

UDC 316.454.3

Gender biases and stereotypes in the theories of crowd behavior of late XIX – early XX centuries

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This work is supported by Russian Foundation for Basic Research. The project 18-013-00302. "A crowd and a personality: The historical and psychological research of theories of the 19th - early 20th centuries".

Abstract

The article is devoted to the study of the tendency of feminization of spontaneous groups, the spread of gender biases and stereotypes in relation to them. It is established that initially the researchers characterized women in the crowd with partiality, but later, largely under the influence of the ideas of G. Le Bon, they began to attribute "female" characteristics to the crowd (variability of mood, impulsiveness of behavior, excessive feelings, tendency to suggestion, inability to reason, etc.). This contributed to the consideration of the crowd outside the social and situational context, legitimization of police violence, refusal to take into account the demands of the masses. The article states that the trend of feminization of the crowd was not long. The authors describe the features of its formation and ways of overcoming in science of the late XIX – early XX centuries. In particular, it is noted that the cessation of this trend was due to the emphasis on social factors of women's behavior in the crowd, the exclusion of pathological properties from the list of attributed ones, the gradual recognition of greater severity of individual differences in comparison with gender. The study is useful in the context of expanding the subject field of psychology of spontaneous social groups, as well as developing the conceptual foundations of a systematic approach to the phenomenon of the crowd.

For citation

Gorbatov D.S., Baichik A.V. (2019) Gender biases and stereotypes in the theories of crowd behavior of late XIX – early XX centuries. *Psikhologiya. Istoriko-kriticheskie obzory i sovremennye issledovaniya* [Psychology. Historical-critical Reviews and Current Researches], 8 (2A), pp. 7-14.

Keywords

Crowd, theories of the crowd, women in the crowd, feminization of the crowd, gender biases, gender stereotypes.

Introduction

The theories of crowd behavior, which appeared in the late XIX – early XX centuries, are often considered in the context of the expression of collective fears by the ruling classes, concerned about the destruction of the usual world order, namely, increase in the number and activity of the proletariat, wave of anarchist terror, politicization of the labour movement, struggle for women's voting rights [Barrows, 1990]. It is no accident that the first description of spontaneous groups were accompanied by negative connotations. The researchers of those times considered the crowd as the personification of all "criminal", "low", "animal", "crazy", and "savagely" in human nature. This list would be incomplete without mentioning the "feminine nature" of crowd, mental instability, irrationality of thinking and the expressed suggestibility of which were opposed to the "male" stability and sanity of the individual [Gallini, 1988].

Preconditions for feminization of the crowd

The attribution to spontaneous groups of features of the "weaker sex" at the initial stage of their study has the same origin as the biased characteristics of women by writer Emile Zola, historian Hippolyte Adolphe Taine, publicist Maxime Du Camp, anthropologist and psychiatrist Cesare Lombroso, hypnologist Ambroise-Auguste Liébeault and other representatives of the intellectual elite of the second half of the XIX century. The reason for this is the influence of gender stereotypes, improper generalizations, and prejudices, biased attitudes formed in the public consciousness of the time. Their presence has led to the fact that the random behavior of women is often taken for a typical, situation-based behavior – for a stable inherent, and concrete historical behavior – for unconditionally immanent.

Sexist aspects of Charles Darwin's theory of evolution had a significant influence on the scientific community. The famous scientist confidently proclaimed the mental and physical superiority of men as a consequence of millennia of fierce competition [Bergman, 2000]. If Charles Darwin limited himself to a set of theoretical calculations, the famous anatomist and anthropometrist, "apostle of scientific objectivity" P.P. Broca was the first to present the empirical justification for them. After weighing more than 400 samples of the brain of men and women extracted at autopsies, the reputable researcher found that the female brain is on average 14 percent lighter than the male. This has been interpreted as "exhaustive" proof that differences in intellectual characteristics are largely due to gender. Later P. Broca conducted a study of the volume of 13 skulls of primitive people found in the cave L'Homme Mort in the South of France. It was found that the difference between the cranial cavities, which he very arbitrarily classified as "female" or "male", was only 99.5 cm³ in primitive people, whereas it was in the range of 129.5 to 220.7 cm³ in the modern population [Gould, 1980]. There is a peculiar interpretation in the spirit of evolutionists: the active participation of men in the struggle for survival stimulated the intensive development of the brain, while the dependent and passive role of women seemed to have led to the fact that their brain has not almost developed since primitive times.

The biologist Stephen Jay Gould expressed reasonable doubts about the sufficiency of paleontological prerequisites for categorical conclusions and pointed to the lack of direct connection of intellectual characteristics with the volume of the skull. When he recalculated the data from the study of P. Broca on comparison of the weight of the brain of his contemporaries, adjusting for the stature of individuals and their age (women were smaller and, as a rule, older than men were), he received a not so significant difference. In his opinion, consideration of other factors that can affect the weight of the brain, for example, the specificity and duration of the disease, will reduce the real differences between the sexes to a statistical error [Gould, 1980].

The contribution of G. Le Bon in the process of feminization of the crowd

The ideas of Charles Darwin and measurements of P. Broca influenced Gustave Le Bon, the author of the most popular book on the phenomenon of the crowd [Le Bon, 1896]. In one of his early works, he tendentiously wrote that the volume of the skull of a Parisian woman as a typical sample of the "lower form of evolution" is closer to the skull of a gorilla than that of a modern man. Without denying the existence of women superior to the other sex in this anatomical characteristic, G. Le Bon defined them as a game of nature, similar to the birth of a gorilla with two heads. Directly linking the indicators of a smaller volume of the skull with intellectual "inferiority", he gave preference to women only in the manifestations of fine motor skills, intuition of instinctive order, external attractiveness and in those qualities that are indispensable in the education. Therefore, Le Bon perceived as a dangerous chimera the emerging practice of the same education for both sexes. From his point of view, the ensuing further rivalry with a man is a dead-end path of female existence. The real place of the girl he saw not in school, but near her mother, able to teach the basics of family life [Le Bon, 1881].

The researchers characterize G. Le Bon as a brilliant compiler of other people's ideas, who did not avoid plagiarism [Barrows, 1990]. Indeed, in his book on the crowd there are theses of Scipio Sighele, Gabriel Tarde, Henry Fournial without mentioning the original authors. However, with regard to the attribution of "feminine nature" to the crowd, we can on the contrary state the influence of G. Le Bon on researchers of spontaneous groups of that time.

The authors of the first Western European works on the psychology of the crowd [Sighele, 1893; Fournial, 1892] on the examples of mainly the French revolution and the Paris commune wrote not about the crowd "as a woman", but about specific women in the crowd, characterized by courage or cruelty. The reason for this behavior, they, following the hypnotologists of the time, saw in suggestibility as a consequence of natural impressionability, credulity, weakness of the will. Already in this they were not free from gender stereotypes. When S. Sighele described the crimes committed by a man in the crowd, he referred to his belonging to the category of "born offenders", pointed to the specificity of his profession or emphasized the role of madness. When the crime was committed by a woman, such detail was not observed. Gender was considered as "a factor explaining all the things". Gender bias was also evident in his work. Thus, the judgment of his teacher C. Lombroso that "a depraved woman is worse than a depraved man" S. Sighele considered more than fair to the subjects of mass crimes, categorically arguing: "When a woman is drunk with the blood, she knows no boundaries, no measures" [Sighele, 1893, 68-69]. Even more revealing is the comparison of a woman in a crowd with a hyena by H. Fournial. If she becomes a beast, then the most abhorrent among those animals, that attack in packs [Fournial, 1892, 83].

The first researcher who compared the nature group with a woman and found some similarities was Gabriel Tarde, who claimed that the crowd "like women and children" is prone to strange and unconscious contradictions, and its temperament is "nervous and a sort of female" [Tarde, 1893, 28]. In his next work on the subject, he was more specific: "in its usual whims, in its unbridled receptivity, in its credulity, nervousness, in its abrupt transitions from rage to softness, from despair to explosions of gaiety, the crowd resembles a woman even when it is, as almost always happens, of male elements. Fortunately for women, their way of life, which forced them to lock themselves in houses, condemns them to comparative seclusion" [Tarde, 1902, 173].

G. Le Bon progressed along this path much further, describing not only the "female" variability, suggestibility and impulsiveness of the crowd, but also its intellectual insufficiency – the inability to reason and criticism, that are characteristic of the "lower form of evolution." It was he who moved from comparisons to complete assimilation, arguing that "the crowd is *always* [our italics – D.G., A.B.] reveals features of a female character" [Le Bon, 1896, 176]. And if that is the crowd, then in communication with it, the author recommended to act, in fact, in the style of pick-uppers, lovers of the fleeting street dating: to paint enticing images, to base on illusions, defiantly to share experiences, to infect with emotion, to exaggerate, to speak flatly and simply, repeat in the same terms, to prefer slogans and stock phrases over the rules of logic, never try to prove anything by reasoning.

Efforts to feminize and pathologize spontaneous groups allowed him to bring the crowd beyond both social interaction, where the crowd, defending their rights, was one of the parties to the inter-group conflict, and situational interaction, ignoring the influence of forces opposing crowd. Now the crowd behavior is unconditionally regarded as irrational, unprovoked and deliberately destructive. Thus, the need to consider representatives of the masses as participants in the process of finding public consent was denied, and violence against them was perceived as a necessary measure [Reicher, Potter, 1985; Stott C., Drury, 2016; Gorbатов, Baichik, 2018].

After the publication of this book, S. Sighele also began to write about the crowd "as a woman", endowing it with all possible vices and individual advantages, a priori "inherent" to this sex, and also drew an even more consistent parallel between any manifestations of collective psychology and "female" one [Sighele, 1903]. G. Tarde, in his turn, singled out not only the "female" crowd, but also the same public, a set of people who acquire similarities of beliefs under the influence of information from the same sources. In his understanding, the "female public" is more categorical, intolerant, but at the same time, relatively harmless for all its large number [Tarde, 1902]. In addition, he replaced the old analogy between the properties of women and the crowd with the actual sign of equality. However, the ultimate expression of the trend is presented in the book of F. Cazanove, where gender prejudices and stereotypes are so mixed with collective fears of the masses, that it is sometimes difficult to understand what exactly is at stake – the psychological nature of women, the behavior of individual women in the crowd or the whole crowd "as a woman" [Cazanove, 1904].

Overcoming the ideas of "feminine nature" of the crowd

The trend towards feminization of spontaneous groups has not been sustained. An important step on the way to resolve it has become an alternative explanation of activity of women in violent crowd, consisting in the transition from the listing of "natural properties" to the designation of the role of social factors.

Here are typical examples. So, the revolutionary I.I. Dobrovolsky noted that the female nervous system causing explosion of her feelings in crowd differs in special "shakiness and instability" both due to the general oppression of national masses, and the increasing burdens of family life generated by dependence on the head of a family irritated with vital adversities [D-ov, 1894]. The emigrant from Russia B. Sidis in the first American publication emphasized the harmful influence of the monotony of impressions and actions as a consequence of the displacement of women in the narrow boundaries of the family sphere, as well as the power of social pressure, manifested in the form of prohibitions by the powerful, religion, fathers, husbands, even their own sons [Sidis, 1895]. Many social conflicts, according to the Russian lawyer P.N. Obninskij, could be avoided by providing consistent education of the people, especially the most downtrodden, oppressed and dark group – women [Obninskij, 1893]. The culmination of this approach was the ideas of the Italian researcher P. Rossi about the need for demopedia, a program of education of the masses, including a set of measures from legislative restrictions on the exploitation of women and child labor to the provision of political freedoms, the women's right to study at the universities, the opening of accessible libraries, theaters, concert halls [Rossi, 1904].

The possible logic of further conclusions of the scientific community was as follows: spontaneous groups accompany civilization at all stages of history, so if they should be given characteristics, then only "eternal" in nature. They can be extrapolated from lists of timeless hereditary qualities of individuals making up the crowd. But if extreme behavior women are merely prerequisites for social order, not the nature of the sex, the further attempts of the feminization of the crowds look incorrect.

A number of reactionary politicians for quite a long time continued to share the beliefs of Le Bon in "feminine nature" of the crowds or even nations [Moscovici, 1998; Lynch, 2013], but in the scientific community, the trend of likening the crowd to a woman lost popularity at the end of the first decade of the twentieth century. This does not mean that gender prejudices and stereotypes have been excluded from the field of study of the crowd. For example, even later it was possible to meet the following categorical statement: "a crowd of women worse than men: they live by instincts more than latest and their mind have weaker control over their actions than men`s" [Vagner, 1929, 166].

As far as this can be seen by analogy with the processes in the social sciences, the next steps towards the destruction of illegal generalizations and prejudices against the contribution of women to the activity of spontaneous were, first, the exclusion of pathological and clearly derogatory qualities from the attributed characteristics and, secondly, the recognition of greater manifestation of individual differences in comparison with gender ones. As a result, the generalized and vague image that united thousands of indistinguishable female faces in the eyes of researchers of the initial period gave way to images of representatives of various psychological types and social strata. However, the probable representation in the minds of researchers of gender stereotypes and prejudices in an unconscious, latent form does not give grounds to assert that these processes are complete. And if the crowd has long been "not a woman", the woman in the crowd is still the subject of close and sometimes biased attention of specialists.

Conclusion

In the late XIX – early XX centuries, under the influence of existing gender stereotypes and prejudices in Western European studies, there was a transition from biased descriptions of the behavior

of women in the crowd to endowing spontaneous groups in general with the characteristics attributed to women. A social philosopher and psychologist, an outstanding popularizer of science G. Le Bon, who extrapolated the biased arguments of Charles Darwin and P. Brock's interpretation of the nature of spontaneous groups, played a decisive role in the emergence of the trend of feminization of the crowd.

The attribution to the crowd of violations of emotional-volitional and intellectual spheres, as if specific to women, contributed to the consideration of its activity outside the social and situational context, the legitimization of violence against it, and the justification for refusing to take into account the demands of the masses. Overcoming this trend, which persisted in Western European science for at least a decade, took place in three directions: emphasizing the importance of social factors of women's behavior in the crowd, the exclusion from the list of attributed properties of derogatory and pathological ones, the gradual recognition of greater manifestation of individual differences in comparison with gender.

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Гендерные предрассудки и стереотипы в теориях толпы конца XIX – начала XX века

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Исследование выполнено при финансовой поддержке РФФИ. Проект № 18-013-00302, «Толпа и личность: историко-психологическое исследование теорий XIX – начала XX вв.».

Аннотация

Статья посвящена изучению характерной для первых теорий толпы тенденции феминизации стихийных объединений, распространения на них гендерных предрассудков и стереотипов. Установлено, что первоначально исследователи пристрастно характеризовали женщин в толпе, но позже, во многом под влиянием идей Г. Лебона, они стали приписывать толпе в целом «женские» характеристики (изменчивость настроения, импульсивность поведения, чрезмерность чувств, склонность к внушению, неспособность рассуждать и др.). Это способствовало рассмотрению толпы вне социального и ситуативного контекста, легитимизации полицейского насилия, отказу учитывать требования масс. В статье констатируется, что тенденция феминизации толпы не была продолжительной. Описываются особенности ее формирования и пути преодоления в науке в конце XIX – начале XX века. В частности, отмечается, что прекращение этой тенденции было связано с подчеркиванием социальных факторов поведения женщины в толпе, исключением патологических свойств из перечня приписываемых, постепенным признанием большей выраженности индивидуальных различий в сравнении с гендерными. Проведенное исследование представляется целесообразным в контексте расширения предметного поля психологии стихийных социальных объединений, а также для разработки концептуальных основ системного подхода к феномену толпы.

Для цитирования в научных исследованиях

Горбатов Д.С., Байчик А.В. Gender biases and stereotypes in the theories of crowd behavior of late XIX – early XX centuries // Психология. Историко-критические обзоры и современные исследования. 2019. Т. 8. № 2А. С. 7-14.

Ключевые слова

Толпа, теории толпы, женщины в толпе, феминизация толпы, гендерные предрассудки, гендерные стереотипы.

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