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## **Gender, Language, and Society: Saudi Female University Students' Perception of the Category of Professions**

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# Gender, Language, and Society: Saudi Female University Students' Perception of the Category of Professions

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## Abstract

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This study concerns itself with the prevalence of gender stereotypes and classification of professions in Saudi Arabia. A survey and follow-up interview were administered to 80 female university students to determine whether young Saudi females' classification of professions carries evaluative connotations related to gender. The results show that the subjects associate higher status (or skilled) professions with males and lower status professions with females despite the following facts: (i) Saudi women work in almost all professions, due to the rule of gender segregation and (ii) the image of women as professionals forms part of the participants' knowledge about Islam in which women are not stereotyped. The research highlights how the social experience of gender stereotyping plays a more important role than any other kind of experience in the hierarchical organization of the category of professions.

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**Keywords:** gender and language; gender and identity; women's education in Saudi Arabia, gender stereotypes and classification; Saudi women

# **Género, Lenguaje, y Sociedad: Percepción de la Categoría Profesional de la Estudiantes Universitarias Saudíes**

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## *Resumen*

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Este estudio se centra en la prevalencia de los estereotipos de género y la clasificación de las profesiones en Arabia Saudí. Una encuesta y entrevistas de seguimiento fueron realizadas a 80 estudiantes universitarias para determinar si la clasificación de las profesiones de las mujeres jóvenes saudíes conlleva connotaciones evaluativas relacionadas con el género. Los resultados muestran que las sujetos asocian mayor estatus (o especialización) a profesiones con hombres y mejor estatus a profesiones con mujeres, a pesar de los siguientes factores: (i) Las mujeres Saudíes trabajan en casi todas las profesiones, debido a la regla de segregación de género y (ii) la imagen de las mujeres como profesionales forma parte del conocimiento de las participantes sobre el Islam en que las mujeres no son estereotipadas. La investigación pone de relieve cómo la experiencia social de los estereotipos de género juega un papel más importante que cualquier otro tipo de experiencia en la organización jerárquica de la categorización de profesiones.

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**Palabras clave:** género y lenguaje, género e identidad, educación de las mujeres en Arabia Saudí, estereotipos de género y clasificación, mujer Saudí

The view that women are inferior to men in terms of knowledge and capabilities appears to permeate many institutions within all societies. One consequence of this, as shown in this study, is that men are given more status than women, even by women. Another consequence is the association of higher status jobs, particularly those that require a high level of knowledge or power, with men and lower status jobs with women. Eckert & McConnell-Ginet (1992; 2003) pointed out that in all societies professions are classified in terms of gender specialization, which is viewed to carry the evaluation that men's enterprises are generally better than women's, although the classification itself has no such evaluative connotation. However, as argued in this study, an evaluative classification of professions by females is counterintuitive in Saudi society in the following respects: 1) Saudi women's real-life experience with female professionals, due to the rule of gender segregation in the Muslim Saudi society (manifested by single-sex schools, universities and any kind of organization) and 2) the status of women in Islam which does not discriminate between males and females as professionals. Data about the evaluative classification of professions were collected via a survey and follow-up interview administered during 2010–2012 at two universities in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia. The results show how Saudi female students perceive female and male professionals in general and university professors in particular, and how they constantly give more power and respect to male than to female professors and other professionals. The results of the study are presented in terms of insights from the field of cognitive semantics, whereby meaning is considered to be a matter of conceptualization that encodes how particular language users understand and organize their world experiences under the influence of their specific socio-cultural surroundings. The study shows that the evaluative organization of the category of profession does not reflect the participants' real-life experience with professionals. Rather, it supports the hierarchy of males over females, which, as mentioned above, permeate many institutions within all societies (Muslim and non-Muslim). The conclusion arrived at from the study implies that the social experience of gender stereotyping can play a more important role than other types of experience in the evaluative organization of the category of professions, considering that professions tend to be associated with different levels of power and knowledge, or learning abilities.

In previous studies, researchers looked into gender and learning in various ways, including gender-related studies of online learning (e.g. Sullivan, 2001). Rarely the gender of the students was explored in relation to the teacher's gender. However, numerous studies examined patterns of interactions in relation to gender differences (Lockheed & Harris, 1984; Sadker, Sadker & Bauchner, 1984; Massey & Christensen, 1990; Rodriguez, 2002; Einarsson & Granström, 2002) with most documenting greater amounts of teacher attention directed toward boys rather than girls (as cited in Krieg, 2005). Most importantly, work on gender and learning basically focuses on gender stereotypes from a male perspective, examining, for example, the processes through which they are formed, their effects on social perception and behavior (e.g. Hamilton, 1979; Smith & Zarat Quinn, 1992) and on females' performance in such scientific fields as math (see Spencer, Steele & Quinn, 1999).

This study brings into focus gender stereotypes related to professions, not simply from the perspective of females, but rather from the perspective of females whose real-life experience with professionals can be restricted to female encounters due to the rule of gender segregation in their Muslim society. The study draws attention to (i) how many professional women are working in Saudi Arabia and (ii) how even women fail to see working females as skilled, knowledgeable professionals.

## **Backgrounds**

### **Contextual Backgrounds: Women as Professionals in the Muslim Saudi Society**

The points presented below are facts that make the association of higher-status jobs with males by Saudi females counterintuitive.

The Saudi nation's rule of segregation between genders has allowed women to be taught by women from an early age. When girls at the age of six leave their family homes and their mothers' care to attend schools, they are surrounded by women. Women are served by women not only in schools but also in banks and in hospitals. That is, women's experience with professionals is, for the most part, limited to female encounters.

The possibility of establishing gender segregation implies that there are Saudi women who have the skills and knowledge that would enable them to replace men whenever and wherever possible. However, this is the result of considerable efforts on the part of the Saudi government to increase women's access to education and reduce the gender gap at different educational levels, as the following lines show:

Interest in education in Saudi Arabia grew along with the development of the economy after the discovery of oil in 1935. The Ministry of Education was established in 1953 and public schools for boys opened the same year. Girls were still confined to their homes by the traditional norms of gender segregation. .... It was only in the late 1950s and early 1960s that important steps were taken to open the first schools for girls in Saudi Arabia. ... In the early 1980s, education was available to all Saudi girls, and young women were already enrolled in and graduating from the universities. The public system of women's education in Saudi Arabia is segregated and is supported by the Saudi government. (AlMunajjed, 2009, P. 6)

Because the Saudi government has paid much attention to women's education, the World Bank (2008) report states, females now outnumber males in colleges: They constitute 58% of students. A report published by the Saudi Arabia Ministry of Higher Education (2010) noted that 'The number of female students in tertiary education in the kingdom rose six fold between 1970 and 2007 compared with a quadrupling of male enrolments during the same period' (p. 8). These achievements have also been reflected in international reports and statistics. For example, UNESCO's (2009) *Global Education Digest* showed that Saudi women come remarkably ahead of western women in terms of obtaining academic degrees. The World Economic Forum's *Global Gender Gap Report 2009* (Hausmann, Tyson, & Sahidi, 2009) ranked Saudi Arabia as 25<sup>th</sup> among countries in terms of the gap between the two sexes in university registration. The fact that there are thousands of female professors in Saudi universities reflects rather explicitly the high general level of female education. This level will continue to rise steadily, considering that, in the past few years, 30% of the higher education scholarships have been awarded to women. King Abdullah created a government-funded scholarship program that has sent thousands of Saudi

women to foreign universities since 2005; he believed in women as partners in moving Saudi Arabia to the new millennium.

It should be noted, however, that gender segregation carries the implication that the education system treats the sexes differently. The fields of education and training of women are limited, with science, engineering, and agriculture remaining a predominantly male territory, as AlMunajjed (2009, p. 16) rightly commented, ‘Women’s degrees are concentrated in education and teaching, human sciences, natural sciences, and Islamic studies.’ But this is a matter of gender specialization specific to the Saudi society. Put differently, it is intended to involve women in fields they can pursue as careers in a conservative society.

However, new career opportunities opened for Saudi women in 2010. They have participated in the all-male Shura Council—referred to as the house of parliament in other countries. The announcement made by King Abdullah Bin Abdul Aziz of Saudi Arabia on Friday, January 11, 2013, to appoint 30 highly educated women to the Shura Council has gained attention. These women are distributed amongst all committees in the Council to give suggestions and form decisions in all matters of life side by side with their male counterparts. This is the latest action in a series of moves from the Saudi government intended to enhance the role of women in society after it granted women the right to vote in municipal elections years ago (Mousa, 2013).

## **Women in Islam**

A well-known fact to all Muslims is that Muslim women have always played an active and important role in the shape and direction of Islamic society. The Prophet’s wives were “feminists” in that their activism was integral to the foundation and growth of the first Islamic community, and of Islam itself (Bullock, 2002). During early days of Islam, women worked in trade, medicine, and animal husbandry and also participated in Islamic battles (Al-Manea, 1984). That is, women were active participants in all aspects of life. One example in early Islam is Khadija, the first wife of the Prophet Mohammed (Peace Be Upon Him) and the first believer in Islam among women. She was an independent entrepreneur who, in fact, proposed marriage to her male worker, none other than the Prophet Mohammed

(Peace Be Upon Him) himself. She continued to be a businesswoman after she married him (Arebi, 1994, p. 17). Historian Ibn-Saad, in *At-Tabaqat*, included the biographies of many remarkable women of the Prophet Mohammed's (Peace Be Upon Him) time, some of which fought in Muslim armies and demonstrated remarkable courage. In the battle of Uhud, for instance, Umm Umara fought in the defense of the Prophet, eventually losing her arm in the fray (Ibn-Saad, 1958, p. 18).

Above all, both the Quran and Sunna place great emphasis on women's education as both encourage all humans to acquire knowledge, as revealed by the following Qur'anic verse: 'Say, O my Lord! Advance me in Knowledge' (Chapter: 20, Verse: 114) and by another verse, 'God will raise up, to ranks, those of you who believe and who have been granted knowledge' (Chapter: 58, Verse: 11). This is confirmed by Prophet Mohammed's (Peace Be Upon Him) statements concerning women's education: 'The search of knowledge is a duty for every Muslim male and female,' and 'Seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave'. Even some minority traditionalist Muslim interpreters advocate that women work alongside men 'as educators, scholars, and experts' (Ibn-Hisham, 1978, as cited in Al-Manea, 1984, p. 51).

Moreover, Muslim scholars have quoted the Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him) as recommending that his followers seek knowledge about religious matters from Aisha, his wife, who was a renowned scholar of her time. The Prophet said, 'Half the knowledge of my revelation should be acquired from all of my companions and the other half from Aisha' (as cited in Syed, 2004, p. 24). This is vivid evidence that the Prophet admitted women both as eligible students and as trusted teachers (Al-Manea, 1984).

The above information is essential knowledge that all Muslims learn. In addition, as shown in (2.1), young Saudi women's experience with professionals involves women, and they themselves have all the opportunities to qualify as professionals. However, in the Muslim Saudi society, like in any other society, professions seem to be associated with a hierarchy in which women are secondary to men. In addition, Saudi professional institutions may be described as "patriarchies" in which men have more power and status than women. It can be argued that this is due to these institutions drawing on the following Qur'anic verse which clarifies the rights and responsibilities of male and female family members: 'And

they (women) have rights similar to those (of men) over them, and men are a degree above them’ (Chapter: 2, Verse: 228).

The referenced degree here is “*Quiwama*” (maintenance and protection). It refers to the natural differences between the sexes, which entitles the weaker sex to maintenance and protection (The Status of Women in Islam <http://www.turntoislam.com/forum/showthread.php?t=2351>). It does not mean that women are inferior to men in terms of knowledge and capabilities. The question, however, is: How do young Saudi female students conceptualize profession words in relation to gender? This question will be addressed after examining word meaning from a cognitive perspective.

### **Theoretical Backgrounds: Word Meaning from a Cognitive Perspective**

Within the framework of cognitive semantics, a word does not have a compact, intrinsic meaning of its own (Langacker, 1991, p. 2). Rather, a word is a form that provides points of access to a network of knowledge structures (c.f. Evans, 2006). In this way, the activation of a word may activate any type of knowledge structures accessible via the word, be it social, cultural, psychological, linguistic (e.g., collocational), or pragmatic (see Langacker, 1987, p. 163).

An important point about the cognitive approach to meaning is that it explores the organization of knowledge structures accessible via a word and presents it as shaped by repeated experience. For Lakoff (1987), related experiences form a category that consists of a number of idealized cognitive models (ICMs). Each ICM is a mental representation of reality from a certain perspective. ICMs are radially structured in the sense that some of them can be more prototypical than others, depending on the degree to which they activate the associations that fit our experience-based world knowledge.

However, and as far as gender association with respect to profession words is concerned, it is shown below that the way the study participants associated professions with gender is not determined by their daily experience with female professionals but by their social experience of gender stereotyping. Put differently, gender was found to be a defining feature determining the radial structuring of the category of professions, with

men viewed as typical candidates for professions requiring high levels of knowledge and power, and women as atypical.

## **Methodology**

### **Participants and Data Collection Tools and Procedures**

This study took place between September 2010 and June 2012 at two Saudi universities. 80 female students ranging in age between 18 and 23 years participated in a survey and interview that aimed at identifying how gender stereotypes influence the way young Saudi women perceive the category of profession words. Participation in the research project was voluntary and students were told to withdraw, without any consequences, if they decided not to participate in the study.

The survey and interview used for data collection may be described as qualitative. According to Kvale (1996), a qualitative research tool such as an interview can help the researcher to obtain varied descriptions from the different qualitative aspects of the subjects' world. Thus, the qualitative approach is appropriate for finding out through words and explanations facts related to the perception of profession words on the parts of Saudi female university students.

The survey was designed in such a way as to make a quick overview of students' classification of profession words in terms of gender specialization, which can carry evaluative connotation. The survey consisted of two simple questions. The first question asked the participants to place a masculine or feminine pronoun next to a number of professions that can be scaled according to whether they require a high, middle, or low level of education and/or power. The second question sought to explore the participants' understanding of the roots of the gender associations they made; that is to say, whether they would relate their responses to religion or experience (see Appendix (1) for details). The primary focus was on how many students in the sample of 80 would give answers that support the researchers' hypothesis that the majority of females at universities (as represented by the sample group) give higher regard and more respect to male than to female professors and other professionals. A follow-up interview was conducted with a random sample of the female students who had chosen to participate

in the survey (see Appendix (2) for the interview questions). The interview was used to allow students to elaborate on their survey answers. Additional to the above-mentioned research tools, the researchers were continuously writing their own observations and were meeting to discuss the study data.

### Findings and Data Analysis

As mentioned above, the data in this study were collected via a simple survey and a follow-up interview. The survey data were analyzed consistently and immediately. The second part of the data (i.e. taped and written feedback from the research participants) will also be discussed in this section. Recurring themes were highlighted to be discussed in this paper.

### Survey Results

The survey results show that gender stereotyping has a strong influence on gendered notions of occupations, even among Saudi women who most often interact in their lives with female professionals. To begin with replies to the first survey question, tables (1) and (2) summarize students' use of a masculine or a feminine pronoun with the provided list of profession words. The professions can be divided into two categories: those that require a high level of education (see Table 1) and those that do not necessarily require education (see Table 2).

As Table (1) shows, for the overwhelming majority of the study participants, the prototype of professions that are associated with a high level of education (or high status professions such as *scientist*, *expert*, *professor* and *academic department head*) is a male.

Table 1. Professions requiring a high level of education

Profession	Male	Female	Both	No response
Scientist	84%	13%	13%	0%
Academic department Head	80%	10%	5%	5%
Professor	74%	10%	15%	1%
Physician	59%	16%	12%	1%

Profession	Male	Female	Both	No response
Doctor	3%	80%	17%	0%
Writer	41%	36%	23%	0%
Teacher	14%	71%	15%	0%
Expert in any field	76%	8%	10%	6%

The association of a scientist, expert or professor with a male prototype is by no means based on the participants' real-life experience, as a large number of female professors who teach in Saudi universities are themselves scientists and experts. Only a small number of the participants indicated this fact by associating these professions with the female gender or both genders.

As for *academic department head*, at the time of collecting the data, a woman in Saudi academic institutions could not occupy such a position. She could only be a deputy head. Accordingly, the 80% of the participants for whom the word activated a male prototype would have drawn on their real-life experience. The remaining responses, where 10% of the participants used the pronoun "she" and 5% answered with "both," indicate that these participants considered the subordinate position a Saudi woman could occupy to be on a par with the higher one occupied by a male, considering that it is the highest position a woman could reach. This may be explained as a matter of viewing the hierarchical structuring of male and female positions in Saudi academic institutions, which no longer holds in some institutions, as the norm of counter parting.

*Doctor* is the only profession among the ones categorized as requiring high qualifications that triggered for a female prototype. That is, although *doctor* references a highly skilled and knowledgeable person, 80% of the female participants associated the profession with the female gender. This may be explained on the point that the medical profession is linked to medical examination, and due to cultural restrictions, gender sensitivity and taboo, most women see or prefer to be seen by female doctors. In other words, for most Saudi women seeing a doctor activates a scenario of medical examination carried out by a female doctor. Hence, the association of the medical profession with the female gender is deeply rooted not only in the real-life experience of the participants but also in the social values of Saudi society. Put differently, the organization of the ICMs accessible via the word

*doctor* is clearly determined by a real-life experience that is shaped by social values.

The participants seem to consider *writer* as a neutral profession as their responses are not significantly different with respect to gender. This may be considered as a true reflection of reality where male and female writers exist. In addition, writing has varied genres that can be placed on a continuum of complexity. The different responses of the participants can be the result of the activation of different parts of the continuum. It is not inconsistent with facts about education in Saudi society to claim that the participants for whom *writer* triggered for a male prototype (41%) focused on the most complex end of the continuum of writing genres (e.g., fields of science), and those (36%) for whom the word triggered for a female prototype focused on the least complex end or less complex spaces on which non-scientific genres can be placed. On the other hand, for those who answered with “both” (23%) the word must have activated the continuum as a whole. The findings below may be seen as further evidence for this explanation.

For 71% of the participants, a prototypical *teacher* is a female. This is logical considering that the participants are normally taught by female teachers. However, taking into account the point that the participants are university students taught by female professors, it is the word *professor* rather than *teacher* that should have triggered for a female prototype. But this did not happen. For the overwhelming majority of the participants (74%), a prototypical *professor* is a male. This is an indication that the participants see female professors as simply teachers, a profession that does not require very high qualifications. This may be supported by the researchers’ observation that female Saudi students constantly refer to female university professors as “Ms.” or “Mrs.” but they use high titles, such as “Dr.” and “Professor”, to refer to male university teachers regardless of the level of their qualifications. The title would also be followed by the name of the male teacher. This is a clear instance of language use shaped by gender stereotyping, in which men are superior to women in terms of knowledge and status.

A consideration of Table (2) will further show that even with lower-status professions, the prototype of a profession that requires power is a male.

Table 2

*Professions requiring low or no qualifications*

Profession	Male	Female	Both	No response
Teller	55%	27%	13%	5%
Receptionist	50%	39%	8%	3%
Cook	31%	55%	12%	2%
Nurse	2%	98%	0%	0%
Security guard	86%	8%	0%	5%
Cleaner–janitor	31%	56%	12%	1%
Supervisor	43%	31%	18%	8%

While the participants’ responses with regard to *nurse* and *cleaner* can be accepted as a reflection of reality, their association of *teller*, *receptionist*, *security guard* and *supervisor* with a male prototype is not.

Only 27% of the participants associated the teller profession with the male gender. For 55% of the participants the prototype of this profession is a male. This contradicts reality in Saudi society – Saudi females encounter female tellers in all banks as they have branches that serve females only. Tellers usually have little power; however, this profession, like all professions that are related to money, is typically considered a domain of power and, therefore, a male domain.

Similarly, a *security guard* is typically a big, strong person, and women are not normally associated with these features. This fact explains the reason why for 86% of the female participants the word triggered for a male prototype. However, it is surprising that only 8% of the participants associated the profession with the female gender, and 5% did not even give an answer, considering that in a segregated society like the Saudi society females would be surrounded by female security guards.

Interestingly, and along the lines with their previous results, for 43 % of the participants the word *supervisor* triggered for a male rather than a female prototype. This is an interesting response since the female participants are surrounded by women in almost all sorts of supervisory positions. Because of gender segregation prevalent in Saudi government and private sectors, schools, universities, and banks are led by women. For instance, all female school principals and supervisors are females. However, decision making is always happening on the male sector of the school and the college. This would have affected participants' answer to this question.

By contrast, 55% of the participants consider a prototypical *cook* to be a female. Only for 31% of the participants it is a male and for 12% it can be both. Although cooking is known to be a unisex profession and although the younger Saudi generation are influenced by cooking shows that are led by male cooks, such as Chefs Gordon Ramsay, Emeril Lagasse, and Alton Brown, also famous Arab chefs such as Chef Osama and Jouni Ibrahim, among others, it is clear that participants are mostly influenced by the cultural norm that sees cooking, particularly for the family, as a female enterprise. The scenario of male enterprises as lying outside the home is prototypical in an Arab Muslim society such as Saudi society.

The researchers find it an interesting contradiction that a higher percentage of female participants gave higher percentage for males over females in jobs and professions that are associated with females in Saudi culture. The above examples demonstrate that in the overwhelming majority of cases the association is a matter of gender stereotyping.

Finally, when participants were asked if their answers to the first survey question were influenced by their religion, reality or both, the majority of them (87%) related their views about professions and gender to reality, and not to their faith. Table (3) summarizes the participants' responses. Note that only 4% related their views to both religion and reality, whereas 1% did not respond at all. These responses were treated as insignificant, based on the possibility that these few students could not make a decision or a choice.

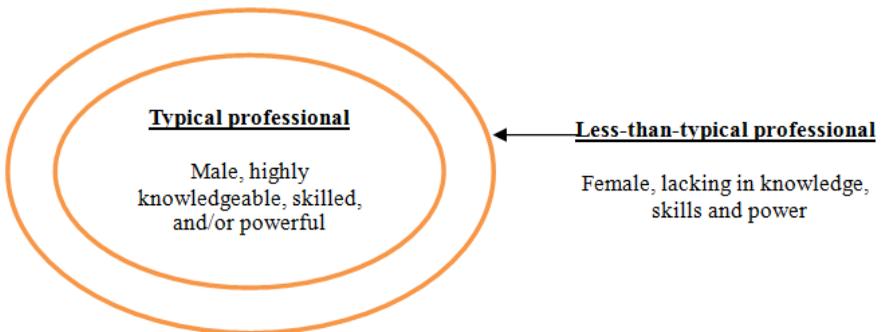
Table 3  
*The root of gender choice*

Religion	Reality	Both	No response
8%	87%	4%	1%

Only 8% of the participants related their responses to religion. On examining these participants’ responses to the first survey question, it was found that they are based on gender stereotypes. However, the fact that the majority of respondents related their views about professions and gender to reality indicates an understanding among young Saudi females that Islam supports female professionals. However, as shown above, what these females consider to be the reality is, for the most part, their real-life experience with gender stereotypes. It hardly reflects their real-life experience with professionals.

Figure (1) below depicts the associations underlying the perception of the category of professions by Saudi female university students. The associations seem to be more influenced by gender stereotypes than by the participants’ real-life experience with professionals.

Figure 1.  
*Associations underlying the perception of the category of professions by Saudi female university students*



### **Follow-up Interview Results**

From the interviews with a random sample of 26 students who volunteered to pursue the exploration of this research, it became more evident that the organization of the category of professions by the participants is basically more influenced by gender stereotypes than by the participants' real-life experience with professionals. The interviews yielded interesting results, particularly in relation to *professor*. Some 85% of the participants indicated that, having been taught by male and female professors, they prefer to be taught by male professors. However, the reasons the participants gave for their preference do not suggest that they found male professors to be more knowledgeable than female professors, but rather easier. The reasons given may be summarized as follows. While male professors covered few modules and helped female students obtain high grades, female professors showed more seriousness in teaching and testing, which students found to be a little rigid. One student argued, "*How can we dislike male instructors? They give us make up quizzes and extensions to work on our assignments.*" Another female student said, "*It is more exciting for me to take a class with a male than with a female professor. The one that I took a class with last time covered less material than his female counterpart. This made it easier for students. I told my friends about that and we took every other elective with him.*" An A (excellent) student also said, "*Our female professors are so thorough and strict; it is easier to sign up with a male than with a female.*" The most important response was given by a student who said that "*Male teachers feel that we are not going to be able to work hard or compete with their male students, so they give us less work, unlike our female teachers.*" This response is particularly important because the student did not seem to have any problem with the male instructors' low expectations of female students. This is a case where a respondent showed an understanding of a gender stereotype and accepted it as a reality. In fact, this student is one of the 39% of interviewees who believe that male "professors" are more knowledgeable than female "teachers". However, the justifications the students gave for their preference to take classes with male professors imply that they find the classes of female professors to be demanding, in the sense that they involve serious work and knowledge dissemination, but a female is

not a prototypical university professor and, in terms of knowledge or status, she simply cannot be placed on a par with male professors.

This was also implied in the responses of the remaining student interviewees (67%). Although these students did not show preference for male instructors, yet the responses they gave do not suggest that they consider male and female professors to possess an equal degree of knowledge. These students simply mentioned that they prefer to take classes with female professors because they can see them in person, and not via television circuits, which is the case when male instructors teach females (and sometimes when there are male students taught at the same time). This is certainly a better teaching/learning environment. However, what the students said is merely an evaluation of a situation caused by gender segregation (i.e. teaching via television circuits). That is, their preference to be taught by female professors is not based on their appreciation or recognition of female professors' knowledge.

The above-mentioned results are consistent with the interviewees' perception of the other professionals they were asked about; namely, *physician* and *chef*. Surprisingly, although the majority of the participants associated medical and cooking professions with the female gender in the survey, the interview responses suggest that they consider the male practitioners of these professions to be more skilled than the female. For *physician*, 100% of the 26 participants expressed opinions that may be summarized by the following statements: "*I prefer to be seen by a male physician for important health problems*" and "*If the problem is surgical, I would expect to be operated on by a male surgeon*". When asked to explain the reasons, 12% of the participants could not provide an explanation. However, 88% said frankly that male physicians are better than female physicians. Some of those who expect surgical problems to be dealt with by male surgeons (39% out of 60%) further explained that "*surgeons tend to be males*" or that "*there can be no female surgeons*". These responses indicate that the participants perceive female physicians to be only capable of carrying out simple tasks, like those expected from a general practitioner or a midwife. More difficult tasks are expected to be performed by male physicians. Similarly, responses related to *chef* indicate that the majority of the participants (82%) perceive male chefs to be more skilled than female chefs. However, no mistrust was exhibited regarding the cooking skills of

female chefs. None of the participants, for example, showed preference for a cooking show or book based on the gender of the chef. However, *chef* as a profession is not of the same status as *physician* or any other profession that requires a high educational level. This explains the reason why the participants showed a lesser degree of mistrust regarding the skills of the female chef as compared to those of the male chef. Answers to the question about women in leadership positions run in the same vein, in the sense that they reflect the participants' perception of female leadership positions as subordinate. The participants first showed a positive or negative attitude towards the female leaders in their universities, but then explained that they prefer to solve their problems through their male counterparts because there are many issues that female leaders cannot resolve. Although this is drawn from reality, the data obtained from the interviews, like those obtained from the survey, are consistent with the observation that the organization of the category of professions is more influenced by gender stereotypes than by the participants' real-life experience with professionals.

### **Discussion**

The above study demonstrated that gender stereotyping has a strong influence on gendered notions of professions, even among Saudi women who most often interact in their lives with female professionals. The subjects associated higher status (or skilled) professions with males and lower status professions with females. An important observation made from the study relates to the question of consciousness. The participants may be divided into two groups: those who failed to explain the reasons behind their gendered notions of professions and those who tried to articulate their understanding and acceptance of these notions. Put differently, knowledge of gender stereotypes appeared in two forms: *practical* (unconscious) and *discursive* (i.e., propositional, conscious). However, those who demonstrated discursive knowledge of gender stereotypes accepted them as a reality without giving clear reasons or talking about real-life experiences to justify their notions. This is a type of social knowledge that Vaisey & Frye describe in their working paper *The old one-two: Preserving analytical dualism in psychological sociology* as 'social knowledge that is formed as practical knowledge but that its holders attempt to articulate

discursively.’ As for the acceptance of gender stereotypes on the part of the female participants, it may be viewed from the perspective of West & Zimmerman’s (1987) work on “performative gender”. From this perspective, an individual’s performance of gender is expected to construct gendered behavior as naturally occurring, meeting gendered societal expectations.

### **Conclusion**

How female university students perceive the category of professions in Saudi society was the focus of the present study. The results of the survey and follow-up interview administered to female students at two Saudi universities showed that experience with gender stereotypes is more effective than any other kind of experience in the radial organization of the category of professions as professions can carry evaluative associations. It has been demonstrated that although women mostly deal with female professionals in all aspects of their lives (such as in schools, universities, and banks), they still associate higher status jobs and professions with males rather than females. It has also been demonstrated that gender stereotypes are part of social rather than religious cognition – Islam does not discriminate between males and females as professionals. In addition, the discussion touched on important issues related to the understanding and acceptance of gender stereotypes on the part of the female participants.

However, the study has limitations. For example, it dealt with gender stereotyping as a social problem without bringing into focus any scientific explanation for the problem. In addition, the study did not look into young males’ perceptions and feedback on the same professions. Further research may look into these points, allowing a comparison to be drawn between our study and a study of male responses to questions about gender and professions.

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## Appendices

### Appendix (1)

#### Survey Questions for Profession, Gender, and Language

1. Write *she* or *he* or both he and she next to each profession. Use the gender you think of when you first hear the word.
  - i. Teacher .....
  - ii. Nurse .....
  - iii. Doctor .....

- iv. Receptionist .....
  - v. Teller .....
  - vi. Cook .....
  - vii. Expert .....
  - viii. Scientist .....
  - ix. Writer .....
  - x. Department head .....
  - xi. Professor .....
  - xii. Cleaner .....
  - xiii. Security guard .....
  - xiv. Supervisor .....
  - xv. Physicians .....
2. Does your gender choice in relation to the above professions have a basis in
- i. Religion
  - ii. Reality
  - iii. Both

#### Appendix (2)

##### Interview questions for Profession, Gender, and Language

- 1. Would you register for a course offered by male or female professor?
- 2. Why?
- 3. Do you encourage your friends to take courses given by male or female instructors?
- 4. Why?
- 5. Do you tend to value male or female instructor?
- 6. Why?
- 7. Do you think that there is more value associated to male or female knowledge?
- 8. Why?
- 9. Do you consider male professors to be more knowledgeable than female professors?
- 10. How about female physicians? Are they different from male physicians in terms of knowledge and skills?
- 11. How about male and female chefs? Are they different or similar in terms of cooking skills?

12. What do you think of women in leadership positions?

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