their reasons for choosing this picture included that the lady had "ch'i chih" (an aura of elegance), the way she looked, the way she dressed, that she looked beautiful, powerful, mature, sociable, rich, wise and "kuei ch'i" (noble) or "kao kuei" (noble). Of the seven subjects who chose picture C, they used such descriptions of the woman as "kuei ch'i" (noble) or "kao kuei", (noble). Two pointed out she had "ch'i chih" (an aura of elegance). As can be seen in the pictures, the two women were in their 40s and 50s respectively and they wore expensive clothes and accessories so the subjects thought they looked rich, noble and elegant.

All in all, the descriptions used by Group 2 in the interview were consistent with the appearances chosen by the subjects in Group 1. It proved that these two groups of subjects from the same social group did share a gender stereotype toward women. Moreover, as described by subjects in Group 1, they gave vague descriptions about what a Lao-pan-niang should look like. Similarly, the subjects in Group 2 also used vague descriptions to describe a Lao-pan-niang.

4. Conclusion

The study was a small scale study. It might give useful data for a preliminary look at gender stereotypes in Taiwan. However, the study is limited in scope in that it only focused on a small social group. The study suggested that there was a gender stereotype in Taiwanese society among a social group with a comparatively lower social status. These people still possess a shared gender stereotype toward female customers. However, the motives of the social group were positive and this gender stereotype seemed to be acceptable to people in their society. It did not appear to imply any negative connotation.

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