

Chapter #15

PINK IS FOR GIRLS, BLUE IS FOR BOYS: ATTITUDES TOWARDS MASCULINITY AND EFFEMINACY IN MEN

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ABSTRACT

The idea that “boys will be boys” has been used as an excuse for many behaviours, both by men and towards them. With the recent burst in attempts to bring back “masculine men” and the rise of the hegemonic norms most may wish were left in the 1920s, this study attempted to explore the attitudes towards masculine and effeminate men held by a sample of Maltese participants. Specifically, any associations between one’s attitudes and their age, gender, and self-perception of their own gender were sought. The goal of the study was to determine which stereotypes about men are the most believed. Questions from the BSRI-12, the MRNI-SF, and the AFNS were used to construct an anonymous questionnaire. Hypotheses were tested using data obtained from 410 participants aged 18-78. It was found that older age groups endorse traditional attitudes more strongly than younger ones, and use more dated adjectives to describe masculinity. Additionally, men were found to have more traditional views than women. Participants who perceived themselves as having low femininity endorsed traditional attitudes more than those high in femininity. These findings highlight which groups need to be targeted to encourage changes in the way that men are perceived and consequently judged.

Keywords: hegemonic masculinity, effeminacy, attitudes, stereotypes.

1. INTRODUCTION

Rigid gender categories can result in harmful behaviours and misperceptions. These are becoming increasingly problematic in relation to masculinity and the traditional cultural standard of what a man should and shouldn’t be. Moreover, effeminate men tend to be shunned because they do not fit the hegemonic ideal. Though literature on the subject is exceedingly diverse, that pertaining to the Maltese context is somewhat limited. As of late, research on masculinity in Malta has either been focused on homosexual men, carried out in relation to the feminist movement and how women are affected by the construct, or is otherwise fairly old and in need of an update given the everchanging nature of our society. Furthermore, research on the violation of gender norms often focuses on female targets. Moreover, the available research tends to focus on violation or adherence to gender stereotypes, rather than attitudes towards them. Hence, this topic is relevant to be studied as it may require more exposure in the Maltese context.

2. BACKGROUND

Both masculinity and femininity can be defined as descriptive gender terms, including characteristic ways of relating, acting, and appearing (Spencer, 2017). These are malleable, depending on the cultural demands of a context or time (Liu, 2017). Masculinity encompasses commonly socialised behaviours such as limiting emotionality and striving to be powerful.

On the other hand, femininity could include being gentle and nurturing. These two constructs are not bound within the limitations of biological sex. They are socially constructed and thus can vary in different societies. Malta has made great strides in civil liberties and laws related to them. However, changing legislation does not always result in changing attitudes.

Sex stereotypes are systemic beliefs about attributes of men and women (Banks, 2012). These are typically applied to a whole group, widely shared, and often support differences between men and women. Moreover, these beliefs are biased and unsubstantiated. Sex stereotypes may be descriptive, pertaining to what men and women *are like* – for example the belief the men are rational rather than emotional. Sex stereotypes may also be prescriptive, delineating how men and women *should behave* (Luksyte, Unsworth, & Avery, 2017). When a behaviour is not in line with the stereotype, it will likely be evaluated negatively (Heilman, 2012).

A prevalent ideology in this area of study is hegemonic masculinity – the notion of what constitutes a ‘real man’ (Connell, 1987). This concept maintains that men who adhere to the masculine stereotype are to dominate over women and other men. It can often be seen as the ideal form of masculinity, and hence it is what men are often socialised to achieve. Men must avoid anything feminine, never show signs of weakness, gain success and status, and take risks (David & Brannon, 1976). These norms might seem outdated or false today, however hegemonic masculinity is still alive and well even in today’s society (Iacoviello, Valsecchi, Berent, Borinca, & Falomir-Pichastor, 2021). Hegemonic ideals are rarely fully exemplified in every man. However, they remain a guiding force and continue to be endorsed as desirable by a large majority (Vernay, 2018).

In addition to this notion there is the anti-femininity mandate, an unwritten rule whereby all feminine tendencies, behaviours, and preferences must be renounced (Bosson & Michniewicz, 2013). Research has been consistent on the idea that following the anti-femininity mandate is a way that men affirm their own masculinity (Falomir-Pichastor, Berent, & Anderson, 2019). Hence, it may follow that men who perceive themselves as highly masculine will tend to reject other men who show overt displays of femininity. The precarious manhood hypothesis is a perfect example of the performative nature of gender. Manhood is seen as a precarious state which can easily be lost at the slightest sign of weakness. Bosson and Michniewicz (2013) argue that men affirm their masculinity by eschewing stereotypically feminine behaviours and roles and display it through public action. Effeminacy – often used in a derogatory manner – may be displayed in men who deviate from traditional male norms, take on roles labelled as feminine, or fail in domains labelled as masculine, such as sports. Traditionally masculine behaviour is often rewarded in modern society, whereas effeminate behaviour in men is often stigmatised (Thepsourinthone, Dune, Liamputtong, & Arora, 2020).

Herreen, Rice, Currier, Schlichthorst, and Zajac (2021) found that as one ages, conformity to masculine norms decreases and gender roles become less rigid. Harris (1995) found that the strongest variable in relation to how masculinity is conceptualised was generational difference. Attention to gender and awareness of gender stereotypes is something which emerges early on in one’s lifespan (Dunham, Baron, & Banaji, 2016). These are seen as most salient during adolescence, though research on the subject expanding beyond adulthood is scarce (Herreen et al., 2021). The question remains: have attitudes towards masculinity or femininity in men become less traditional? The answer is difficult to determine, as recent findings are inconsistent (Hentschel, Heilman, & Peus., 2019). Some studies suggest that this is not the case, and that there is a stagnation in the way people have been conceptualising gender presentation in men for the past 30 years (Haines, Deaux, K., & Lofaro, 2016). However, other studies suggest that progress has in fact been made.

For example, Thompson and Levant (2021) found that endorsement of traditional norms differed between age cohorts, with older cohorts emphasising the importance of avoiding femininity, and younger cohorts emphasising gender equality.

Generally, men are judged more negatively by other men when they express their gender in ways which do not conform to the norm (Horn, 2007). Anti-effeminacy bias could be stronger in men than women due to the tendency for men to adhere to traditional norms more rigidly. Gul and Uskul (2021) attempted to test the expression of this bias in men by focusing on the reluctance of men to be friends with effeminate men. Effeminate men were seen as less valued in the group, and men were concerned that their reputation would be damaged by association. Ulrich and Tissier-Desbordes (2018) found this attitude encompasses the avoidance of using feminine brands as they are perceived as threats to their manhood. Vandello, Bosson, Cohen, Burnaford, and Weaver (2008) found that men feel more anxiety about their gender status than women, and this may explain their reasons for endorsing masculine traits and rejecting feminine ones to preserve their manhood. It has also been found that men find it more important to differentiate masculine and feminine characteristics (Borinca, Iacoviello, & Valsecchi, 2020), and that men are more likely to sanction non-traditional men (Iacoviello et al., 2021). Further to this, Glick, Wilkerson, and Cuffe (2015) found that men who identified as masculine had more positive attitudes towards portrayals of both men and women who adhered to traditional gender norms. Such men also had negative attitudes towards effeminate men.

3. METHODS

3.1. Objectives

The aim of this study was to determine the attitudes towards masculine and effeminate men that are held within the Maltese population, as well as whether there is an association between attitudes and the respondent's gender, age, and whether they perceive themselves as more masculine or feminine. The hypotheses below were proposed:

H₁: Attitudes towards masculine and effeminate men vary with age.

H₂: Attitudes towards masculine and effeminate men vary with gender.

H₃: Attitudes towards masculine and effeminate men vary between people who identify as having high or low femininity/masculinity.

The third hypothesis was proposed as it is difficult to find research that uses self-perception of one's own gender as a variable independent from gender i.e., feeling masculine or feminine independent of whether one is biologically a man or a woman.

3.2. Design

A quantitative approach was used, with data being collected through anonymous online questionnaires made up of four sections: (1) demographic data – age and gender; (2) Bem Sex Role Inventory-Short Form (BSRI-12) (Mateo & Fernandez, 1991); (3) Male Role Norms Inventory-Short Form (MRNI-SF) (Levant, Hall, & Rankin, 2013); (4) the Anti-Femininity Norm Subscale (AFNS) (Brannon & Juni, 1984), as well as some questions related to stereotypes towards women. These additional items about women served as distractor items, so that the intent of the test would be more difficult to infer. This would help ensure that participants would not be able to detect that the study was solely about attitudes towards men, as this knowledge could have potentially affected their responses. These items were not scored, as they were not related to the objectives of the study. Finally,

an open-ended question asked participants for words and phrases which they associate with the word 'masculine'.

BSRI-12. This scale was used to assess whether respondents viewed themselves as more masculine or feminine. In turn, the aim was to determine whether viewing oneself as more masculine or feminine affects the way they judge others. Reliability for the BSRI-12 is good, with Cronbach's alpha being .77 for the feminine subscale and .73 for the masculine subscale (Fernández & Coelleo, 2010).

MRNI-SF. This scale was used to assess attitudes towards masculinity. It includes seven hegemonic domains: dominance, negativity towards sexual minorities, self-reliance through mechanical skills, avoidance of femininity, importance of sex, restrictive emotionality, and toughness. It has high reliability, as Cronbach's alpha was found to be .92 for men and .94 for women (Levant et al., 2013). All items except one were kept the same. One of the items was changed from '*the President of the United States should always be a man*' to '*the Prime Minister of Malta should always be a man*', to be more applicable to the Maltese context.

AFNS. This subscale was used to assess attitudes towards effeminacy. It is a 7-item subscale taken from a 110-item measure developed by Brannon & Juni (1984), called the Brannon Masculinity Scale (BMS). Although the scale is quite old, it was still determined to be a good fit for this study as the scenarios presented are still relevant today.

A seven-point Likert scale was used for all items of all three scales. The BSRI-12 was rated with 1 being 'never applicable' and 7 being 'always applicable'. The MRNI-SF and the AFNS were both rated with 1 being 'strongly disagree' and 7 being 'strongly agree'. The questionnaire was piloted and feedback addressed.

3.3. Sample

The sample consisted of a convenience sample. The volunteers had two criteria for participation – being Maltese and above 18 years of age. The reason for such unspecific criteria was to be more inclusive. Previous studies similar to this one were often carried out with students or samples having a good level of education. The research study was approved the Social Wellbeing Faculty Research Ethics Committee (FREC) of the University of Malta.

3.4. Statistical Analysis

Statistical analysis was carried out using the IBM Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS-28). Descriptive statistics were used to compile the demographic data for age and gender. The responses of each scale were added together to create new variables. These new variables were used to carry out statistical tests. Cronbach's alpha was computed for each scale to determine whether the instrument had internal consistency (Kiliç, 2016). All scales had a score above .78, thus having good reliability. Inferential statistics were used to determine associations between variables; Analysis of Variances (ANOVAs), Mann-Whitney U tests, independent samples t-tests, and multiple correspondence analysis were used.

4. RESULTS

The original sample consisted of a total of 422 participants. 12 participants were eliminated from the final data set – seven were under 18, one was the only non-binary person, and four had unusable answers (e.g., putting their name in the 'age' field). The final sample had 410 participants (N = 410). The participants were aged between 18 and 78 years, with

the mean age being 36.06 (SD = 15.03). These were split into six age groups for analysis. Table 1 describes the sample of participants and gives their age and gender. There is an overrepresentation of participants between the ages of 18-24 years of age. The sample is also overrepresented in females. Because it is not a representative sample, the findings cannot be generalised to the population.

*Table 1.
Demographic and descriptive data.*

Gender	n (%)	Age	n (%)
Male	107 (26.3)	18-24	155 (37.8)
Female	303 (73.7)	25-29	29 (7.1)
		30-39	53 (12.9)
		40-49	76 (18.5)
		50-59	66 (16.1)
		60+	31 (7.6)

Independent samples t-tests were carried out to compare the scores on the MRNI-SF and AFNS between genders. T-tests were also carried out to compare groups scoring high and low in masculinity/femininity. Comparisons were made based on scores of the MRNI-SF and BMS.

When measuring attitudes towards masculinity using the MRNI-SF, higher levels of endorsement were reported by male participants (M = 61.78, SD = 20.69) in comparison to female participants (M = 48.01, SD = 15.08). There was a statistically significant difference in mean endorsement score for MRNI-SF between males and females. A separate t-test was carried out for each subscale to tease out whether there were any differences between males and females in their attitudes to each aspect of masculinity. Results are shown in Table 2.

Attitudes towards effeminacy were measured using the Anti-Femininity Norms Subscale (AFNS). Higher levels of negative attitudes towards effeminacy were reported by male participants (M = 18.79, SD = 7.98) in comparison to female participants (M = 15.53, SD = 6.76). There was a statistically significant difference in mean scores between males and females.

*Table 2.
T-tests for gender and MRNI-SF/BMS.*

Scale	Subscale	Mean and SD		Sig.	C. α .
		Males	Females		
MRNI-SF	Dominance (D)			<.001	.79
	Negativity Towards Sexual Minorities (NM)	6.04 (3.51)	4.02 (1.62)	.014	.83
	Self-Reliance Through Mechanical Skills (SR)	6.34 (4.03)	5.24 (3.51)	.615	.72
	Avoidance of Femininity (AF)	14.89 (3.99)	14.66 (4.08)	<.001	.81
	Importance of Sex (IS)	7.95 (4.34)	5.69 (3.02)	<.001	.89
	Restrictive Emotionality (RE)	7.14 (4.78)	5.17 (3.02)	<.001	.68
	Toughness (T)	8.06 (3.46)	5.47 (2.51)	<.001	.71
	Whole scale	11.36 (4.40)	7.75 (3.87)	<.001	.91
		61 (20.69)	48.01 (15.08)		
BMS	Anti-Femininity Norms Subscale	18.79 (7.98)	15.53 (6.76)	<.001	.81

A t-test was carried out to compare people with high and low masculinity on their endorsement of masculine ideology. Group means show that those having high masculinity ($M = 52.29, SD = 19.53$) had slightly higher levels of endorsement than those having low masculinity ($M = 50.76, SD = 15.29$) however, the result was not statistically significant.

Participants were also compared on their level of endorsement of anti-effeminacy norms. A t-test was carried out to compare people with high and low masculinity on their attitudes towards effeminacy. There was no difference in attitude scores between high masculinity ($M = 16.35, SD = 7.55$) and low masculinity ($M = 16.42, SD = 6.84$). This may indicate that the extent to which one identifies as masculine has no effect on their attitudes towards effeminacy.

Another t-test was carried out to compare people with high and low femininity on their endorsement of masculine norms. Higher levels of endorsement were reported by participants having low femininity ($M = 54.04, SD = 18.23$) in comparison to participants having high femininity ($M = 49.04, SD = 16.15$). There was a statistically significant difference in mean endorsement scores between high and low femininity.

Participants with high and low femininity were compared on their attitudes towards effeminacy. Higher scores were reported by participants having low femininity ($M = 17.41, SD = 7.00$) in comparison to participants having high femininity ($M = 15.54, SD = 7.32$). This result was statistically significant. This could mean that the extent to which one identifies as feminine can affect their attitudes towards effeminacy. Table 3 shows the means, standard deviations, and significance of these t-tests.

Table 3.
T-tests for BEM-12 subscales and MRNI-SF/BMS.

Scale	BEM-12 Subscale	Mean and SD		Sig.
		Low	High	
MRNI-SF	Masculine	50.76 (15.29)	52.29 (19.53)	.375
	Feminine	54.04 (18.23)	49.04 (16.15)	.004
BMS	Masculine	16.42 (6.48)	16.35 (7.55)	.910
	Feminine	17.41 (7.00)	15.54 (7.32)	.009

One-way ANOVAs were conducted to compare endorsement scores of masculine and anti-effeminacy norms between different age groups. Means and standard deviations are shown in Table 4. Endorsement scores were statistically significantly different between age groups, as is shown by the varying means in Table 4. The result indicates that attitudes towards traditional norms and effeminacy vary with age. Groups showing a significant difference following Tukey post-hoc analysis are given in Table 5.

Table 4.
ANOVA tests for Age*Masculine norms and Age*Anti-effeminacy norms.

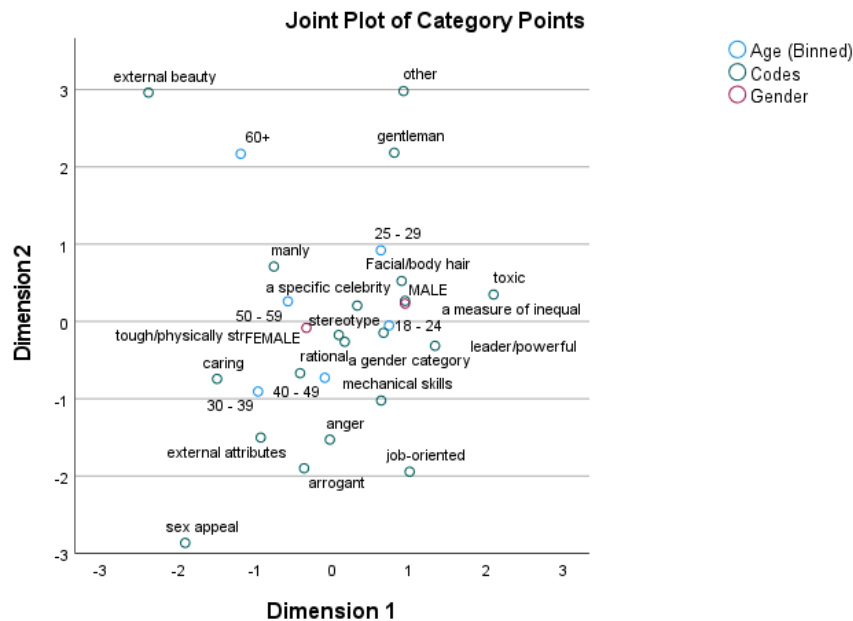
Age group	Masculine norms (MRNI-SF)			Anti-effeminacy norms (AFNS)		
	N	M	SD	N	M	SD
18-24	155	47.45	15.79	155	14.94	6.68
25-29	29	50.27	14.94	29	14.52	6.31
30-39	53	48.61	16.12	53	15.74	7.05
40-49	76	54.76	18.37	76	17.64	7.79
50-59	66	52.67	14.77	66	17.15	6.63
60+	31	62.45	20.06	31	20.81	7.18

Table 5.
Significantly different groups.

Masculine norms (MRNI-SF)		Anti-effeminacy norms (AFNS)	
Age group	Sig.	Age group	Sig.
18-24*40-49	.02	18-24*60+	<0.001
18-24*60+	<.001	25-29*60+	.007
30-39*60+	.004	30-39*60+	.017

Participants were asked to give adjectives that they associate with the word ‘masculine’. Responses were coded according to commonly occurring traits in the literature. A multiple correspondence analysis was carried out to investigate the categorical variables age, gender, and adjectives produced. Two dimensions were extracted. The first dimension explained 47.19% of the variance and second explained 43.63%. As illustrated in Figure 1, points closer together on the plot indicate a relationship. For example, the 60+ category associated masculinity with external beauty and being a gentleman, echoing the norms often upheld by that generation. It is interesting that the term ‘masculinity’ was associated with both positive traits like caring and negative traits like being toxic. What was perhaps unexpected was that masculinity is still strongly associated with being tough and strong.

Figure 1.
Joint category plots for variables of age, gender, and adjectives (codes).



5. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

This study showed that older cohorts, males, and those identifying as having low femininity endorse traditional norms more. If one were to replicate this study, it would be interesting to introduce variables such as culture, religion, and level of education. Another way to approach it would be to determine whether there are personality factors that can predict the attitudes that one would have towards effeminate and masculine men. This may then lead to interventions that could counteract the hegemonic ideology. This issue may also be explored qualitatively, by holding in-depth interviews with people who hold traditional views. By knowing why an attitude is held, it would be easier to tackle the problem at its root by counteracting these reasons. Another possible strategy would be to carry out a longitudinal study, to determine whether attitudes can change as one ages and what affects this change.

6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to determine the attitudes towards masculine and effeminate men in the Maltese context. The findings obtained had mixed support from the literature presented.

Attitudes and gender. Males in the sample endorsed traditional masculine norms more than females, and the difference is fairly large ($M_{males} = 61(20.69)$, $M_{females} = 48.01(15.08)$, $p = <.001$). Additionally, almost all dimensions of hegemonic masculinity were endorsed by male participants more than females. The dimension showing the largest difference between genders was that of restrictive emotionality ($M_{males} = 8.06(3.46)$, $M_{females} = 5.47(2.51)$, $p = <.001$). This may reflect the way society has been constructed. It seems more likely that a man would react negatively to overt displays of emotionality in other men than a woman would, especially since women find it more acceptable to do so. This is corroborated by the literature, as men face the most backlash from other men when they deviate from traditional norms (Iacoviello et al., 2021). Men were also found to endorse anti-effeminacy norms more ($M_{males} = 18.79 (7.98)$, $M_{females} = 15.53(6.76)$, $p = <.001$) in line with the literature (Gul & Uskul, 2021). This finding makes sense in light of the precarious manhood hypothesis, especially since women do not seem to experience this phenomenon. Hence, while men would feel the need to reject effeminate men because they find their displays threatening to their own manhood, women would have more tolerance for effeminacy in men because they do not feel at risk of losing anything.

Attitudes and age. It was found that age is associated with participants' attitudes towards traditional masculine norms and effeminacy. The most significant difference in both cases was between the youngest and the oldest age groups, with the 60+ group showing the highest levels of endorsement of both masculine and anti-effeminacy norms. These findings reflect some of the literature, where older cohorts emphasised avoiding femininity more than younger cohorts did (Thompson & Levant, 2021). However, they contradict findings in other studies suggesting that gender norms become less rigid with age (Herreen et al., 2021). An interesting aspect of the current results is that there were significant differences between groups which represented a generational difference. This means that there was an age gap of at least 15-20 years between the two different groups. This may reflect that attitudes have become more progressive with time, and that there may be a movement towards diminishing the importance of traditional norms in future generations in the Western world. According to this study, 18-24-year-olds associate masculinity with toxicity. The 60+ category associated masculinity with external beauty and being a gentleman, echoing the norms often upheld by

that generation. Since such attitudes often form early on in life, results may also suggest that people who are older still hold attitudes which were formed decades ago, when gender roles were more stereotypical. Results from the MCA show that the 60+ groups associated being masculine with being a gentleman, whereas the 50-59 group associated it with being tough, manly, and rational.

Attitudes and high/low masculinity/femininity. Testing the hypothesis pertaining to the effect of self-perception of one's own gender yielded some unanticipated results. Participants rated themselves highly in both feminine and masculine domains. This could mean that the tendency to see those adjectives as gendered has decreased with time. It may imply a paradigm shift in the past few years, as it could indicate a movement away from considering adjectives as gendered. This change may have been brought about by recent movements, such as advancements made in the LGBTQ+ community where gender is being seen as more fluid and malleable. Another interesting finding was that there were significant attitudinal differences between participants scoring high and low in femininity (MRNI-SF: $M_{high} = 49.04(19.53)$, $M_{low} = 54.04(15.29)$, $p = .004$; BMS: $M_{high} = 15.54(7.32)$, $M_{low} = 17.41(7.00)$, $p = .009$). This could be explained by the possibility that rejection of femininity in others may also stem from rejection of femininity in oneself. If one rejects and suppresses their own feminine traits to remain in line with the hegemonic ideology, for the same reason it is likely that these traits will also be rejected in others. Moreover, certain traits which were once thought to be highly masculine may have become more neutral because of more diverse representation. With more Maltese women being represented in political parties and leading business organisations, the common assumption that being a leader equates to masculinity might be given less weight. Another example would be the rise in feminine Maltese activists, which counteracts the classification of defending one's own beliefs as a masculine trait. Hence, the reason why participants' masculinity levels had no effect might be because the BSRI traits used to classify people as masculine may no longer be presumed to fall into the 'masculine' category. On the other hand, 'feminine' traits may not yet have the same neutrality. Traits such as being sympathetic and gentle have been slower to change, and are exhibited less by prominently masculine people.

Although great care was taken to ensure a valid study, it was not without limitations. The use of a convenience sample decreased generalisability of the results. A non-representative sample could have resulted in skewed results, due to an imbalance in the sample.

Since research in this area in the Maltese context is lacking, this study sheds light on the attitudes held by Maltese participants regarding masculinity and effeminacy in men. This study, in combination with others, may inform policy makers of the target populations – older cohorts and males – for reducing harmful attitudes, such as those pertaining to domestic violence towards men and implementation of paternity leave. If gender categories are socially constructed, then it is possible to re-shape and de-emphasise them through social change.

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