

Comparing the influence of gender stereotypes on well-being in Italy and Turkey during the COVID-19 lockdown

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Abstract. – OBJECTIVE: The hypothesis that gender stereotypes influence human behaviour and relational well-being is widely accepted in the literature. However, a comparison based on scientific assumptions is necessary to deeply understand the mechanisms activated by stereotypes in conditions of stress. The global health emergency from COVID-19 offers the opportunity to compare countries with different socio-cultural conditions, whose population has been subjected to the same stressful event during the lockdown phase.

SUBJECTS AND METHODS: The same questionnaire was disseminated in both Italy and Turkey during their respective lockdown phases. 140,000 interviews were collected in Italy and 10,000 in Turkey, a number big enough to obtain useful information for a comparative analysis in relation to behaviours, attitudes and well-being, also using the recursive regression models.

RESULTS: The results, based on scientific data, show that gender stereotypes are much more rooted in Turkey than in Italy, where the emancipation process of the population is more advanced, producing profound social changes and decreasing differences between men and women in terms of behaviour and reactions to difficult situations, such as the present one.

CONCLUSIONS: Stereotypes, which are hostile to any opposite evidence, affect individual behaviours and attitudes to the point that, within a specific context, they play a protective role against the uncertainty during a period of health emergency, inducing people to seek shelter in pre-established and widespread behavioural models. According to the data analysis, this has happened in Turkey more than in Italy. The results show that within a culture still strongly pervaded by these social conditioning, especially at the presence of low levels of education, the adherence to gender roles constitutes a “protective factor” of the individual well-being against external stress factors.

Key Words:

COVID-19, Survey, Gender stereotypes, Gender roles, Social conditioning, Sexism, Male chauvinism, Lockdown.

Introduction

During the first period of 2020 the world went through some radical changes during the COVID-19 spread, which have affected people's health involving the psycho-social and the economic spheres. People have been forced to find a new way of life, because of quarantines, social distancing and curfews, that implied some compulsory restrictions aimed at limiting social life.

The measures taken by governments to contain the virus spread have differently affected women and men. Women, who still play a central role in household and family tasks, have faced a greater workload that often needed to be reconciled with home working. Moreover, the sudden breakdown of family, social and friendly networks, can be ascribed among the most recurrent consequences of social distancing. These networks tend to act as social buffers against the absence of care services, thus stimulating the employment and empowerment opportunities of women. The unequal distribution of family burdens and the unbalance in caring of children and the elderly are the result of cultural confinement within stereotyped gender roles. These roles are generated by gender stereotypes, which has the power to condition societies being still part of the predominant world culture.

The society an individual lives in, establishes social roles in accordance with hypothetical “bio-

logical” roles, creating responsibilities, attitudes and behaviours which are preordained and gender based¹. Due to these social conditioning, the tasks that men are responsible for are considered to be more relevant than those a society has set up for women². Thus, stereotypes describe and prescribe behaviours³⁻⁵.

Gender roles strongly affect behaviour because they are acquired through the socialisation process. As many studies pointed out, the strongest influence regarding gender stereotypes seems to develop within families, with parents passing on their own beliefs about gender both directly and indirectly^{6,7}. Dökmen² describes gender roles as an expectation defined by a society that each individual needs to fulfil. Similarly, Newman⁸ defines them as the socially described characteristics and expectations, attitudes, behaviours, beliefs and values associated with being male or female in a specific culture.

Stereotypes have a specific functioning that strongly affects the perception of what is right or what is wrong. These represent a categorisation attempt which individuals make to simplify a world of diverse experiences. They produce two basic consequences: once they're acquired, they tend to resist to change and get reinforced by a series of behavioural, cognitive and language mechanisms; secondly, they lead to misinterpretation⁹. The reason to adhere to and maintain stereotypes reflects the desire of people to avoid the effort of obtaining information and the willingness of using them as a shield against the external world. As Demir¹⁰ states, people need stereotypes to increase simplicity and predictability by avoiding confusion, whereas saving time and effort to get to know individuals within a group. Therefore, people may give generalised and ambiguous responses without considering the potential unfairness of stereotypes. In traditional families, this gender-based separation of roles and responsibilities can be better observed. According to the intensification of social interaction within families during the lockdown, it was possible to observe the influence of gender stereotypes on the reshaping of daily routines and the perception of individual well-being.

Our research focused on the study of the influence of gender stereotypes on individual well-being, comparing two radically different sociocultural contexts: Italy and Turkey. In the two countries, the process of overcoming of gender stereotypes has reached different achievements. These differ mainly for religious and political

reasons, with strong repercussions on the current gender gap in each of the two countries. As many studies state along with globalization, educational processes and urbanization, this gender-biased discrimination seems to contract slowly^{11,12}, in Turkey gender stereotypes are still evident, especially in the rural areas¹³. The Global Gender Gap Index 2020¹⁴ depicts a situation in which the gender gap, especially in relation to job and economic opportunities, is still present in all countries analysed from the health, political, educational and economic point of view. Italy ranks 76th out of 153 countries in terms of gender equality, seeing also a worsening in its condition compared to 2018. The gender gap in Turkey is greater than in Italy, because it still reflects an explicit political strategy due to the presence of a government, heavily masculine and conservative, that is holding back opportunities for women's empowerment¹⁵. The result is that Turkey today ranks 130th place out of 153 countries in terms of gender equality, and even slips to 136th from women's economic participation point of view. The aim of this article was to analyse the influence of gender stereotypes on individual behaviours, starting from the hypothesis that, during a phase of forced cohabitation, the adherence to gender stereotypes can result in either risk or protective factors in relation to the individual and relational state of people.

Subjects and Methods

Two parallel investigations were carried out in Turkey and Italy during the first COVID-19 global outbreak through the same questionnaire (from April 29 to July 3 in Turkey reaching more than 10,000 interviews - from March 22 to April 4 in Italy collecting more than 140,000 interviews). The questionnaire was administered using an online support made available by the Italian CNR and disseminated through a multi-channel method, on various social networks and interest groups. The purpose of these dissemination method was to reach all areas of the countries as much as possible, representing every population category in terms of gender, age and level of education. Through an *a posteriori* weighting of the collected data, it was possible to correct and balance the number of categories of interviewees.

The statistical data analysis was performed both basically and using a complex model based on the recursive application of simple regression

models. The presence of gender stereotypes has been measured through a battery already used in other studies¹⁶, involving six statements. Using a 4-point Likert scale, it was possible to measure the degree of respondents' adherence to gender stereotypes. Analysing gender stereotypes also allows us to understand how these conditionings influence individual attitudes, behaviours and emotions that crystallise social inequalities and generate prejudice and discrimination.

In our study, despite the fact that we have data at different levels of measurement, we have chosen to select variables with ordinal intervals or scales that are usually used in the regression analysis in many social studies¹⁷. This application of regression models allows a less effective performance of the model fit indicators to data, because the real nature of the data affects these indicators. However, the statistical significance is verified with the tools of the quantitative measurement level respecting the most common rules. The theoretical framework of the general model is therefore the following, in which, as usual, α , β and γ are the parameters to be estimated. The coefficient ε represents the residual information on which a study was performed in order to verify the existence of systematic errors that could invalidate the model, even at the presence of statistical significance.

Personal background \rightarrow Gender stereotypes
 \rightarrow Environmental context

- a. Gender stereotypes = $\alpha \cdot \text{Religion} + \beta \cdot \text{Education} + \gamma \cdot \text{Place} + \varepsilon$
- b. Negative emotions = $\alpha^{''} \cdot \text{Gender stereotypes} + \varepsilon^{''}$
- c. Atmosphere at home = $\alpha^{'''} \cdot \text{Gender stereotypes} + \varepsilon^{'''}$
- d. Perception of violence = $\alpha^{''''} \cdot \text{Gender stereotypes} + \varepsilon^{''''}$

This investigation was carried out through a recursive application of the algorithm of the linear regression model to test, first of all, the influence of the personal background on gender stereotyped view (sub-model a). The individual background was conceived in terms of adherence to religion (on a range between -1 for non-believers to 2 for convinced believers; indifference and no answer are identified as 0), level of education (six modalities from 'no qualification to 'postgraduate') and living place (more or less isolated: from 1 = 'living in the centre of a big city' to 5 = 'living in an isolated place'). The model is designed to

also test the influence of the stereotyped view on both psychological sphere and environmental context, in terms of negative emotions (as a synthesis of 5 basic negative emotions which are sadness, fear, disgust, anxiety and anger on a scale from -2 to 2) as in the sub-model b, the atmosphere at home (a synthesis of three items related to the mood at home that would be more or less collaborative, pacific and affectionate, on a scale from -2 to 2) as in the sub-model c, and the perception of violence (a synthesis of four items related to the perception of the increase in physical and psychological violence in the family context during the lockdown period, each on a scale from 1 to 4) as in the sub-model d.

The left side of the model establishes as the dependent variable the one related to gender stereotyped view and the three choices to represent the personal background as independent variables, as just described. The correlation, but also the collinearity, among the independent variables is modest and, therefore, does not raise concerns about the validity of the choice. For the right side of the model we have three dependent variables, since the gender stereotyped view became the independent variable. Finally, we have 4 different regression models, one of which is multivariate (left side) and the others are simple (right side). We choose not to examine the indirect effect of personal background on the environmental context because this falls outside the scope of this work.

Results

The comparison between the Turkish and Italian results highlights a substantial difference in the spread of gender stereotypes, linked to social, religious, historical and political reasons that characterise the two territories. Figure 1 shows the values as a percentage of the degree of agreement to each of the statements: the percentage of Turkish respondents that agree with the items is much higher than the one of Italy (Figure 1).

In addition to the strong presence of gender stereotypes in both societies, especially in the Turkish one, it is important to point out that there is a difference in their spread among the categories of the two populations: stereotypes tend to be more prevalent among those with a lower educational degree and among believers, who in the case of Turkey account for 86% of the sample and in Italy reflect the 55% of the sample. However, in

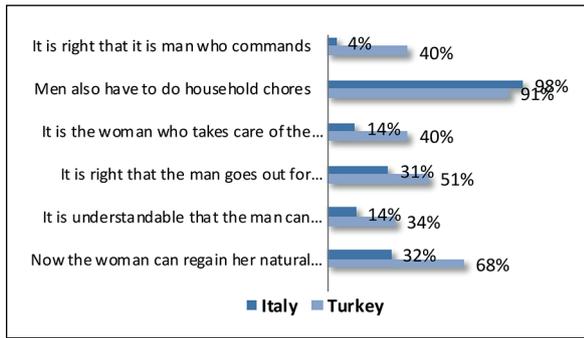


Figure 1. Gender Stereotypes (% of agreement among respondents).

Turkey, unlike in Italy, there are no particular differences in gender, age and employment status. For the purposes of this analysis we chose to use the latest item of the battery (“Now the woman can regain their natural role as mother and wife”), because better sums up the gender stereotype that relegates women to the role of mothers and wives within society. During the lockdown, the activities carried out by respondents subject to stereotypes in their free time, are often the reflection of adherence to gender roles. This generated daily routines in which it is evident the division between activities considered purely masculine or feminine. In both Turkey and Italy, if we take into account the stereotyped respondents, we notice that they have spent less time reading books and listening and reading the news on the web than the respondents without stereotypes, whilst they have spent more time praying and/or attending religious services online (Figure 2).

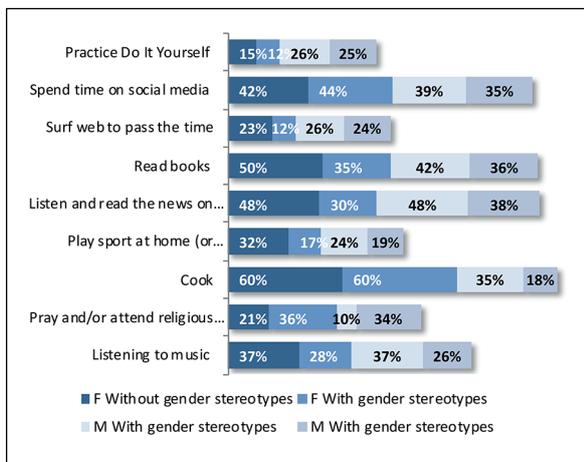


Figure 2. Main free-time activities in Turkey (% of males [M] and females [F] with and without gender stereotypes).

Respondents were also asked to choose, from a list of issues related to violence, deviant behaviour and discomfort, what would have been the main problems among cohabiting partners if the lockdown had lasted for even a longer time. In general, the results show a greater concern on the side of Turkish respondents rather than those living in Italy for domestic violence, both physical and psychological. The same applies for the risk of the increase in depressive states, alcohol abuse and eating disorders. If we look closely at the answers given by men we note that in Turkey the risk of domestic violence is perceived by about 3 out of 10 men, with no major differences between stereotyped and non-stereotyped individuals. In Italy, on the other hand, men who are subject to stereotypes perceive less of the risk of violence than non-stereotyped nationals. The answers given by Italian and Turkish women show similar trends: respondents who are not subject to gender stereotypes perceive a higher risk of domestic violence, with the highest percentages in Turkey. These data lead us to hypothesize that believing in the existence of gender stereotypes affects the individual perception also regarding the potential risks associated to social distancing and forced cohabitation.

When looking at the intensity of primary emotions experienced during lockdown by respondents in both countries, women tended to have higher levels of negative emotions than men. From a gender perspective, respondents subject to stereotypes in Turkey show lower levels of negative emotions than non-stereotyped subjects: they experience less anger, disgust, fear, anxiety and sadness. However, in Italy, where the awareness of female discrimination due to the presence of gender stereotypes is culturally more mature, the trend is reversed. In this case, respondents subject to gender stereotypes show higher levels of negative emotions intensity than non-stereotyped nationals. We have hypothesised that this dynamic has happened because in Italy gender roles are no longer passively accepted by women. This trend also has an impact on the homely atmosphere: in Turkey, subjects conditioned by stereotypes have declared a more peaceful, collaborative and affectionate atmosphere. Definitely, a trend is emerging from the data analysis: the spread of gender stereotypes appears as a protective factor in the case of Turkey, where the culture of honour and Islamic religious-driven perspectives still have a strong role in shaping the attitudes and behaviours of men and women²⁰. Conversely,

in Italy, gender stereotypes are now widely recognized and, therefore, they appear as a risk factor in social terms.

The results of the application of the models synthesised in Figure 3 are useful for testing our hypothesis and allow to immediately compare the two analysed countries. First, the Turkish model only shows differences in the answers coming from males and females, while in the case of Italy there is not a relevant difference in the results. On the left side of the model, both for Italy and Turkey, religion plays a significant role in influencing the gender stereotyped view of respondents: meaning that the level of a gender stereotyped view increases in accordance with religious beliefs. Education acts, in any case, as an emancipation factor because the higher is the educational level, the lower is the stereotyped view. In the Turkish case, this emancipation factor is much greater for women than men. Finally, living in a non-isolated context can help to overcome the stereotyped perspective, but in the Turkish case this applies only to women as the model is not significant for men (just the female coefficient is indicated in parenthesis).

The right side of the models shows the biggest differences between the two countries. First of all, negative emotions are influenced in the opposite way by the presence of gender stereotypes: in the Italian case, the adherence to stereotypes coincides with a greater intensity of negative emotions, whilst in the Turkish case it represents a protective factor, corresponding to a lower intensity in negative emotions. A good atmosphere at home is affected by the presence of a stereotyped gender view, and this relation is particularly relevant in the case of Turkish women. This result of the data analysis shows that gender stereotypes, also in the perception of the homely

atmosphere, play a distorting role more in Turkey than in Italy. Finally, the perception of the risk of violence, which is external to the own family, is greater among those with fewer stereotypes, except for the Turkish males.

Conclusions

The outcome of this study shows the deep cognitive invasiveness of gender stereotypes on human behaviours and well-being. However, as the data analysis shows, the type and the intensity of their effect vary according to the socio-demographic context. As it is known, stereotypes are hostile to any opposite evidence, as the social environment can influence our lives to the point that we imagine things before we experience them¹⁸. This is particularly true for a society where social behaviours are still strongly pervaded by gender stereotypes. In Turkey, much more than in Italy, stereotypes fix preordained, sexist male and female roles, which are widely shared by men and women. According to the data collected, the idea of the existence of “natural” gender relationships implying women’s subordination is much more embedded in the Turkish culture than in Italy. In an area where the process of emancipation from machismo is just at the beginning¹⁵, gender stereotypes still have a strong resilience, thus being totally immune to experience¹⁹. However, as we have analysed, at the presence of a high level of education and an urbanised environment, these social conditionings can be unmasked. Mostly women, as the level of education raises, become aware of their social subordination, undermining the “self-fulfilling prophecy”²⁰. According to this theory, as a result of social pressure, the

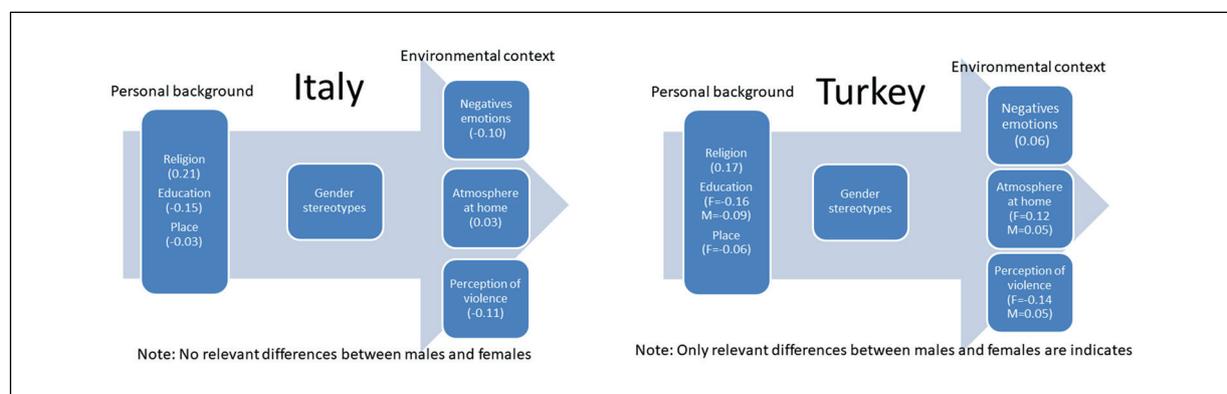


Figure 3. Regression model in comparison for Italy and Turkey (Significant parameters are in parenthesis).

victims of stereotypes themselves are misled to the need of observing preordained gender roles. Though, in a such culturally homogeneous society, the stereotypes' detection can lead to a cognitive space of uncertainty, involving a complex and tiring break with the widely shared beliefs among the members of a group²¹. In Turkey, at the current time of crisis, the unconditional adherence to gender roles has resulted as a "protective factor" on a psychological level, containing the intensity of negative primary emotions. It should be pointed out that, among the variables analysed, only the adherence to stereotypes has shown this "protective" function. We assume that this dynamic is linked to the tendency of individuals to seek shelter in pre-established and widespread behavioural patterns and models, especially in critical moments²². In order to cope with the intensity of the domestic relationships due to the lockdown, adhering to the predominant gender model has meant to find security in opposition to the uncertainty caused by the spread of the Coronavirus and its social and economic effects. However, the theory outlined in this study also highlights the existence of a "protective role" that can be played by gender stereotypes within a country which is still strongly pervaded by these social constraints. This "protective function" is a result of the mystification of social reality consequent to the internalisation of gender stereotypes. Those who uncritically embrace the existence of "natural" gender roles cannot objectively look at the quality of their own relational life. Indeed, as the results show, the family atmosphere seems to be better among the most stereotyped respondents, who also perceive less risk of increased physical violence of men against women as an effect of the possible extension of the lockdown measure. We have interpreted these answers as a result of the cognitive distortion arising from the illusory reality produced by gender stereotypes. Within the preordained gender roles, violence is perceived as a physiological element, widely accepted as "natural", and not considered as a problem. This is the reason why, among the respondents who most adhere to stereotypes, the family atmosphere appears "good", and the risk of physical violence "low". In Italy, where the adherence to gender roles is less common as a result of a more advanced cultural emancipation process, the weakening of gender stereotypes has reduced their "protective function" because the cognitive distortion produced by stereotypes

is less intrusive. This outlines the existence of different degrees in relation to the influence of gender stereotypes on well-being. Although the results of this article show strong statistical evidence, attention should be paid to the need to test the present theory carrying out further comparative surveys among countries with different levels of adherence to gender stereotypes.

Conflict of Interest

The Authors declare that they have no conflict of interests.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

The study was approved by the National Ethics Committee of the National Institute for Infectious Diseases Lazzaro Spallanzani I.R.C.C.S. of Rome.

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Authors' Contribution

CL, CG, OA, TA conceived and designed the study, consulted literature, collected data and wrote and edit the paper. CL did the statistical data analysis and is the last author, i.e., the group leader in this research, CG and TA did the sociological interpretation, TA is also the first author in this paper, OA, BG, BD and SS contributed to the introduction and literature review. All authors read and approved the manuscript.

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