

Experiential Learning Enters the Eighties, Volume 7, 1980

THE MANAGER'S DILEMMA: AN UNOBTUSIVE MEASURE OF THE MANAGERIAL SEX-ROLE STEREOTYPE

Claude L. Graeff, Illinois State University

ABSTRACT

This paper reports the development of an unobtrusive measure of the sex-role stereotypic attitude associated with the organization position of manager. It further reports some preliminary findings resulting from the administration of the instrument to three large sections of an undergraduate business class containing both male and female students. The paper also considers some additional research conducted in order to eliminate a "social-links" explanation for the data observed. The utility of the instrument as a pedagogical tool and as a research or diagnostic instrument is considered, and some implications of the preliminary findings are noted.

INTRODUCTION

Most texts on organization behavior [e.g., Hellriegel and Slocum (13), Hamner and Organ (12), Luthans (15)], and some management texts [6, 17] contain chapters or sections dealing with individual differences like personality, perception, attitudes, and values. These same texts frequently note the close relationships among these variables, especially personality and perception, as they impact on the behaviors of organization participants. A frequently discussed perceptual phenomenon that affects the behaviors of organization members is the stereotype. And while it is relatively easy to identify stereotypes "hippies" or "hells angels" and the general effects of stereotypic attitudes on behavior, there has been little work devoted to the development of procedures or methods for explicitly measuring specific stereotypes or their effects.

A stereotype that has generated considerable interest in the business world over the past decade pertains to the concept of a businessperson, and more specifically the notion of a manager as essentially a male role. Presumably the effects of such stereotypic attitudes are reflected in both access and treatment discrimination against female employees [14].

During the same decade, two other relevant and related social phenomena have occurred. One, an enormous growth in the female labor force participation rate has intensified the managerial sex-role controversy and provided impetus for enactment of a 1972 Equal Opportunity Enforcement Amendment to the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Second, a substantial increase in the number of females pursuing degrees in Business Administration has been observed [22]. Consequently, an exercise designed to demonstrate not only the existence of a managerial stereotype, but also the subtleties involved when managerial sex-role stereotypes are evoked would be very useful in both classroom and research settings. As an experiential exercise, the instrument would have to meet the criteria of brevity and simplicity while simultaneously achieving both involvement and effect [5].

This paper reports the development of an unobtrusive measure of the sex-role stereotypic attitude related to the managerial position. It reports some preliminary findings resulting from administering the instrument to three large sections of an undergraduate

business course containing both female and male students. The paper also considers additional research conducted in order to eliminate a "social-links" explanation for the data observed. Finally, the utility of the exercise as a pedagogical tool and as a research or diagnostic instrument is considered, and some implications of the preliminary findings are noted.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE EXERCISE

A review of the literature pertaining to stereotypes, and especially the area of managerial sex-role stereotypes, reveals very few instruments or exercises specifically designed to measure or illustrate such attitudes. One exception is the WARS: Women as Managers Scale [21]; however, the transparent nature of many of the scale items leaves open the question of a social desirability influence on subject responses. That is, subjects can easily perceive the intent of the instrument and may be reluctant to violate the norm of equalitarianism by reporting females as inferior for managerial roles. Because of socially sensitive issues (women's rights, equality) associated with sex-role stereotypes, and the idealistic nature of college students, it was decided that an unobtrusive measure of the managerial sex-role stereotype was needed.

To these ends, a three paragraph managerial incident was written that required the subject or exercise participant to role play the position of a recent MBA graduate who is an administrative assistant to the president of the firm. The participant's task is to reply to a non-gender-specific friend who has applied for a managerial position that has been described in the exercise in such a way as to be as sex-role neutral as possible. The proportion of subjects or exercise participants responding to a male, as opposed to a female, friend in the following exercise is taken to be an unobtrusive measure of the existence of a managerial sex-role stereotype.

The Manager's Dilemma

Upon receiving your MBA degree at the University of Illinois about five years ago, you joined the Canuk Corporation as a management trainee. After a lot of effort you are now an administrative assistant to the president of the firm, a title you have held for nearly a year. Although your track record concerning personnel decisions is a little lean, the company president increasingly trusts your judgment. However, with prior experience as a personnel manager, the president still likes to interview applicants for positions that carry managerial responsibilities. Nevertheless, the president insists that you screen candidates forwarded from the office of the personnel manager. Currently the search is for a candidate for the second slot in public relations. The person hired will edit the company magazine, sent quarterly to stockholders as well as employees, and the company newsletter.

The morning's mail brings you a letter from an old college friend who has heard that Canuk Corporation is looking for a writer/editor. You have seen your friend

Experiential Learning Enters the Eighties, Volume 7, 1980

only occasionally since graduation and the last time you met, your friend's attire was not really appropriate for the norms of your organization. Today's letter is written on the stationery of a metropolitan newspaper.

Decide how to answer your friend. You supply your friend's name and other details you think you need. You may refuse the request to intercede or set up an appointment and make some suggestions about dress and demeanor. Be sure to sign your own name so that feedback can be provided.

It is very important to control for the potentially harmful effects of situational variables on the saliency of stereotypes [9, 6]. Accordingly, all actors in the above exercise were referred to in nongender fashion, that is, specific reference was made to the firm's president, search for a candidate, you (the subject) and an old college friend.

Perhaps most potentially problematic for evoking a perceptual set of the position as one most appropriate for a male role incumbent is the position description of the job for which the friend was applying. It seemed that the position should be "neutral" [1] in the sense that it was not sex-typed [7, 8] or traditionally identified as a female-or-male only position. If anything, the position description should favor a female orientation in order to subject the research question to its most rigorous tests

The behavioral content and amount of authority reflected in the position description, in paragraph one of the exercise, were selected on the basis of empirical evidence and authoritative comments in literature dealing with the status of women in the work force. McNally [16] reported that fast growing occupations for women included public relations and publicity, and personnel and labor relations. Women constituted 46% of the editors and reporters, and 33% of the individuals employed in personnel and labor relations in 1966 [16]. Elsewhere, Bowman [2] suggested that equal opportunity existed for both sexes in acquiring managerial positions in personnel, and Waldman and McEaddy [23] report that in 1973, 50 percent of the persons employed in the printing and publishing of periodicals were women. Finally, Cohen and Bunker [4] had twenty male advanced undergraduate students in industrial psychology indicate for which sex the job of "editorial assistant" was more appropriate. Their finding that 14 males (70%) perceived the job as female appropriate supports their contention that the job connotes a female orientation.

The second-slot authority level in the organization hierarchy was deliberately chosen to avoid evoking a mental image for the subject of the male-top-dog stereotype, while still implying that the job may have contained managerial status and responsibility. It is a widely accepted norm [18, 24] that women should not be in authority positions over men of similar social standing and age. Since males report being uncomfortable with a female boss [2, 10], women are usually supervised by male managers [3], even in occupations otherwise dominated by women [11].

In order to avoid evoking a sex-characteristic stereotype leading to the perception of the friend as a male, extreme caution was taken to describe the friend in very nondescript terms. Reference was made to the friend's work history and attire; it was hoped this description might fit a male or the contemporary female role model Billie Neuman [19], the aggressive female reporter on the Lou Grant show.

RESEARCH RESULTS

The Manager's Dilemma was administered to subjects in three sections of an undergraduate, introductory management course at a large university. For the combined N of 602, the distribution of female and male students across the three sections was 58,41, and 231 males and 47,38, and 187 females respectively. Since many of the students were not only business students, but officially enrolled in a management curriculum, the likelihood of female students possessing managerial or business-person sex-role stereotypes should be minimized.

Subjects voluntarily participated in the study after they were told that the exercise was designed to assess their knowledge of management problems and, therefore, provide data useful for planning the course content. All subjects were given a one page description of the Manager's Dilemma during the first class session of the semester and asked to develop a short, one or two paragraph response to their "friend." After the subjects completed the assigned task, usually in about 15-25 minutes, they were debriefed and told the true nature of the exercise. They seemed to easily appreciate the need for the minor deception employed in the exercise and only two students indicated any pretask suspicion concerning the true nature of the exercise.

The number and percentage of male and female undergraduate business students who responded to a "male" as opposed to "female" friend in the Manager's Dilemma job-situation exercise was remarkably similar. Male business students overwhelmingly (by a 313:1 ratio) responded by evoking a perceptual image of a business-person as that of a male. In contrast to the single male who responded to a female friend, 44 out of 272 female subjects replied to a female friend. Still, 221 (over 80%) of the female subjects responded by writing to a male friend. Apparently, when confronted with the seemingly unobtrusive task of responding to an old friend in search of employment, women also evoked a male image of a businessperson.

These results might be interpreted via a social links" explanation, that is, it may be that both females and males have more male than female friends while in college. In order to eliminate the "social links" explanation for the data observed, research was conducted in three additional undergraduate business courses. A total of 190 (116 male and 74 female) students were asked to list on a sheet of paper the name of their "best" friend and the names of four other friends, ostensibly as participants in a study of names by the sociologist conducting the research.

After writing the names of five friends and their own first name on a piece of paper, the subjects were asked to indicate the sex of each friend and their own sex by placing either an F or M by each name, indicating whether that person was a male or female. The subjects were then debriefed and told why the data was being collected.

The results of the social connections research were both interesting and intuitively what one might have expected. For the female respondents, 60 of the 74 subjects listed no males, or only one male, friend(s) among the five names provided. In contrast, the male respondents (116) listed an overwhelming majority of their friends (84%) as males. These findings strongly substantiate the conclusion that the Manager's Dilemma exercise does elicit a sex-role stereotypic response.

Experiential Learning Enters the Eighties, Volume 7, 1980

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The most important finding to emerge from this exploratory investigation of occupational sex-role stereotypes in undergraduate business students is the substantial number of females who apparently see managerial work as a role more appropriate for males than for females. It reflects the substantial utility that can be derived from employing the Manager's Dilemma exercise as a research tool. This is in sharp contrast to the capacity of the exercise to demonstrate, in a pedagogical sense, the subtle existence or influences of stereotypic attitudes. Obviously, the exercise would have additional utility as a diagnostic tool for assessing certain aspects of the attitudinal climate of work organizations.

There are several implications of this search that are enumerated below.

1. Stereotypic attitudes on the part of females may contribute to indirect participation in the discrimination process, that is, they may "play along."
2. Given the important role of higher education in the anticipatory socialization of potential managers, this research suggests a review of the conduct and pedagogy of most collegiate schools of business might be worthwhile.
3. Social scientists may need conceptual elaboration of the sex-role stereotypic term "chauvinist pig" that is often used in reference to males, hence, the term "male chauvinist pig." It may be more appropriate to identify "chauvinist hogs" and further, to conceptually dichotomize the group into "chauvinist sows" and "chauvinist boars."

REFERENCES

- [1] Avery, R.D., Passiono, E.M., and Loundsbury, J.W. "Job Analysis Results as Influenced by Sex of Incumbent and Sex of Analyst," Journal of Applied Psychology, Vol. 62, 1977, pp. 411-416.
- [2] Bowman, C., Wortney, B.N., and Greyser, S.H. "Are Women Executives People?" Harvard Business Review, Vol. 43, 1965, pp. 14-28; 164-178.
- [3] Caplow, T. The Sociology of Work (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1954).
- [4] Cohen, S.L. and Bunker, K.A. "Subtle Effects of Sex Role Stereotypes on Recruiters' Hiring Decisions," Journal of Applied Psychology, Vol. 60, 1975, pp. 566-572.
- [5] Dittrich, J.E. "The Picnic: A Perceptual Errors Exercise," Proceedings: Sixth Annual Conference of the Association for Business Simulation and Experiential Learning, 1979.
- [6] Duncan, W.J. Essentials of Management (Hinsdale: The Dryden Press, 1975).
- [7] Epstein, C.F. "Encountering the Male Establishment: Sex Status Limits on Women's Careers in the Professions," American Journal of Sociology, Vol. 75, 1970, pp. 965-997.
- [8] Feather, N.T. "Positive and Negative Reactions to Male and Female Success and Failure in Relation to the Perceived Status and Sex-typed Appropriateness of Occupations," Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, Vol. 31, 1975, pp. 536-548.
- [9] Gerber, C.L. and Balkin, J. "Sex-role Stereotypes as a Function of Marital Status and Role," The Journal of Psychology, Vol. 95, 1977, pp. 9-16.
- [10] Gilmer, B. Industrial Psychology (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961).
- [11] Grim, J.W. and Stern, R.N. "Sex Roles and Internal Labor Market Structures: The Female Semi-professions," Journal of Social Problems, Vol. 21, pp. 690-705.
- [12] Hamner, W.C. and Organ, D.W. Organization Behavior: An Applied Psychological Approach (Dallas: Business Publications, Inc., 1978).
- [13] Hellriegel, D. and Slocum, J.W. Organization Behavior (New York: West Publishing Co., 1979).
- [14] Levitin, T., Quinn, R.P., and Staines, C.L. "Sex Discrimination Against the American Working Woman," American Behavioral Scientist, Vol. 15, 1971, pp. 238-254.
- [15] Luthans, F. Organization Behavior (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1977).
- [16] McNally, G.B. "Patterns of Female Labor Force Activity," Industrial Relations, Vol. 7, 1968, pp. 204-219.
- [17] Misshauk, M.J. Management: Theory and Practice (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1979).
- [18] O'Leary, V.E. "Some Attitudinal Barriers to Occupational Aspirations in Women," Psychological Bulletin, Vol. 81, 1974, pp. 809-826.
- [19] Ray, L. "Billie Neuman: TV's New Hero, A Prototype of the Emerging Woman," Stillwater News Press, Stillwater, Oklahoma, February 7, p. 14.
- [20] Terborg, J.R. "Women in Management: A Research Review," Journal of Applied Psychology, Vol. 62, 1977, pp. 647-664.
- [21] Terborg, J.R., Peters, H.L., Ilgen, D.R., and Smith, F. "Organizational and Personal Correlates of Attitudes Toward Women as Managers," Academy of Management Journal, Vol. 20, 1977, pp. 81-100.
- [22] Turner, R.C. "Enrollment Prospects for Collegiate Schools of Business," Business Horizons, Vol. 10, 1976, pp. 55-64.
- [23] Waldman, E. and McEaddy, B.J. "Where Women Work - An Analysis by Industry and Occupation," Monthly Labor Review, May, 1974, pp. 3-13.
- [24] Wilensky, H.L. "Women's Work: Economic Growth, Ideology, Structure," Industrial Relations, Vol. 7, 1968, pp. 235-248.