

## THE EFFECTS OF SEX-TYPED TRAIT DESCRIPTIONS ON JUDGMENTS OF LIKEABLENESS<sup>1</sup>

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*The present study attempted to specify some of the conditions in which the use of sex-typed trait description would influence ratings of likeableness. Ninety male and 90 female subjects evaluated descriptions of stimulus persons varying in gender and sex role orientation. Female subjects rated masculine role descriptions less favorably than feminine or androgynous descriptions regardless of the gender ascribed to the stimulus person. Male subjects' judgments were influenced by the appropriateness of the gender of the stimulus person to the sex role of the description. Researchers should be aware that trait descriptions may have subtle sex role connotations which will influence subjects' judgments.*

Anderson's (1968) list of likeableness norms for 555 trait words is commonly used in the formulation of stimulus person descriptions in studies of impression formation. In fact, according to the Social Science Citation Index, during the period from 1975 to 1977 the article in which the list appears (Anderson, 1968) was cited more than 75 times. Although Anderson states that an effort was made to eliminate "strongly sex-linked" words from the list, it appears that many of the traits on the list are seen as more characteristic of persons of one gender than the other or as more desirable for persons of one gender than the other (Rosnow et al., 1969; Bryson and Corey, 1977). In fact, several of the traits contained in the list are scored as masculine or feminine on the Bern Sex Role Inventory (BSRI, Bem, 1974).

It is possible, therefore, that researchers may unintentionally derive trait sets which are contaminated by sex-typing. The purpose of this research is to specify some of the conditions in which the use of such sex-typed trait descriptions would influence judgments of likeableness. Specifically, it is predicted that descriptions which have been equated for likeableness using Anderson's (1968) norming procedure will be rated differentially depending on the sex-typing of the traits in the description, the gender of the person they are ascribed to, and the gender of the person doing the rating.

Based on the results of previous research, several hypotheses can be formulated regarding the manner in which these variables will interact with one another to determine likeableness ratings. For instance, it has been found that females are more lenient in their evaluations of others than males (Deaux and Farris, 1975) and, therefore, a significant main effect for gender of subject is predicted. The gender ascribed to the stimulus person should also influence subjects' judgments of trait descriptions and it is expected that this will be moderated by the sex role connotations of the trait descriptions. Information regarding the gender of the

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<sup>1</sup>This study was supported by Canada Council Grant S76-1258. Thanks to Martin Kaplan for his comments on a previous draft of this manuscript and to Beverly Baxter and Valerie Whiffen for their technical assistance.

stimulus person provides a context for the evaluation of the trait description which is given to the subject, and thus the subject's ratings of the stimulus persons should be influenced by the appropriateness of the description to the gender of the person described. Two studies provide evidence that this is what actually occurs. Seyfried and Hendrick (1973) showed that stimulus persons with sex role attitudes which were stereotypically appropriate to their gender were rated more favorably than stimulus persons with sex role attitudes which were inappropriate to their gender. One could expect that similar results would be obtained using sex stereotyped traits as stimuli.

In addition, Rosnow et al. (1969) found that both the gender of the judge and the gender of the stimulus person influenced the ratings of likeableness of Anderson's trait words. Although this study demonstrated that the same trait might be evaluated favorably in a male and unfavorably in a female or vice versa, it did not examine how the combination of masculine and feminine qualities in a stimulus person might affect judgments of the person's likeableness. It can be inferred from androgyny theory (Bem, 1974) that females who had masculine characteristics would receive positive evaluations as long as these traits were balanced by feminine characteristics; likewise, males whose femininity was tempered by masculine attributes would also be favorably evaluated. Therefore, the present study will compare androgynous descriptions with sex-typed descriptions which have been equated to them in likeableness.

More importantly, however, it is expected that this differential valuation of trait descriptions will occur even in the absence of information regarding the gender of the stimulus persons. The sex role connotations of the traits themselves should provide a context which will influence subjects' judgments. Thus, subjects may infer gender based on the stereotyping of the trait descriptions.

## METHOD

In order to obtain likeableness norms for the 60 traits on the BSRI, the procedure in Anderson (1968) was followed. One hundred undergraduate psychology students rated each of the BSRI words on a scale ranging from zero (*least favorable or desirable*) to six (*most favorable or desirable*).

The stimulus materials consisted of four types of trait sets: (1) masculine sex role (two traits scored masculine on the BSRI); (2) feminine sex role (two feminine BSRI traits); (3) androgynous sex role (one masculine and one feminine BSRI trait); and (4) fillers (two neutral traits). Four sets each of masculine, feminine and androgynous sex role traits and 12 filler sets were composed by selecting BSRI traits from the appropriate sex role categories without replacement. Mean likeableness values (based on the previously derived norms) of the masculine, feminine and androgynous sex role sets were not significantly different as demonstrated by *t* tests. The trait sets were presented in random order.

Ninety male and 90 female undergraduate psychology students at the University of Guelph rated each stimulus description on a 21-point scale ranging from 0 (*dislike very much*) to 20 (*like very much*). For one-third of the subjects the stimulus persons were described as males, for one-third they were described as females and for the remaining third the gender of the stimulus person was not identified. This resulted in a 2 (gender of subject)  $\times$  3 (gender of stimulus person: male, female, not described)  $\times$  3 (sex role of stimulus description: masculine, feminine, androgynous) factorial with repeated measures on the last factor. Newman-Keuls analysis was used throughout to compare cell means.

## RESULTS

As predicted, there was a significant main effect for gender of the subject,  $F(1,174) = 13.45$ ,  $p < 0.001$  such that female subjects gave more positive ratings than male subjects. There was also a significant main effect for the sex role of the stimulus description,  $F(2,348) = 32.16$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . Both feminine androgynous descriptions were rated significantly higher than masculine

descriptions,  $p < 0.01$ , but feminine and androgynous descriptions were not rated significantly differently from one another. In addition, there were two significant interaction effects. Discussion of the gender of stimulus person  $\times$  sex role of stimulus description interaction,  $F(4,348) = 2.85, p < 0.05$ , will be included in the more interesting gender of subject  $\times$  gender of stimulus person  $\times$  sex role of stimulus description interaction,  $F(4,348) = 7.34, p < 0.001$ .

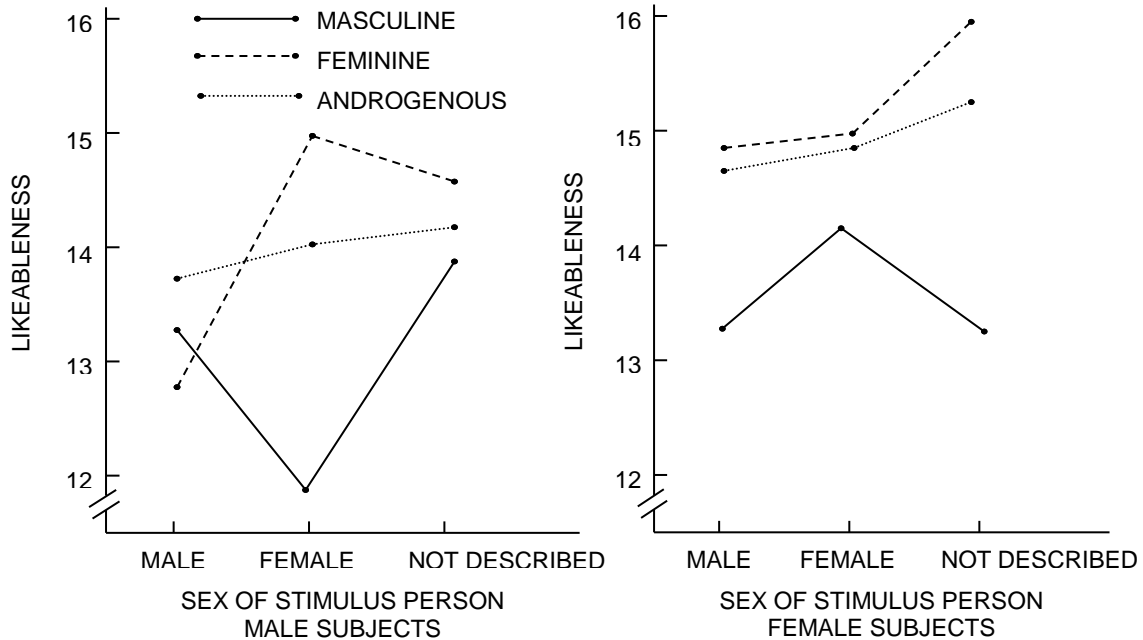


FIG. 1. Gender of subject  $\times$  gender of stimulus person  $\times$  sex role of stimulus description interaction.

As can be seen from Fig. 1, the ratings of female subjects did not vary as a function of the gender of the stimulus person. While male subjects did not differ significantly in their ratings of androgynous sex role stimulus persons of different genders, they did rate masculine and feminine sex role stimulus persons significantly differently depending on their ascribed gender,  $p < 0.05$ . Male subjects evaluated masculine females significantly less positively than they evaluated either masculine males,  $p < 0.05$  or masculine persons not described as to gender,  $p < 0.02$ , but they did not differ significantly in their ratings of the male and no gender masculine descriptions. Male subjects also rated both feminine females and feminine persons not described as to gender significantly more positively than they rated feminine males,  $p < 0.001$ , but they did not rate the feminine female and no gender descriptions significantly differently.

Female subjects did vary their ratings according to the sex role of the stimulus person. They rated the masculine sex role descriptions significantly less positively than either the feminine or androgynous sex role descriptions,  $p < 0.01$ , but they did not rate the feminine and androgynous sex role descriptions significantly more positively than androgynous descriptions,  $p < 0.05$ , which were in turn evaluated significantly more positively than masculine sex role descriptions,  $p < 0.01$ .

**DISCUSSION**

The results of this study indicated that males and females differed in their judgments of sex-typed stimulus descriptions. Females were found to be more positive in their ratings than males. In addition, females did not rate the stimuli differentially depending on their ascribed gender, whereas males did. Females rated masculine descriptions less favorably than feminine or androgynous descriptions.

Masculine characteristics are generally considered more socially desirable in our culture than feminine characteristics (Broverman *et al.*, 1970). By using masculine and feminine traits which were equated for likeableness, the present study may have counteracted expectations of female subjects that the masculine descriptions would be more positive and thus resulted in lower ratings of them.

Male subjects did differentiate their ratings according to the sex-typing of the stimuli. As predicted from the results of the study by Seyfried and Hendrick (1973), males tended to deprecate persons with sex role descriptions which were inappropriate to their gender (*i.e.*, feminine males and masculine females). The fact that this result was obtained only for male judges is consistent with the contention that males are more rigidly sex-typed than females. Research has shown that males are more likely than females to avoid sex-inappropriate activities and to prefer those activities which are associated with their own role (Maccoby and Jacklin, 1974). It appears that the male judges in this study may have been projecting these feelings onto the persons they were asked to rate.

In addition, the ratings of male subjects were influenced by gender appropriateness even in the case where the gender of the stimulus person was not identified. Males tended to infer the gender of the stimulus person from the sex-typing of the description, rating the no gender masculine description similarly to the way that they rated a masculine male and the no gender feminine description similarly to their ratings of a feminine female.

Although males were influenced by the gender appropriateness of the stimulus traits, they did not derogate androgynous descriptions, even though these contained reverse sex-typed elements. In addition, androgynous descriptions were not rated differentially due to the gender of the stimulus person by either male or female subjects. Thus, although the androgynous descriptions were composed of sex-typed traits (one masculine and one feminine) the connotation of the entire description was neither sex-typed nor reverse sex-typed. It is the sex-typing of the entire description and not just that of the individual traits which is important.

Thus, the ratings of most trait descriptions will not be influenced by the sex-typing of the individual traits. Even though many of the traits on Anderson's (1968) list are sex-typed, researchers choosing words randomly from the list would be most likely to derive sets of androgynous (mixed) or neutral stimulus descriptions. Furthermore, since the individual traits were normed under conditions where the normative subjects were unaware of the stimulus person's gender, the likeableness values of the individual traits should take into account gender implications. In most research this normative assumption is duplicated. However, sets composed of sex-typed traits where there is an inconsistency between the stereotyping of the traits and the stimulus person's gender violate this assumption. In these instances researchers may find it desirable to re-norm stimuli to control for such effects. A procedure similar to that used by Bem (1974), Bryson and Corey (1977) or Rosnow *et al.* (1969) with individual traits could also be used to assess the degree of sex-typing implied by trait descriptions. Male and female subjects would rate each description as to its desirability "for a man" or "for a woman" in our society. Descriptions which yielded significant differences due to gender of subject, gender of stimulus person or an interaction of these factors could then be eliminated as being biased by sex-stereotyping.

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