

Title: Tania Reynolds on Men as Stereotypical Perpetrators of Harm
Episode: 40

Transcript

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[Welcome to *Half Hour of Heterodoxy*, featuring conversations with scholars and authors and ideas from diverse perspectives. Here's your host Chris Martin.]

Chris Martin: When you make moral judgments, what is happening in your mind? According to one theory, you're applying a template of two roles – an intentional wrong doer and a sensitive and vulnerable victim. The more closely that template fits the situation, the more likely you are to deem the situation immoral.

Research by today's guest Tania Reynolds shows how these moral evaluations intersect with gender and it reveals that people more easily stereotype men as powerful wrongdoers and women as sensitive victims.

Tania is a social psychologist and post-doctoral fellow at the Kinsey Institute. She's joining us from Bloomington, Indiana.

Hi Tania.

Tania Reynolds: Hi Chris.

Chris Martin: How are things going in Indiana?

Tania Reynolds: Wonderfully. The fall is beautiful. I've never seen a true fall before. So I'm really enjoying all the leaves.

Chris Martin: That is great. So you moved there from Florida and I can see why. The leaves in Florida would be considerably different.

Tania Reynolds: It's quite the change. No more beaches.

Chris Martin: Yeah. Also no alligators, right? Well, we're here to talk about a new paper that you have that is under review. It should be out to the public pretty soon and it's about perceptions of men and women as agents and patients. I think a good place to begin is the moral theory that you're using which is Kurt Gray's theory. It's different from Jon Haidt's theory. I think most of our listeners might be familiar with Jonathan Haidt's theory that there are moral foundations and they're a bit like taste buds and some people have sensitive taste buds of one sort. Some people have sensitive taste buds of another. Something triggers you as immoral if it touches those taste buds. Kurt Gray's theory is about agents and patients and harm and he's saying there aren't six separate dimensions. There's just really one and that's about harm. Is that how you would describe it?

Tania Reynolds: Yeah. So he argues we have this cognitive prototype, this schema in our minds for perceiving moral actions. So if you think of for example assault. There are two roles. There's the assailant and then the victim. So Kurt Gray argues we have this natural template through which we perceive moral actions and we kind of naturally categorize the targets involved as either intentional agents or you can think of them as perpetrators or a suffering patient or a victim.

He argues that these categories are to some degree mutually exclusive. So that is as we tend to see a target as more of a patient or victim, it's harder for us to see them as the intentional agent or perpetrator. He argues that these two roles evoke different moral responses. So in response to a perpetrator, we perceive them as responsible, intentional, and therefore deserving of blame or punishment.

Then in response to the victim role or the patient role, we perceive them as vulnerable and we emphasize that they are experiencing the harmful act. So we perceive them as experiencing pain and in response, we might feel sympathy or a desire to protect and care for them.

Chris Martin: And in that case that template is something that also creates typecasting, right?

Tania Reynolds: Exactly. So Kurt argues that when we see these moral actions or when we think of a moral action, we kind of instinctively typecast these two roles. One target goes into the agent role or the perpetrator and the other target goes into the victim role and that even in – he argues that even in cases of morality where there doesn't seem to be a victim, people naturally kind of impute that. So even in victimless crimes, they apply this moral – this cognitive template and they kind of assume there is a victim. Someone must have been harmed.

That we go into every moral action kind of wanting to see these two roles.

Chris Martin: Right. I remember one of the presentations he gave in which he talked about how seemingly harmless things are perceived. Well, things that are related for example to sexual purity and impurity. If both partners are actually consenting to the sexual act, some very traditional people or religious people who perceive sexual purity as important think that sexually immoral acts, even if both adults consent, harm God or harm children because they contaminate the moral atmosphere so to speak, so there are victims.

Tania Reynolds: Yeah, or even harming one's self. So in the case of masturbation or something, someone might see the person as potentially harming themselves. So the kind of fit the role of both perpetrator and victim.

Chris Martin: Right, and it comes down partly to the perception human beings have souls and you can harm your soul even if you're – through carelessness, even if no other human being is being physically harmed or mentally harmed. Your soul can be contaminated. I was raised Catholic. So I'm kind of familiar with those doctrines.

Tania Reynolds: Oh, man. Yeah, that could be challenge because then you struggle with, “Oh, is this the right thing? Is this the wrong thing? Am I committing these unintentional harms?”

Chris Martin: Right. Yeah, I mean I’m not a practicing Catholic anymore. But I do – and I guess one of the things I gained from being raised Catholic is I can relate to the fact that it’s possible to believe that you have a soul, that is separate from your mind and it’s very tricky they don’t quite delineate where one ends and the other stops. But that your soul must also be pure. If I recall, suicide is also considered a sin because you are destroying your soul.

Tania Reynolds: Yeah, that’s interesting.

Chris Martin: Yeah. I’m not a Catholic theologian. So if anyone out there is listening and I got that wrong, please write to me and tell me about that. But taking this moral typecasting, you looked at gender stereotypes and you said based on a lot of past evidence that women are seen as sort of kind and tender and they don’t – they’re not very agentic, so things happen to them whereas men are seen as agentic. So men take action. They initiate action and going back a couple of decades, research by people like Laurie Rudman and Daryl Bem – or is it Sandra Bem? And other people have shown this. Is that right?

Tania Reynolds: Yeah. So we have a lot of gender stereotypes that link women with this patient role. So we conceptualize femininity as including traits such as tender or gentle or yielding and people do indeed expect that women have lower tolerance for pain compared to men, suggesting that any harm might actually cause more suffering to women.

Then likewise for men, our concepts of masculinity are often centered around this agentic role. So we see masculine as being dominant, self-sufficient, assertive and Rudman has shown that even at an implicit level, people kind of associate men with things like threat, anger and violence.

To some degree, these are backed up by the data in the world. So these stereotypes aren’t exactly arbitrary just as Lee Jussim’s work would suggest. So for example men are more likely to commit violent crimes across cultures. So there would be just reason for us to more instinctively see men as perpetrators compared to victims.

Chris Martin: Right. For listeners who are unfamiliar with Lee Jussim, I interviewed him many episodes ago. But his main stream of work has been on stereotype accuracy and he does work of this sort, looking at whether stereotypes are in fact accurate.

Tania Reynolds: Yeah.

Chris Martin: So going to your first study. So the simple question you wanted to started out with is, “Are women more easily typecast as victims?” How did you study that?

Tania Reynolds: Yeah. So that’s the broader goal of this project is to see, “OK. Is there a bias and moral typecasting such that it’s cognitively easier to place women in these victim roles and men in the perpetrator role?”

So what we did for study one is we had online participants read one of three scenarios depicting harm in the workplace. So for example, one of them described a surgeon bullying the trainee, the surgical trainee to the point where the trainee developed depression and suicidal ideation.

So we made sure that we kept the target of the harm ambiguous as to their gender because we wanted to see two people assume that the harm target is female. So if people are using – if they have a biased application of moral typecasting, then when you see it harmed, you should instinctively assume that the harm target is female, if the schema is biased.

But another thing that we did is we also manipulated the labeling of the targets in the situation. So we either labeled them as victim and perpetrator or we labeled them more neutrally. Just, you know, party A harmed party B. So we looked at two participants assumed that the harmed individual is a female and indeed that's what we found. So we found that participants more often assume that the harmed target was female but especially when we used the terms "victim" and "perpetrator".

So it suggests that by using these labels, we are activating the schema and amplifying the degree to which people assume that the harmed target is female. Moreover, what we also found is that when people assumed the harmed target was a woman, they responded more positively towards her. So they had warmer affective responses when they assumed the harmed target is female as opposed to male, suggesting that when women are cast in this victim role, that we might have more tender responses because women might more easily fit that victim category.

So all the associated responses to victimhood that Kurt Gray argues, perceiving them as experiencing pain and feeling sympathy might be activated more strongly when women are in that role.

Chris Martin: This was a forced choice where they had to pick A as female and B as male or A as male and B as female. Is that correct?

Tania Reynolds: So yeah, so they were forced to indicate who do you think – what do you think the sex of the harmed target was and we inserted the term "victim" or "party A". So they were forced to choose male or female and we found that on average, people assume a female victim. So about 76 percent of the time. But this likelihood was even stronger when we used the terms "perpetrator" and "victim".

Chris Martin: The sample in the study was entirely American.

Tania Reynolds: So these were Mechanical Turk individuals. So yes, they were Americans.

Chris Martin: So in your next study, you broadened out to a cross-cultural sample. Tell me about that.

Tania Reynolds: Exactly. Yeah, and one limitation of study, the first study is participants could have been bringing in some gender stereotypes such as well, if it's the case that women are more

often in subordinate workplace roles such as in the case of the surgical trainee, then perhaps they assumed that's the reason that the harmed target is female or because we mentioned that the harmed target experienced depression and suicidal ideation. Perhaps they were applying their gender stereotypes about depression and that's why they assumed that the harmed target was female.

So in study two, we tried to rule out as many of those confounding variables as possible by reducing our stimuli to using only these animated videos of triangles. So trying to reduce as much of like the human factors as possible.

So we recruited two samples. We wanted to make it cross-cultural. We recruited Chinese managers and then Norwegian university students and each participant saw three brief videos and in the videos, they were just triangles interacting. So the triangles were moving around and two of the videos depicted harm. So in one, the green triangle hits, kind of pokes the orange triangle and then in another one, there is a scenario for retaliation where the green triangle pokes the orange triangle but the orange hits back.

Then in the third one, there was no apparent harm. So the triangles just kind of stare at one another. So we told participants, OK, assume that this is a – these interactions depict a male and female coworker interacting in the workplace. They might depict – the videos might depict harm but it's not physical harm because we wanted to rule out any stereotypes associated with physical aggression.

So we asked participants. "OK. After watching this video, rate the degree to which each triangle is a victim and each triangle is a perpetrator." Then at the end, we asked them, "What do you think the sex of each triangle is? So do you think green is male, orange is female or vice-versa?"

So what we predicted is that across the scenarios, the more that a participant saw a triangle as a perpetrator, the greater the likelihood the participant would classify that triangle as male and vice versa. So the more that they saw a triangle as a victim, they would classify that triangle as female.

So that's exactly what we found basically across all the videos. The more that participants saw a triangle as a perpetrator, they're more likely to classify that triangle as male and the more they saw a triangle as victim, they were more likely to classify that triangle as female.

We didn't find any differences across the study samples. So even though we had quite different cultural samples, Chinese managers and Norwegian students, we found the same pattern across. So what I think this suggests is that this is a – this finding suggests that this might be kind of a cross-cultural feature of human cognition. So that it – this biased application of moral typecasting may be relatively universal. Granted we only tested it in two samples. So we would want future investigations and a broader cultural context.

But the evidence thus far does support that this is a tendency such that when people look at these moral – these situations involving harm, it's easier for them to cognitively link perpetrator with male and victimization with female.

Chris Martin: And in this case, the triangle paradigm, it's a case where you have a very simple background and it's like an animated video, sort of like a 1980s videogame like Pac-Man, correct?

Tania Reynolds: Yeah. We wanted to remove as much of the human factors as possible to just see whether people can even attribute these identities to animated shapes, removing as much of the human features as possible.

Chris Martin: Right. I mean so they're perceived as agents and patients. They're perceived as having a will. But you can't – I mean I guess they could be human, they could be animals, they could just be animated characters. So you could – so in this case, the person viewing the video can just see them as whatever they want.

Tania Reynolds: Yes, yes. So people – humans have a tendency to anthropomorphize and it's relatively easy for us especially when they're moving to see intentions and feelings and motives. So yeah, we relied upon that tendency.

Chris Martin: OK. So where did you take the studies from this point?

Tania Reynolds: OK. So at this point, you can ask, "OK. So what? So what if it's easier for us to place women in the victim role and men in the perpetrator role? Why does that matter?"

So in the remainder of the package, the study package, we wanted to see, "OK. How does a biased, moral typecasting, how does that shape our moral responses to harm?" So as you remember, Kurt Gray argues in response to the victim or the patient role that evoke sympathy and care. But in response to the agent or perpetrator role, people feel these feelings of blame and desire to punish.

So for the next three studies, we used one study of online American adults. One study used Korean individuals and then a third study used American undergraduates in the lab. So across all three of these samples, we exposed participants to eight different social scenarios where we manipulated the gender of the harmed or disadvantaged target.

So some of these were at the level of the group. So for example, we talked about – so imagine there's an affirmative action policy that would increase the proportion of women in male-dominated fields such as investment banking or science and in the reverse condition, participants would see, OK, imagine there's an affirmative action policy to increase the proportion of men in female-dominated fields such as nursing, education.

We measured participants' moral responses to each of these scenarios. So another example for it was in one condition, they might see drug overdose rates are increasing more sharply among men or drug overdose rates are increasing more sharply among women.

In another one, we looked at there are more men than women at the bottom of society, so in jail or homeless or that the alternate condition would be there are more men than women at the top of society, such as CEOs or professors.

So in response to these different scenarios, we measured participants' moral responses. So their moral outrage: "This makes me angry. This upsets me. This is morally wrong." We measured how fair they perceived it, how much sympathy they felt for the harmed or disadvantaged target, how much they blamed the disadvantaged individual. So saying this outcome is their own fault. Then we also measured to what degree do you think this is a serious problem society should drive to fix. If it was a policy one, to what degree do you support the policy?

So for example in a – one of the policies was women can retire earlier than men or in the alternate condition, men can retire earlier than women.

So participants saw only one of these versions for each of the scenarios and so what we found is that across the scenarios and across the samples, we saw a systematic pattern such that the gender of the harmed target shaped the moral responses of participants. So participants felt more moral outrage when women were harmed or a female was harmed compared to men. They –

Chris Martin: Had you found that regardless of the condition, like regardless whether the scenario was a drug overdose or affirmative action?

Tania Reynolds: So we didn't break them apart by the particular scenarios. We did look at – so some of the scenarios manipulated harm at the individual level. So we used some – more interpersonal scenarios, such as a boss is overworking a male employee or a boss is overworking a female employee or a boss is excluding a female employee or a male employee.

So we did look at whether they were – whether effects were – whether they differed based on if the scenario was at the level of individuals, more interpersonal or at the level of group outcomes. What we found is that there were effects based on the level of harm such that they were stronger at these group level disparities than they were at the more interpersonal scenarios.

But they tended – these didn't interact. So pretty much across them, we found that there was both a pattern of the sex of the targets. So whether the male or females were harmed. But then we also saw an effect of the harm level such that the reactions were even stronger when it was these group disparities. So what that would I think suggest is that when we see differences in aggregate, so in these large social outcomes. So when we see women as a group being disadvantage at the top of society, we're going to show – going to see more disparity and outrage compared to when we look at men being disadvantaged as a group at the bottom of society.

So it suggests that in aggregate, you should see stronger moral responses. But what we did find is that there was an effect of the sex of the harmed target such that people perceived harm to women as less fair. So harm to men was more fair. They felt more moral outrage when women were harmed or a female was harmed.

They blamed men more for their own suffering and they felt more sympathy when women were harmed. We also actually included a scenario looking at hypothetical donations to homeless shelters and we manipulated whether they saw a female-only homeless shelter as one of their three options for which to donate to and then whether they saw a male-only homeless shelter.

We did find differences such that participants were more willing to donate to a female-only homeless shelter compared to a male-only one, suggesting that these might have some tangible real-world consequences in terms of money allocation and indeed we also found effects for policy support.

So participants more strongly supported policies that advantaged women but not those that advantaged men and they saw suffering, women suffering as more of a serious problem facing society, compared to men suffering.

Chris Martin: That reminds me. There was a pretty old book called *The Myth of Male Power* and parts of it were pretty controversial. But I think in one part of the book, the author talked about how – both in good and bad. There's more sympathy for women. So he talked about how on Mother's Day, it's much more common for people to send really nice presents to their mother and call them whereas Father's Day tends to be kind of neglected and people might call their dad to wish them and that's it or maybe not even that.

But also that when it comes to getting charitable donations, when people make TV ads for charitable organizations that work in developing countries, they generally portray a girl in the ad to elicit pity.

Tania Reynolds: Yeah, I think that's right. Our findings would suggest that is the more effective strategy. People felt more sympathy in response to female suffering and they felt more moral outrage. So if moral outrage compels donations or desire to help the problem, then it would be wise of them to use women as their – within their campaigns.

I mean it was interesting. I was researching different disparities and social outcomes and I found pretty consistently across my research that even in cases where men were more afflicted, the agencies would still describe the pattern in the percentage of women who were afflicted.

So for example, if you look at rates of homelessness. So 60 percent of homeless individuals are male. But yet when you go to look at the stats, they would say 40 percent of homeless individuals are female, right? So it was as though they needed to frame it in terms of the female victims to activate feelings of care or concern.

Chris Martin: Yeah. Like you said, that is actually pragmatic because it does do what they want it to do. It does elicit pity. I think an interesting version of this, actually now that I think about the Mother's Day issue, is to think about how people – well, to put scenarios in front of people where you talk about a person who keeps in touch with their mother, but kind of neglects their father versus someone who keeps in touch with their father but neglects their mother or how much does a woman suffer when she gets widowed versus how much does a man suffer when he gets widowed and see if people tend to assume that men can cope with widowhood better and

people assume that not keeping in touch with your father as you grow older is more acceptable than not keeping in touch with your mother.

Tania Reynolds: Yeah. It would be really interesting to see – I think you could come up with a whole slew of social scenarios where people would have the heuristic. These could be accurate assessments. It's quite plausible that women do feel more interpersonal pain at certain situations on average. But I do think the point is that it – even if they're true on average, there are going to be plenty of times when we get it wrong and we overlook men's suffering because we don't tend to associate male suffering with this victim role. It's harder for us to place men in that victim category and see them as truly suffering.

Chris Martin: Right. I mean there's a circular effect there where you perceive the state of affairs as normal. So if you're a man, you just get inured to the amount of pity that you get when bad things happen to you and you think that's a normal amount of pity and sympathy to get.

So you measure it in terms of – like do you feel like the world is being fair to you if you're a man? You're really not comparing yourself to women in a way. So to some degree, you just might find that people or men say that they get the amount of sympathy they expect to get. But yeah, partly because people adapt to the norm.

Tania Reynolds: Yeah. I think there's a lot of pressure from male – the cultural expectations around masculinity. A lot of it is man up and take it. You don't complain. You don't cry. You don't show weakness. I think that would make sense if we think of our evolutionary past.

Across human history, men were predominantly the ones that were on the battlefield although there were certainly some female warriors. On average, there were men and so men were choosing their coalitionary partners based on whether they could contribute out on the battlefield.

So you were looking, if you were an ancestral male, for fellow men who would be tough, have a high pain tolerance. You know, we're going to be courageous. We're not going to freak out once the battle happened and leave. You wanted men who are going to be tough and so I think over time, that created a lot of pressure such that men probably had a lot of social forces encouraging them to reduce this victimization – this cry out for help or honest expressions of suffering because if anything, you would have just been excluded from the group. You would have been derogated by other men. It wouldn't have helped your status.

So I think – I mean you still see that today, especially in context that demand physical formidability. So in sports settings, you need to be tough. You can't express too much suffering or victimization.

So I think yes, even if you ask men, you might find that they say, "Oh, no, we're doing OK." You know, we're fine. But if you look at the data, the true disparities out there, it's pretty astonishing.

So there are a lot of cases in which men are actually quite disadvantaged or at least show worse outcomes. So homelessness. I cited education. Men are less likely to graduate from college, from

high school. Ninety-three percent of prisoners are male. Drug addiction, 68 percent of admission to treatment centers are male.

If you look at health, men live five years shorter on average compared to women. They're more likely to die of heart disease, Parkinson's. They're more likely to commit suicide, more likely to die at the workplace, more likely to suffer from mental retardation or intellectual disabilities.

So there are a lot of cases where there is true suffering going on with men and I think based on these findings, I would suggest that it's harder for us to evoke the same concern or sympathy or moral response when we hear those stats or learn about that suffering.

Chris Martin: Yeah. There's a double-edged sword here too where I think men – I mean I know that men are perceived as more competent often. I mean when it comes to interpersonal things like counseling. I think maybe women are perceived as more competent but – because men in general are perceived more competent. They're perceived as more able to handle tough challenges. So it's unfair to women that men are considered more capable of handling things like leading a company and being a good CEO.

So that's unfair to women. But on the other side, men are also seen as more competent when it comes to dealing with tough things like war, like fighting in a war, dealing with physical challenges, which means that men are pushed in these situations where they're supposed to deal with them and then they are injured or they die.

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So there's very much this duality there and I think with the English language, it also just lacks words for a distribution where both the right tail and the left tail are thicker for one category of person. Like there's no common English word you can use to describe the fact that men are more likely to be CEOs and men are more likely to be homeless at the same time.

Tania Reynolds: Yeah. I think that is a pattern that frequently gets overlooked. You know, you hear a lot of stories, social media, on the news, about how women are underrepresented at the right tail of the social distribution, at the top of society. It is true that women are less likely to be CEOs, less likely to serve in roles of political leadership, less likely to be full professors.

But if you look to the other side of the distribution, it's the case that men are overrepresented there as well. So the bottom of society, homeless, drug addiction, dropping out of high school, incarceration. You find many more men there and that's not part of the story that we often hear.

So I think it's important to shed light on that side as well. So if this biased, moral typecasting is the case, as you pointed out, there's going to be kind of a double-edged sword for each role.

So men might be perceived as more competent which gives them an advantage in business settings. But it's also going to mean that they are expected to enlist in the army and sacrifice their bodies and take these jobs that are really tough, such as removing chemical wastes where they're actually putting themselves – their lives at risk whereas for women, if they are more easily typecast in that victim role, it's going to give them a disadvantage when they need to be

agentic, such as in a position of leadership. But when they do – when they're suffering, that it's going to be easier for us to detect that suffering and respond to it.

Chris Martin: Right. So where are you taking this research from here? We only have a couple of minutes left. But where are you taking this research from here?

Tania Reynolds: Well, right now we're trying to look at whether there are some boundary conditions. So for example, if you increase the patience of men. So does this pattern go away? So for example, if a man suffers from autism, do we then – can we eliminate this biased application of moral typecasting?

We haven't yet explored some of the sides on the female side. But I think it would be really interesting to look at for example if a woman – if we have evidence that she is agentic or at least possesses cues associated with agencies such as muscularity or a leadership role, do we then eliminate this biased application of moral typecasting?

Chris Martin: Well, that sounds fascinating. Well, it has been great having you on the show. Thank you again.

Tania Reynolds: Thank you so much for having me, Chris. It was an absolute pleasure.

Chris Martin: Tania's article is titled *Man Up and Take It: The Effects of Moral Typecasting on Responsiveness to Harm Experienced by Men and Women*. It's currently under review and it may be published in 2019. You can find links to her older articles on Google Scholar and you can find links to some of the books and articles that we discussed in the show notes. If you have comments about today's episode, please email me at podcast@heterodoxacademy.org or tag me on Twitter, @chrismartin76. Thanks for listening.

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