

Insights into Experiential Pedagogy, Volume 6, 1979

EFFECTS OF SEX-ROLE STEREOTYPES ON PROMOTION DECISIONS: AN EXERCISE

Thomas L. Ruble, Indiana University

ABSTRACT

An exercise was developed to identify some of the dimensions of sex-role stereotypes and their possible effects on the assessment of promotion potential. The exercise has been used in the classroom and in a conference setting. When used in the classroom, students tended to recommend the promotion of men over women. In contrast, participants in a conference on women in management recommended women for promotion over men. However, in both settings, candidates with "masculine" characteristics were recommended over candidates with "feminine" characteristics. It was concluded that sex-role stereotypes operate on at least two levels and have implications for both men and women.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years we have seen an increasing concern with the problems of bringing women into management. For example, in 1974, the Graduate School of Business at Stanford University sponsored a conference on "Women in Management" [5]. Among the conclusions that emerged from the conference was the recognition that misconceptions about women's capabilities as managers constituted a major barrier to their entry into the profession.

Five years later, we would hope that the barriers have eased. Indeed, I'm sure that the situation has improved. However, it seems that significant barriers may persist. Traditional, deep-rooted stereotypes of the "proper" roles for men and women are difficult to erase in a few years time.

This paper is concerned with increasing one's awareness of the existence and effects of sex-role stereotypes. An exercise, based on recent psychological research, was designed to highlight the possible effects of sex-role stereotypes on promotion decisions.

Background: Research on Sex-Role Stereotypes

In the study of sex-role stereotypes, two rather distinct lines of research can be discerned. One line of research has focused on the possible effects of sex and sex-role stereotypes in a variety of employment decisions [3, 4, 7, 8, 9, 13]. Another line of research has focused on perceptions of sex-role stereotypes in terms of the characteristics considered to be typical of men, women, and effective managers [6, 10, 11].

In general, research on the effects of sex and sex-role stereotypes has indicated that biases against women seem to exist at many stages in the employment process (see [12] for a review of this research). For example, the studies by Rosen and Jerdee [7, 8, 9] found rather consistent biases against women in hiring decisions, assignments to demanding jobs, promotions to managerial positions, and selection for participation in supervisory training.

Despite the relatively consistent evidence of bias against women, some qualifications have been expressed about the findings. For example, Terborg and Ilgen [13] concluded that sex-role

stereotypes may have less influence on discrimination than suggested by previous research. Although they found some evidence of discrimination against women, their study also found no discrimination in a number of decisions relevant to the employment process (e.g., evaluation of performance and ratings of promotability).

Do these recent results suggest that changes in sex-role stereotypes are beginning to emerge? Certainly changes are occurring. However, one should be cautious in drawing conclusions from studies which fail to find significant differences. For example, the lack of differences in recent studies may simply indicate that subjects and managers are less likely to express their biases overtly. If such is the case, we need to explore more subtle expressions of sex-role stereotypes.

Research on perceptions of sex-role stereotypes and "requisite" management characteristics seems to deal with a more subtle form of bias. This line of research suggests that it is not simply one's sex alone that is used to infer management potential but, also, possession of the proper (masculine) characteristics. Research by Schein [10, 11] found that both male and female middle managers tended to perceive successful managers in predominantly masculine terms. Powell and Butterfield [6] found that both male and female business students considered the effective manager as predominantly masculine. Thus, it appears that both men and women must possess those characteristics considered to be typical of males in order to be considered as a potential success in management.

The exercise and research presented in this paper represents an attempt to combine the two lines of research on sex-role stereotypes. The research consists of two studies. Study 1 is based on the use of the exercise as a learning experience for courses in organizational behavior. The classroom setting provided a relatively "neutral" context for collecting data on sex-role stereotypes as issues of sexism or biases against women had not been mentioned as concerns of the course. In contrast, Study 2 is based on data collected as part of a conference focusing on the role of women in management. The sample in Study 2 was aware that the exercise dealt with issues of sexism and bias against women.

The Exercise: A Case of Promotion

The introduction to the exercise indicated that a firm had started a new division, creating three possible openings for middle managers. Eight candidates were presented and the subjects were asked to rank the candidates in terms of potential for success as a middle manager. All eight candidates were described as having "very good" performance records as lower managers. Two different forms were used to present the candidates. On each form, the eight candidates were presented in an order alternating males and females (Form 1) or females and males (Form 2). The descriptions of the candidates were identical on the two forms. The descriptions were as follows:

- A. Joe (Joanne) Block--age 34; not married; ambitious; willing to take risks; has a strong personality.
- B. Karen (Ken) Davis--age 33; married; spouse recently disabled and unable to work; one child; conscientious; sincere; friendly.

Insights into Experiential Pedagogy, Volume 6, 1979

- C. Dan (Diane) Gray--age 38; married; 3 children; sensitive to the needs of others; eager to sooth hurt feelings; soft-spoken.
- D. Carol (Carl) Jackson--age 29; not married; able to understand the structure of the organization and use it effectively; able to delegate authority effectively.
- E. Mark (Mary) Jones--age 35; married; no children; loyal; understanding; cheerful.
- F. Barbara (Bob) Lang--age 30; married; one child; able to change decisions if they turn out wrong (will change mind if necessary); keeps subordinates fully informed.
- C. Steve (Sue) Smith--age 37; married; 2 children; analytical; makes decisions easily; self-sufficient.
- H. Theresa (Tom) Winters--age 34; divorced 5 years ago; 2 children; reliable; adaptable; friendly.

The Bern Sex-Role Inventory (BSRI) [1] provided the source of the characteristics used to describe six of the eight candidates. The BSRI consists of 20 masculine personality characteristics, 20 feminine characteristics, and 20 neutral (non sex-typed) characteristics. The exercise was originally designed to present two candidates with male characteristics (A and C), two with female characteristics (C and E), and two with neutral characteristics (B and H). Subsequent research (available from the author) indicated that five of the six descriptions did reflect the sex-typing suggested by Bern but candidate B's characteristics were rated as more typical of females than males. Thus, it seems appropriate to consider that candidate B represents female characteristics rather than neutral characteristics. The remaining two candidates (D and F) were described with characteristics adapted from an exercise on managerial leadership. Previous experience with the leadership exercise indicated that students considered these characteristics as important for managers. Finally, information on age, marital status, and dependents was included to reduce the salience of one's sex and sex-typed characteristics. It seemed that if the sex and sex-typed characteristics became too visible, it would signal that sex biases were being measured.

STUDY 1: CLASSROOM SETTING

The exercise was conducted in five different OR classes. A total of 211 students completed the forms (152 undergraduates and 59 graduate students). Approximately half the students completed Form 1 and half completed Form 2. Two of the undergraduate classes (n=125) completed the form during the first week of the semester. The remaining students were presented with the exercise about six to eight weeks into the semester. No purpose was given for the exercise other than to consider candidates for promotion. In some cases the individual rankings were followed up with (lively) group ranking sessions.

Results

The mean rankings of the candidates are presented in Table 1. For each candidate, having a male name resulted in a better ranking than having a female name. For five of the eight candidates, the difference favoring males was significant ($p < .005$ in all cases). Thus, for this sample, it appears that sex did make a difference with males being considered more promotable than females. However, a notable exception to the sex bias was

candidate D who was ranked first as a male (Form 2) or a female (Form 1). In some respects, candidate C might also be considered as an exception to sex bias, placing in the top three as a male or female. If, as the instructions suggested, three openings were available, C also would have been promoted regardless of sex. However, G's position was a solid second as a male and a marginal third as a female. Moreover, if three openings had been available, the bias toward males would have been pivotal for candidates A and F. Candidate F placed second as a male (Form 2) but fourth as a female (Form 1). Candidate A placed third as a male (Form 1) but

TABLE 1
MEAN RANKINGS OF CANDIDATES IN STUDY 1

Candidate	Form 1 ^a (n = 101)	Form 2 (n = 110)	t	1 + 2 (n = 211)
A	3.53 (m)	3.68 (f)	.56	3.61
B	6.01 (f)	5.29 (m)	2.93*	5.64
C	5.85 (m)	6.95 (f)	4.80**	6.43
D	2.07 (f)	1.82 (m)	1.37	1.94
E	5.91 (m)	6.24 (f)	1.49	6.08
F	4.20 (f)	3.15 (m)	3.87**	3.05
G	2.41 (m)	3.49 (f)	5.32**	2.97
H	6.01 (f)	5.30 (m)	3.69**	5.64

Note. Lower scores indicate better ranking (1 = top ranked)

^aSex of candidate (m or f) is indicated in parentheses

* $p < .005$

** $p < .001$

fourth as a female (Form 2).

In order to examine the effects of the characteristics independent of the candidates' sex, the rankings for each candidate were aggregated across the two forms. The results indicate that four of the eight candidates can be classified as "high-potential" for middle management and four as having "low-potential" for management. Two of the high-potential candidates, D and F, were described with "leadership" characteristics. The other two candidates with high-potential, A and C, were described with male characteristics. The four candidates with low-potential are B, C, and E (female characteristics) and H (neutral characteristics). Comparisons of the mean rankings of A and C with the mean rankings of B, C, and E yielded significant differences with $t(210) > 9.70$, $p < .001$ in all cases. Thus, candidates with male characteristics were considered more promotable than candidates with female characteristics.

A comparison of male versus female subjects found no significant differences in rankings. Thus, the biases against women and female characteristics seem to exist for both men and women raters.

STUDY 2: CONFERENCE SETTING

Study 2 involved the use of the promotion exercise with a group aware of the basic purpose of the exercise. The sample was comprised of 47 participants in a conference on women in newspaper management held at a midwestern university. The sample was composed of 29 women and 18 men holding managerial and professional positions in the newspaper industry. A few participants held academic positions in schools of journalism and related fields.

Insights into Experiential Pedagogy, Volume 6, 1979

Procedure

The promotion exercise described in Study 1 was mailed to approximately seventy individuals in advance of the conference. Prior to receiving the promotion exercise, the subjects had been informed of the nature of the conference and had agreed to attend. They were aware that the conference planned to cover such topics as equal employment opportunity law and problems associated with moving women into management. In addition, a cover letter mailed with the exercise indicated that the exercise and another questionnaire included in the mailing were designed to offer the participants a chance to examine their own attitudes.

Results

The mean rankings of the candidates are presented in Table 2. Regarding the effect of male versus female names, the results are clearly different than the results of Study 1. For five of the eight candidates, female names were associated with better rankings than male names. Although only two of these differences were significant ($p < .05$), the possibility of "reverse" discrimination is suggested by the pattern of results. As in Study 1, four of the candidates can be considered "high-potential" candidates (A, D, F, and C) while four appear to be "low-potential" candidates. For the four high-potential candidates, the average difference favoring females was .74, or approximately 3/4 of a rank. Overall, the average difference favoring females was only .26, indicating that the bias toward female names was strongest where it would probably count most, differentiating among those candidates

TABLE 2
MEAN RANKINGS OF CANDIDATES IN STUDY 2

Candidate	Form 1 ^a (n = 22)	Form 2 (n = 25)	t	1 + 2 (n = 47)
A	4.41 (m)	2.76 (f)	3.55**	3.53
B	6.32 (f)	6.08 (m)	.71	6.19
C	6.18 (m)	6.32 (f)	.28	6.26
D	1.36 (f)	2.08 (m)	2.22*	1.74
E	6.09 (m)	6.72 (f)	1.57	6.43
F	3.18 (f)	3.72 (m)	1.16	3.47
G	2.41 (m)	2.36 (f)	.14	2.38
H	5.91 (f)	6.04 (m)	.41	5.98

Note. Lower scores indicate better ranking
(1 = top ranked)

^aSex of candidate (m or f) is indicated in parentheses

* $p < .05$

** $p < .001$

actually in contention for the promotions.

As in Study 1, candidates D and C seemed to be a least partial exceptions to the sex bias in that they would have been promoted regardless of sex if three openings had been available. Also as in Study 1, candidates A and F seemed to make the top three as a consequence of their designated sex. However, in contrast to Study 1, in Study 2 they made the top three as a result of having a female name rather than a male name.

When the candidate's sex was controlled by aggregating the data across forms, the pattern of results was the same as that obtained in Study 1: A and C (male characteristics) were ranked as significantly more promotable than B, C, and E (female characteristics) with $t(46) > 6.65$, $p < .001$ for all comparisons. Also as in Study 1, both male and female raters seemed to express similar biases in evaluating the candidates.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS

The major finding of the present research is that sex-role stereotypes seem to operate at two different levels. At one level, one's sex provides a rather overt cue for evoking stereotypes. At the other level, a more subtle form of sex-role stereotyping emerges from a pattern of beliefs regarding the characteristics that are typical of males and females. The similarities and differences in results from Studies 1 and 2 highlight the value of distinguishing between biases based on sex and biases based on personal characteristics. In general, Study 1 found a bias toward men while Study 2 seemed to indicate a bias toward women (at least among candidates with high potential for management). In contrast, a strong and consistent bias favoring male characteristics over female characteristics was found in both Studies 1 and 2.

DISCUSSION

The exercise is usually conducted in a manner to provide "survey feedback" to the participants. If the class or group of participants is large (over 30), it is useful to collect the data in advance of the presentation to allow time to compile the results. In smaller classes, the forms can be completed by individuals, turned in to the instructor, and quickly compiled while the individuals assemble in groups to reach a group consensus. Group discussions are often lively and reveal some of the stereotypes held by various individuals. Then, the posting of results provides a basis for discussing the issues raised by either the data or the group discussion. For example, a consideration of the bias favoring male characteristics in managers suggests that this form of stereotyping has important implications for men as well as women. The issue concerns the extent to which both men and women must live up to the masculine image of managers. For men, the problem involves what Bem [2] has called the "tight-pants" model of humanity. This model suggests that adherence to rigid roles limits the full expression of human characteristics. As Bem [2] has suggested, the result may be that males experience reduced effectiveness in situations requiring a wide range of behaviors (i.e., both masculine and feminine behaviors). For women, the preference for male characteristics in managers involves the problem of meeting expectations that she remain "feminine" in a "masculine" world.

REFERENCES

- [1] Bem, S. L. "The Measurement of Psychological Androgyny," *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 1974, pp. 155-162.
- [2] Bem, S. L. "Fluffy Women and Chesty Men," *Psychology Today*, September 1975, pp. 48-59; 61-62.
- [3] 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.
- [4] Dipboye, R. L., H. L. Fromkin, and K. Wiback, "Relative Importance of Applicant Sex, Attractiveness, and Scholastic Standing in Evaluation of Job Applicant Resumes," *Journal of Applied Psychology*, Vol. 60, 1975, pp. 39-43.
- [5] Cordon, F. E. and M. H. Strober, *Bringing Women into Management* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1975).

Insights into Experiential Pedagogy, Volume 6, 1979

- [6] Powell, G. P. and D. A. Butterfield, "Sex, Sex- Role Identification, and the Good Manager," paper presented at the meeting of the Academy of Management, Kissimmee, Florida, August 1977.
- [7] Rosen, B. and T. H. Jerdee, "Effects of Applicant's Sex and Difficulty of Job on Evaluations of Candidates for Managerial Positions," Journal of Applied Psychology, Vol. 59, 1974, pp. 511-512.
- [8] Rosen, B. and T. H. Jerdee, "Influence of Sex Role Stereotypes on Personnel Decisions," Journal of Applied Psychology, Vol. 59, 1974, pp. 9-14.
- [9] Rosen, B. and T. H. Jerdee, "Sex Stereotyping in the Executive Suite," Harvard Business Review, Vol. 52(2), 1974, pp. 45-58.
- [10] Schein, V. E. "The Relationship Between Sex Role Stereotypes and Requisite Management Characteristics," Journal of Applied Psychology, Vol. 57, 1973, pp. 95-100.
- [11] Schein, V. E. "Relationships Between Sex Role Stereotypes and Requisite Management Characteristics Among Female Managers," Journal of Applied Psychology, Vol. 60, 1975, pp. 340-344.
- [12] Terborg, J. R. "Women in Management: A Research Review," Journal of Applied Psychology, Vol. 62, 1977, 647-664.
- [13] Terborg, J. R. and D. R. Ilgen, "A Theoretical Approach to Sex Discrimination in Traditional Masculine Occupations," Organizational Behavior and Human Performance, Vol. 13, 1975, pp. 352-376.