

ATTRIBUTIONS ABOUT MALE AND FEMALE LEADERS IN ORGANIZATIONS

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The leadership effectiveness of managers depends on whether their subordinates attribute leader-like qualities to them, which in turn depends on the sex-role stereotypes held by the subordinates and the amount of information that they know about the managers. This study found that, although men in general view female managers as less effective than male managers, when presented with information about the managers, they evaluate them on the basis of their personal characteristics and performance, not their gender.

By the year 2000, one in every two employees in the United States will be female (National Commission on Working Women of Wider Opportunities for Women, 1992). Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the federal legislation prohibiting sex discrimination in employment and promotion action, and the actions of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission have resulted in a steady increase in the number of women in managerial positions (Powell & Butterfield, 1982).

The purpose of the present research was to investigate the attribution process toward male and female leaders in organizations. Attribution theory states that, in order to understand what is happening to and around them, people develop their own internal "theories" of behavior. Lord (1985) believed that people make summary judgments about what is suitable for leadership. These summary judgments are based on the observation of prototypical attributes, or they identify a leader from a label or other available cues. When leadership schema are created, they influence perceptions of the target person's traits and behaviors. This schema also leads to attributions of causality and responsibility for the group's performance. Thus, the attribution views in leadership theories emphasize that leadership effectiveness depends on whether subordinates attribute leader-like characteristics and qualities to the leader.

SEX-ROLE STEREOTYPES

To understand better the attributions made toward male and female leaders, the present research also examined how common sex-role stereotypes are in the American society. This issue cannot be ignored when one attempts to study attribution toward male and female leaders since stereotypes affect attribution. In other words, stereotypes influence perceptions of the target person's traits and behaviors.

The study of sex-role stereotypes among the adult population started in the 1970s. The general conclusion drawn from these studies was that sex-role stereotypes were very prevalent. Women were seen by both men and women as dependent, passive, fragile, non-aggressive, non-competitive, emotional, and unable to take risks. Men, in contrast, were seen as independent, aggressive, dominant, competitive, assertive, rational, confident, emotionally controlled, and courageous (Bardwick & Douvan, 1972; Massengill & DiMarco, 1979; O'Leary & Depner, 1975; Powell & Butterfield, 1979; Schein, 1973, 1975). Notice that the female sex-role stereotype was not consistent with common and accepted leadership qualities, whereas the male sex-role stereotype was (Powell & Butterfield, 1979; Schein, 1973, 1975).

In the 1980s, numerous researchers concluded from their studies that sex-role stereotypes were as prevalent then as they were

a decade earlier (Crocker & McGraw, 1984; Geis et al., 1985; Porter et al., 1983; Powell & Butterfield, 1984, 1986; Sutton & Moore, 1985). Other researchers found out that one major change did occur in that decade—a change in women's attitudes. In the 1980s, women shifted away from their traditional sex-role stereotypes of women and, as a result, became more liberal compared to their counterparts in the 1970s (Brenner, et al., 1989; Dubno, 1985; Heilman et al., 1989; Schein & Muller, in press; Schein, et al., 1989). Even though these are two contradictory findings, both indicate that men possess traditional sex-role stereotypes, which lead to negative evaluations of female leaders.

In the late 1980s, Morrison, White and Van Velsor (1987) developed the concept of a *glass ceiling* (a transparent barrier) in organizations that keeps women from rising above a certain level in the hierarchy. They concluded that the glass ceiling is a result both of prejudice and of unreasonable expectations from women.

ATTRIBUTIONS ABOUT LEADERSHIP EFFECTIVENESS

Since it is clear that sex-role stereotypes exist among all levels of employees, the next issue to be discussed is the effect that these sex-role stereotypes have on attributions about the leadership effectiveness of male and female leaders. Several studies found no differences in attribution toward male and female leaders. Day and Stogdill (1972) asked male and female civilian subordinates in the U.S. Air Force to evaluate their immediate leader and found no differences in the evaluations. The same findings were found with full-time service supervisory and non-supervisory employees of a large hospital (Bartol & Wortman, 1975) and with undergraduate students (Lee & Alvares, 1977). These findings were supported by other researchers as well (Butterfield & Powell, 1981; Stitt et al., 1983).

On the other hand, other studies found differences in attribution about leadership

effectiveness of male and female leaders. Rosen and Jerdee (1974a & b), in one of the earliest studies in the area, sampled undergraduate business students and banking supervisors attending a management course. They found out that male leaders were viewed as more effective than female leaders by both male and female subjects. They concluded that the similarity of the ratings made by subjects of both sexes provided evidence that men and women share common perceptions and expectations of appropriate behavior for male and female leaders. These perceptions and expectations influence their attributions, leading to different attributions of male and female leaders. In addition, they concluded that the similarity between the ratings of bankers and students suggested that sex-role stereotypes may be widely held. These conclusions were confirmed by other studies as well (Bartol & Butterfield, 1976; Haccoun, et al., 1978; Rosen & Jerdee, 1974b; Schein, 1973).

Another study (Forsyth et al., 1985) found that both men and women believed that task skills were more important qualities for a leader to possess than socioemotional skills and interpersonal skills. It was also found that task skills were both attributed to and claimed more frequently by men. Given these findings, Frank's findings in regard to his female sample are very important. These findings suggest that women perceive male leaders as more effective than female leaders, since they believe that female leaders do not have desirable task abilities.

Several investigators attempted to explain these inconsistencies (Deaux & Lewis, 1984; Dobbins & Platz, 1986; Jacobson & Efferty, 1974; Locksley, et al., 1980; Osborn & Vicars, 1976). They found out that male leaders were viewed as more effective than female leaders only in laboratory settings (Bartol & Butterfield, 1976; Deaux & Emsuiller, 1974; Deaux & Taynor, 1973; Haccoun et al., 1978, Rosen & Jerdee, 1974a & b; Welsh, 1979). In field settings, on the other hand, the leader's gender did

not influence his or her perceived effectiveness (Adams, 1978; Day & Stogdill, 1972; Osborn & Vicars, 1976; Petty & Bruning, 1980; Rice, et al., 1984). These investigators believed that the differences between laboratory studies and field studies have to do with artifacts of laboratory research. In the laboratory setting, cues about the situation are weak compared to cues of leader gender. This may have forced the raters to rely on their sex-role stereotypes when evaluating their leader, thus causing them to make different attributions about male and female leaders. In the field, on the other hand, raters have more information available to them about their leader, so gender becomes less salient and other variables become more important in evaluating their leaders. It seems that sex-role stereotypes are more salient in situations characterized by an absence of adequate information on which to judge the leader. However, when relevant information about the leader is present, it causes raters to minimize or to ignore the effect of their sex-role stereotypes on attributions about male and female leadership effectiveness (Deaux & Lewis, 1984; Gerber, 1988; Locksley, et al., 1980; Miller, 1987; Pratto & Bargh, 1991; Swim, et al., 1989).

PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY

Several problems exist in the majority of studies that have investigated the prevalence of sex-role stereotypes. The first major problem concerns the external validity of the results obtained in these studies. Most of these studies used one kind of sample, i.e., student population (Babladelis et al., 1983; Cann & Siegfried, 1987; Cecil et al., 1973; Crocker & McGraw, 1984; Geis et al., 1985; Lii & Wong, 1982; Porter et al., 1983; Powell & Butterfield, 1984, 1989; Schein et al., 1989), which overall is a homogeneous population comprised of relatively young, educated people with relatively little work experience. This fact limits the extent to which these results can be generalized to other populations. The first

purpose of the present study was therefore to overcome this problem by using employees as the sample, and not students. However, since only one organization was used in the present study, the sample may still be limited.

A second problem common to all previous studies is that all used only one scale to assess sex-role stereotypical attitudes. The present study, for the first time, attempted to investigate the extent to which sex-role stereotypes are held by people in the United States by using two measuring instruments: the Schein Descriptive Index and the Male-Female Relation Questionnaire. These two instruments measure sex-role attitudes from two different aspects: the Schein Descriptive Index focuses on the work domain, whereas the Male-Female Relations Questionnaire focuses on the personal domain. By using these instruments one can have a more accurate and complete estimate of the tendency of people to hold sex-role stereotypical views.

The main purpose of the present study was to investigate the effect of sex-role stereotypes on attributions about leadership effectiveness in the presence of information about the leader. In the past, most of the investigators focused only on the effect of sex-role stereotypes on the attribution process. Inconsistent results were obtained. Some researchers concluded that sex-role stereotypes affect attribution about leadership effectiveness (Adams, 1978; Bartol & Butterfield, 1976; Deaux & Emsuiller, 1974; Forsyth et al., 1985; Jacobson & Efferty, 1974; Rosen & Jerdee, 1974a & b; Schein, 1973), whereas others did not find such an effect (Bartol & Wortman, 1975; Butterfield & Powell, 1981; Day & Stogdill, 1972; Lee & Alvares, 1977; Stitt et al., 1983).

One explanation for these inconsistencies was that when no information was given about the leader, perceivers relied on their sex-role stereotypes when evaluating the target. However, when such information was available, perceivers relied on it when evaluating the target, thus minimiz-

ing the effect of sex-role stereotypes on the evaluation process (Dobbins & Platz, 1986; Jacobson & Efferty, 1974; Osborn & Vicars, 1976; Powell & Butterfield, 1982). It was suggested by numerous researchers that when there is an attempt to investigate the effect of sex-role stereotypes on attribution, situational factors should not be ignored because they might influence this effect (Deaux & Lewis, 1984; Hollander & Yoder, 1980; Locksley et al., 1980; Swim et al., 1989). There is a great need to identify those cues in the situation that are most likely to make gender salient and those situational cues that are most likely to elicit differences in attributions about males and females.

In the present research two kinds of situational cues were investigated: the leader's personal characteristics and his or her behavior. This study is the first attempt to determine the effect of sex-role stereotypes on the attribution about male and female leaders in the presence and absence of these two types of leader's information cues.

HYPOTHESES

One conclusion drawn from the literature is that in the 1980s, men still held conservative views about women, an attitude that did not change from a decade earlier. As a result, they still perceived a successful middle manager as possessing masculine characteristics. In contrast, women in the 1980s had changed their attitudes from the 1970s, holding more liberal attitudes toward women. As a result, they perceived a successful middle manager as possessing both masculine and feminine characteristics. This leads to the first two hypotheses of the present study:

1. Men will perceive successful managers as possessing characteristics that are more commonly associated with men than with women.
2. Women will perceive successful managers as possessing characteristics that are commonly associated with both men

and women.

It was also suggested in the literature that the absence of information about the leader forces raters to fill in the gap in information by relying on their sex-role stereotypes when evaluating their leader, thus resulting in different attributions of male and female leaders. It has also been suggested that when raters have more information available to them about their leaders, gender becomes less salient and other variables become more important in evaluating their leaders. These findings lead to the third hypothesis in the present study: (3) The effect of sex-role stereotypes on attributions about leadership effectiveness will depend on the availability of information about the leader. Specifically, the effect of sex-role stereotypes on attributions about leadership effectiveness will decrease when *personal characteristics* and *behavioral* information about the leader is available.

In the present research, two sets of personal characteristics information were included: positive information and negative information about the leader.

Positive Information

- finished his or undergraduate studies with honors
- received a master's degree in business
- in the last 5 years, he or she has been the top manager of the marketing division of Ring Telephone Company

Negative Information

- graduated high school with average grades
- dropped out of college in his or her junior year
- in the last 5 years, he or she has been promoted once to a first-level managerial position in the marketing division of Ring Telephone Company

In the present study, there were also two sets of leadership behavior information—positive and negative—that included infor-

mation about the leader's performance on the job. The positive information included the following behaviors: (1) holding individual and staff meetings, (2) sending memos to the staff, (3) setting specific goals for each department, (4) setting specific individual goals, and (5) developing new procedures in order to eliminate procedural confusion that had existed in the past.

The negative information included the following behaviors: (1) no personal contact with the staff (the only contact between the manager and the staff is through memos), (2) egocentricism—thinks only about his or her success, (3) demands that the staff work overtime with no compensation, and (4) does not set clear, specific goals.

METHOD

Design

The experimental design can be described as a 2 x 3 x 3 factorial design. The three independent variables were the leader's sex, personal characteristics, and behavior. The dependent variable was perceived leadership effectiveness. It was measured by using a questionnaire consisting of nine questions about leadership effectiveness (from Bartol & Butterfield, 1976 and Butterfield & Powell, 1981). A composite score (of the first eight questions) was taken and used to represent the perceived leadership effectiveness of each subject. The ninth question (an open-ended question) was used in order to understand better the rationale for the first eight answers.

Subjects

Participants in this study were 184 employees (70 males and 109 females) of a large nonprofit human services organization located in New York City, Long Island, and Westchester County. Employees were taken from different locations, different departments, and different levels of the organization. Their average age was between 31 to

40 years. Their total full-time work experience ranged from under 1 year (11.7%) to over 15 years (34.2%). Positions included support staff (18.3%), professional (31.5%), first-level managers (23.6%), middle management (16.3%), and top management (5.4%).

Measuring Instruments

Two instruments were used, in the present study, to assess sex-role stereotypical attitudes: the Schein Descriptive Index and the Male-Female Relations Questionnaire (MFRQ). Three sets of materials were self-administered, given out all at once and returned all at once by the organization's internal mail system. These three sets of materials include Schein's Descriptive Index, the Male-Female Relations Questionnaire, and the Leadership Effectiveness Versions.

RESULTS

Schein Descriptive Index

Results indicated a significant difference between how male respondents perceive managers and how female respondents perceive managers. For the male respondents, there was a significant resemblance between the ratings of men and managers ($r^2=.42$, $p<.00$), whereas there was nonsignificant resemblance between the ratings of women and managers ($r^2=.02$, $p<.42$). This finding confirms the first hypothesis in the present study that states that men will perceive successful managers as possessing characteristics that are more commonly associated with men than with women.

For the female respondents, there was a significant resemblance between the ratings both of men and managers ($r^2=.48$, $p<.00$) and of women and managers ($r^2=.38$, $p<.00$). This finding confirms the second hypothesis that states that women will perceive successful managers as possessing characteristics that are commonly associated with both men and with women.

Male-Female Relations Questionnaire (MFRQ)

In the MFRQ, a score of 1 represents the extreme traditional sex-role response, whereas a score of 5 represents the extreme liberal response. The purpose of the Social Interaction Scale is to assess men's and women's tendency to modify their behavior to conform to sex-role expectations in social interactions. On this scale, men scored closer to 1 ($m=3.48$) than did women ($m=3.71$), but the difference was not significant ($t=-1.00$, $df=176$, $p<.05$).

The Marital Role Scale focuses mainly on the relative power in decision making that the respondent preferred to be allocated to husband and wife. Some other items in this scale focus on the division of domestic responsibilities. Once again, as in the previous scale, in this scale men hold slightly more traditional sex-role views ($m=3.48$) than women ($m=3.65$), but the difference was not significant ($t=-.77$, $df=176$, $p<.05$).

The only scale where women's scores represent a more traditional sex-role response than men's score is the third scale, labeled Male Preference. This scale contained items describing preferences for masculine, dominant men, and the results showed that women overall do like men who are more masculine and dominant than feminine and passive ($m=2.61$). For the men, the third scale, labeled Expressivity, contained items describing an unwillingness to express emotional upset overtly and to be thought of as sensitive. In this scale men's responses were not traditional as in previous scales. They did not want to be seen as sensitive, but they also did not want to be seen as insensitive. In this scale, the difference between men and women was significant ($t=3.94$, $df=176$, $p<.05$).

Perception of Leadership Effectiveness

A third hypothesis was tested in the present study: the effect of sex-role stereotypes on attribution about leadership effectiveness will depend on the availability of information about the leader. To test this hypoth-

esis, 16 scenarios were given to subjects in which the information about the leader's gender, personal characteristics, and behavior was manipulated.

The following results were obtained:

- The leader's gender did not influence perception of leadership effectiveness.
- The leader's behavioral information had a great impact on the perception of leadership effectiveness.
- The leader's personal characteristic information had an impact on the perception of leadership effectiveness.
- The largest difference in the evaluation of male and female leaders occurred when no information was available about the leader. When no information is presented to perceivers about their leaders, it forces them to rely on their sex-role stereotypes when evaluating them, leading to differences in evaluation between male and female leaders.

These findings support this researcher's expectations that behavioral information will have a greater influence on the attribution than leader's sex and personal characteristics.

DISCUSSION

The major purpose of the present study was to investigate whether women as leaders are perceived and evaluated differently than men as leaders. To investigate this issue, one needs to address first sex-role stereotypes because they affect expectations, and expectations affect attributions that people make.

One of the most notable results of this study is the disparity between how female and male respondents perceive the characteristics of effective managers. The results that were obtained confirm the first two hypotheses of the present study. That is, men perceived successful managers as possessing characteristics that are more commonly associated with men than with women, whereas women perceived successful man-

agers as possessing characteristics that are associated with both men and women.

If women leaders are perceived differently than men leaders, it may explain in part the discrimination that exists today against women leaders: women make up less than 5 percent of senior managers, they are more likely to be found in jobs that traditionally have been regarded as "feminine," and they are less likely to be promoted (Catalyst, 1991).

The general consensus after reviewing the literature is that men and women who occupy leadership positions do not differ in their interpersonal-oriented or task-oriented leadership styles (Adams, 1978; Bartol, 1978; Bartol & Martin, 1986; Bass, 1981; Butterfield & Powell, 1981; Cullen & Perrene, 1981; Day & Stogdill, 1972; Dobbins & Platz, 1986; Eagly & Johnson, 1989; Lee and Alvares, 1977; Nieva & Gutek, 1981; Osborn & Vicars, 1976; Petty & Bruning, 1980; Petty & Lee, 1975). Some researchers (Morrison et al., 1987) even believe that women have an advantage over men because they adapt more easily to change and they have greater interpersonal skills.

Since it seems that female leaders' overall behavior is similar to that of male leaders, it is logical to assume that they are rated equally. However, this is not the case; female leaders consistently are rated lower than male leaders. One explanation for this finding is that women as leaders are perceived differently than men as leaders, which leads to differences in the evaluations of male and female leaders.

The relationship between attitudes and attribution is not simple; situational factors need to be taken into consideration when investigating attributions. This led to the third hypothesis of the present study, which stated that the effect of sex-role stereotypes on attributions about leadership effectiveness will depend on the availability of information about the leader.

The results of the present study confirm this hypothesis, which confirms in turn the

importance of presenting information to the raters in order to decrease the effect of sex-role stereotypes on attribution. These findings lend support to the argument that situational factors should not be ignored when investigating attributions.

Even though the male respondents, in the present study, hold stereotypical sex-role attitudes, they perceived male and female leaders in a similar manner. Both male and female respondents' attributions about leadership effectiveness were based on the information available about the leader—his or her personal characteristics and behavior—not on the leader's gender.

Overcoming the Barriers to Women's Advancement

If the United States had not experienced a recession in the 1990s, today there would have been a shortage in labor due to the low birth rates following the end of the Baby Boom in 1964. After the recession ends, American companies are expected to experience difficulty in filling jobs (Catalyst, 1992). Therefore, employees will need to retain skilled and valuable managers. As the proportion of women in management continues to increase (Korn/Ferry International, 1990), retaining female managers will be essential for organizational survival, growth, effectiveness, and success. But organizational effectiveness does not only depend on its managers' effective behavior; it also depends on the perception of followers about their managers. There is no leadership without followship; if followers do not accept and/or perceive the manager as effective, the manager is not going to be effective.

The present study provides additional support to the belief that men still hold stereotypical sex-role attitudes. With these attitudes, they are less likely to accept a female leader and are also less likely to perceive her as effective. Women, on the other hand, believe that a leader should have not only characteristics that are associated with men but also those associated with women.

Since half of the working force consists of men and since the majority of top management positions are filled by men, our society needs to take action to ensure that efficient, valuable, and effective female leaders will be accepted, appreciated, and perceived effectively by their followers.

In theory, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 outlaws discrimination in the workplace based on gender. Although the law applies to all levels, in practice it rarely reaches upper levels, and opportunities for subtle discrimination are great. As a result, the Civil Rights Act of 1991 was enacted. The new law makes it easier for employees to prove discrimination and to be awarded both punitive and compensatory damages. As a result of these changes, employers have a strong incentive to avoid discrimination (On the Line, 1992). In a separate action, the U.S. Department of Labor, in its 1991 *Report on the Glass Ceiling Initiative*, grants the Office of Federal Contract Compliance (OFCCP) the authority to conduct "Glass Ceiling Audits: to ensure that employers comply with anti-discrimination laws. If the OFCCP finds irregularities, it may give heavy fines to the organization" (On the Line, 1992).

In a survey of human resources professionals (Catalyst, 1992), they reported these strategies for advancing women in the next 5 years, in order of importance: career development (49%), early identification of high-potential women (21%), targeted recruitment (16%), career and family programs (12%), meeting EEO goals (12%), and job targeting for women (9%). These strategies suggest that companies should take a very general approach to developing women, rather than dealing with each specific barrier to women's advancement that they identify.

Some believe that true equality can be achieved only if the differences between men and women are valued equally. For some, that means re-emphasizing women's traditional caregiving role in the home; for others, it implies putting a greater focus on

integrating "feminine" qualities, such as nurturing and sharing, into the workplace (*U.S. News and World Report*, 1991). DuPont, NYNEX, and PepsiCo are some firms that have instituted programs aimed at helping employees understand and value the differences between men and women.

People often prefer to work with others who are similar to them; it is not surprising that male managers prefer to work with other male managers. Studies have shown that top executives tend to promote in their own images, selecting people similar to themselves (MIS Week, 1988). Or, as one male executive said, "Most men still find it easier to work with men. You joke about sports or whatever, and there's no sexual tension" (*Executive Female*, 1988, p. 2). To overcome this problem, mentors and sponsors are used. Cross-sex mentor relationships are subject to sexual innuendo, so most organizations prefer to avoid this kind of relationship. But, of course, if an organization uses mentoring or sponsoring, it has to have female managers in place who will function as mentors, sponsors, or role models.

Today, more and more organizations, such as Kodak and GTE, are implementing training where the goal is to help managers work together within a diverse workplace and also to help them reduce discrimination (Morrison & Von Glinow, 1990). According to the findings of the present study, women can reduce discrimination on an individual basis. That is, each female who acquires a managerial role and/or each female who is already in a managerial role should concentrate on behaving effectively in that role, because in the present study respondents did not evaluate their leader based on gender, but rather on performance. Morrison, White, and Von Velsor (1987) add that "to be successful in upper management, women must constantly monitor their behavior, making sure they are neither too masculine nor too feminine." In a discussion that was sponsored by NAFE, the National Association for Female Executives

(*Executive Female*, 1988), these comments were made by executives about women: "Women have to learn how to stand their ground when arguing a point. They get rattled too easily and back down" (p. 5).

In the present study, the leader's behavior was not only the basis for raters' attribution about leadership effectiveness; his or her personal characteristics also played a role. Thus, before a female leader starts a new relationship with her followers, she should give them some positive background information about herself. This background information can come in many forms, such as a resume, short oral presentation of her biography, written work, or art work if it applies to the position.

Finally, both the organization and the women working in it should be responsible for eliminating sex-role stereotypes. The organization can, for example, distribute information about their female leaders, it can develop training programs to help people deal with diversity in the workplace, and finally it can encourage an organizational culture that will support female leadership. Female leaders, as mentioned before, also have the potential power to decrease sex-role stereotypes by giving superiors and subordinates as much information as possible about themselves and proving their abilities by behaving effectively.

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