

INFLUENCE OF SEX ROLE STEREOTYPES ON PERSONNEL DECISIONS

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An in-basket exercise was used to investigate the influence of sex role stereotypes on the personnel decisions of 95 bank supervisors. The design consisted of four separate experiments (in-basket items) in which an employee's sex and other situational attributes were manipulated. Results confirmed the hypothesis that male administrators tend to discriminate against female employees in personnel decisions involving promotion, development, and supervision. Discrimination against male employees was found in personnel decisions involving competing role demands stemming from family circumstances. Features of the decision-making process which tend to heighten the influence of sex role stereotypes on personnel decisions are discussed.

It is frequently alleged that male administrators view females as equipped to do the organizational housekeeping but as deficient in the toughness, stability, judgment, and dedication required for success in managerial and other traditionally male roles. To protect both the organization and the "vulnerable" female employee, male administrators allegedly resort to a pattern of exclusion in selection, promotion, and development which bars women from the more challenging organizational roles or places them at a disadvantage when they do achieve these roles.

In some ways, however, the commonly alleged sex role stereotypes may tend to work in favor of females and against males. Since men are expected to pursue their careers with single-minded dedication, any intrusion of family or other personal considerations may be viewed more unfavorably for them than for women. In cases involving time off or other similar indulgences for family and personal reasons, management may deal more harshly with males than with females, and young male managerial aspirants may be reluctant to make such requests for fear of jeopardizing their careers.

In spite of all the allegations and circum-

stantial evidence, the actual behavioral effects of sex role stereotyping have only recently been subject to systematic investigation (see, for example, studies by Goldberg, 1968; Shaw, 1972; Rosen & Jerdee, 1973). While some studies have supported the general notion of the biasing effects of sex role stereotypes, they cover a rather narrow range of discriminatory behavior and they do not deal at all with those situations in which sex role stereotypes may work to the disadvantage of males. Accordingly, it is desirable to direct research at both types of effects, those forms of exclusion and favoritism favoring males and those forms favoring females. On the basis of the commonly alleged stereotypes for males and females, we hypothesized (*a*) that male administrators would tend to discriminate against females in important decisions involving promotion, development, and supervision and (*b*) that they would tend to discriminate against males in decisions involving competing role demands stemming from family or other personal circumstances. These hypotheses were tested in an experiment involving a group of male managers from the banking industry.

METHOD

Subjects

The subjects were 95 male bank supervisors attending a management institute at the University of North Carolina during the summer of 1972. The institute was open to both sexes, but since only 13 women attended, it was necessary to restrict the study to males.

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Procedure

Experimental materials were embedded in an in-basket exercise.² Subjects were asked to assume the role of the personnel director of a multibranch bank and to react to a series of items in memorandum or letter form. Four of these in-basket items covered different types of personnel problems and were written in two or more versions so as to manipulate the sex of one or more of the characters and certain other attributes of the characters and the situation.

For each item, subjects indicated on fixed-response scales their decisions and the extent to which they would find certain reactions to the case acceptable. Each subject received only one version of each of the experimental items and was unaware that other versions existed. From the subjects' perspective, all were participating in an identical in-basket exercise dealing with personnel problems in the banking industry. The sex variable was completely unobtrusive. Since each item dealt with a different type of problem and involved different dependent variables (managerial decisions), the design can best be conceptualized as a series of four separate experiments with different experimental stimuli and different dependent variables in each and with completely random assignment of treatments to subjects within each experiment.

Three of the in-basket items involved administrative decisions in which sex role stereotypes were hypothesized to work to the disadvantage of females. These items dealt with promotion, development, and leadership style. These three items and the experimental variables of interest were as follows:

1. *Promotion to branch manager: Sex of candidate and complexity of job.* This item was in the form of a memorandum requesting a decision on the promotion of an employee to the position of branch manager. The memorandum was written in four versions so as to manipulate the variables of sex of the candidate and the nature of the manager's job, which was described as either complex or routine. We expected a greater tendency to promote the male, especially when the job was more complex.

The major dependent variables were (a) a recommendation either to promote the candidate or to hold the candidate's file and interview additional candidates, (b) a rating of the candidate on potential for customer relations, and (c) a rating of the candidate on potential for employee relations. Subjects were asked to make their evaluations on 6-point scales ranging from extremely unfavorable (1) to extremely favorable (6).

2. *Development: Choice of a male or female candidate to attend a conference.* This item was in the form of a memorandum asking the personnel director to decide which of two persons on his staff should attend a personnel conference. In one version of the memorandum the choice was between an older, unpromotable female and a younger, highly qualified

male. In the other version, the choice was between an older, unpromotable male and a younger, highly qualified female. We expected that the male would be chosen more frequently than the female.

3. *Solution of a supervisory problem: Sex of Supervisor \times Sex of Subordinate \times Nature of the Problem.* This item consisted of a lengthy report from a bank supervisor describing a problem with one of his (her) subordinates and requesting the termination or at least the transfer of the subordinate. We expected that the subjects would be more inclined to accept the supervisor's judgment and proceed with the termination or transfer when the supervisor was a male than when the supervisor was a female. We also sought to examine how the sex of the subordinate and the nature of the problem (poor performance vs. offensive personality) would affect the subjects' willingness to terminate or transfer the subordinates. Accordingly, eight versions of this case were used, forming a $2 \times 2 \times 2$ factorial design.

The major dependent variables for this item were subjects' ratings of the following administrative actions: (a) arrange for a termination of the subordinate; (b) arrange for transfer of the subordinate; (c) suggest that the supervisor try again to solve the problem; or (d) arrange for an interview with both the supervisor and the subordinate.

4. *Approval of request for a leave of absence: Sex of employee.* The final item involved an administrative decision in which sex role stereotypes were hypothesized to lead to more indulgent or deferent behavior toward females than toward males. This item was in the form of a request from an accountant for time off to take care of children. In Version A, the request was made by a female accountant who claimed that it was impossible for her husband to assume these responsibilities. Version B involved the identical situation except that the accountant was a male whose wife's career obligations prevented her from assuming the child care responsibilities. We expected that subjects would be willing to grant the leave to the female accountant, since it would be more in keeping with the stereotype regarding the primacy of a woman's family obligations.

Subjects were asked to rate the appropriateness of the request and the desirability of the following administrative actions: (a) give the employee a leave of absence without salary; (b) do not allow the employee to take a leave of absence; and (c) allow the employee to take a leave of absence with salary.

RESULTS

Our first major hypothesis stated that male administrators would tend to discriminate against females in important decisions involving promotion, development, and supervisory practice. Results for the in-basket items relevant to this hypothesis will now be considered.

² See Fredricksen (1968) for an example of the use of the in-basket technique as a research task.

TABLE 1

PROMOTION CASE: ADMINISTRATIVE ACTIONS FOR FEMALE AND MALE CANDIDATES

Administrative action	Female candidate			Male candidate			Total
	Simple job (<i>n</i> = 24)	Complex job (<i>n</i> = 25)	Both jobs	Simple job (<i>n</i> = 24)	Complex job (<i>n</i> = 20)	Both jobs	
Promote ^a	14	5	19	21	11	32	51
Hold file ^a	10	20	30	3	9	12	42
Potential for customer relations ^b	4.52	4.01	4.25	4.95	4.51	4.73	4.47
Potential for employee relations ^b	3.99	4.39	4.19	4.75	4.66	4.70	4.43

^a Number of subjects.^b Mean rating.*Promotion to Branch Manager*

Subjects' promotion decisions and mean ratings of the candidates are shown in Table 1. From Table 1 it can be seen that subjects were more willing to promote a male candidate than a female candidate. The male candidate was recommended for promotion by 32 out of 44 subjects, while the female candidate was recommended for promotion by only 19 out of 49 subjects ($\chi^2 = 6.53$, $df = 1$, $p < .05$). As might be expected, subjects were more willing to promote a candidate to a simple job than to a complex job ($\chi^2 = 13.09$, $df = 1$, $p < .01$). The interaction of job complexity by sex of candidate was not significant. It appears that subjects discriminated against women in their promotion recommendations and that the bias against promoting women to managerial positions held across the two conditions of job complexity.

Table 1 also shows mean ratings of each candidate's potential in the experimental conditions. Ratings of potential for customer relations were influenced by both sex and job type. Mean rating for the male candidate was 4.73 compared to a mean rating of 4.25 for the female candidate ($F = 4.76$, $df = 1/80$, $p < .05$). The mean rating for candidates for the simple job was 4.72 compared to a mean of 4.24 for the complex job ($F = 4.93$, $df = 1/80$, $p < .05$). The sex of the candidate by job complexity interaction was not significant.

Finally, Table 1 shows the mean rating of the candidate's potential for employee relations in each of the experimental conditions. The sex of the candidate variable was again

significant. The mean rating on potential for employee relations for the male candidate was 4.70 compared to 4.19 for the female candidate ($F = 4.57$, $df = 1/80$, $p < .05$). No significant effects were obtained for the job complexity variable or for the complexity by sex or candidate interaction. These results clearly demonstrate discrimination against females in promotion decisions.

Choosing an Employee to Attend a Professional Training Conference

Table 2 shows subjects' choices of an employee to participate in the professional training conference in the two experimental conditions.

When the younger, promotable employee was male, 76% of the subjects selected him in preference to the older unpromotable female. On the other hand, when the younger, promotable employee was female, only 56% selected her in preference to the older, unpromotable male ($z = 2.04$, $p < .05$). It appears that a highly promotable male employee is strongly preferred to a female employee with less potential; however, a highly promotable female is preferred only slightly more frequently than an unpromotable male.

Results for this in-basket item add further support to the hypothesis that women are victims of discrimination in important personnel decisions involving career progress.

Solution of a Supervisory Problem

Table 3 shows the mean rating for each of the administrative actions under each of the eight experimental conditions. Ratings of

TABLE 2
SELECTION OF EMPLOYEE TO ATTEND CONFERENCE

Male		Female	
No. subjects	Proportion of row total	No. subjects	Proportion of row total
Version A: Qualified, younger male versus unpromotable, older female			
37	.76	12	.25
Version B: Qualified younger female versus unpromotable, older male			
20	.44	25	.56
Total			
57	.61	37	.39

termination and of transfer are of particular interest and will be considered together since these are mutually exclusive actions with negatively correlated ratings.

Main effects were not significant but there were significant interaction effects (Sex of Supervisor \times Nature of Problem) for both termination ($F = 5.30$, $df = 1/69$, $p < .05$) and transfer ($F = 4.75$, $df = 1/69$, $p < .05$). For *performance* problems, the differential effects of the supervisor's sex are quite clear. When the requesting supervisor was male, termination of the subordinate was rated high ($\bar{X} = 4.3$) and transfer low ($\bar{X} = 2.9$); when the requesting supervisor was female, termi-

nation of the subordinate was rated low ($\bar{X} = 2.9$) and transfer high ($\bar{X} = 4.2$). One speculative interpretation of these findings is that subjects had greater confidence in the ability of a male supervisor than a female supervisor to appraise the seriousness of a performance problem. Accordingly, subjects would be more willing to accept the male supervisor's recommendation for termination.

For *personality* problems, the differential effects of sex are not as clear. When the requesting supervisor was male, termination of the subordinate was rated low ($\bar{X} = 2.9$) and transfer high ($\bar{X} = 4.1$); when the requesting supervisor was female, termination and transfer rated equally ($\bar{X} = 3.5$). The differential effects of sex here are difficult to interpret.

The results for the three in-basket items reported thus far strongly support the hypothesis that sex role stereotypes lead to discrimination in personnel decisions involving promotion, development, and supervision. We now turn to results relevant to our second hypothesis. Here we predicted that males who deviated from the sex role stereotypes that depicted men as dedicated to their work above family and personal considerations would be dealt with more harshly than females in similar situations. The final in-basket item is concerned with this hypothesis.

Approving a Leave of Absence

Mean ratings for the leave request and alternative administrative actions are shown in Table 4. Subjects rated the request for a

TABLE 3
SUPERVISOR-SUBORDINATE CONFLICT: MEAN RATING OF ADMINISTRATIVE ACTIONS
FOR EACH EXPERIMENTAL CONDITION

Managerial action	Male supervisor				Female supervisor				Row \bar{X}
	Performance		Personality		Performance		Personality		
	Male (<i>n</i> = 8)	Female (<i>n</i> = 6)	Male (<i>n</i> = 11)	Female (<i>n</i> = 7)	Male (<i>n</i> = 10)	Female (<i>n</i> = 10)	Male (<i>n</i> = 9)	Female (<i>n</i> = 8)	
Arrange a termination	4.25	4.42	3.38	2.62	3.00	3.00	4.00	3.10	3.42
Arrange a transfer	3.00	2.85	3.45	4.90	4.00	4.20	3.10	4.00	3.74
Suggest that supervisor try to resolve problem	2.00	2.16	2.45	2.00	1.90	2.40	1.88	2.00	2.11
Arrange for interview with both parties	5.40	4.42	4.47	4.62	5.18	5.00	4.41	5.60	4.87

leave to care for small children as significantly less appropriate when it came from a male accountant than when it came from a female accountant. In addition, subjects rated it significantly more appropriate for a female than a male to take a leave of absence without salary. Here we have a situation where the male sex role stereotype of complete dedication to the job appears to be influencing subjects' ratings. Subjects clearly perceive it more inappropriate for males than for females to take time off because of family obligations.

DISCUSSION

Our findings support current allegations regarding discrimination against women in a variety of organizational situations. The pervasiveness of the discrimination was demonstrated by the finding of bias against women in personnel decisions related to promotion, development, and supervision.

In view of the unobtrusiveness of the manipulations in the experiment (subjects were unaware of other versions of each in-basket item), the results demonstrating the effect of sex role stereotypes seem impressive. Subjects' responses in the simulated decision-making situation provided by the in-basket exercise were similar in a very important way to comparable administrative decisions in real life; that is, each administrative decision was made for only one person (sometimes a male and sometimes a female). It might be reasonable to assume that when managers are confronted with both a male and a female employee for either a new position, promotion, advanced training, or supervisory assistance, they will be more likely to act in a fair and impartial way. In such instances, the potential for discrimination is quite salient and subjects might tend to guard against favoritism. On the other hand, in many organizational settings such administrative actions occur as single events, as was the case in our experimental situation. In these situations, where the possibility of discrimination is not an obvious factor in the decision process, the influence of sex role stereotypes seems to have a definite impact.

Our data reveal a second feature of the decision situation which tends to foster biased decisions. Indications of discrimination were

TABLE 4
REQUEST FOR A LEAVE OF ABSENCE: MEAN RATINGS
OF APPROPRIATENESS OF REQUEST AND
ADMINISTRATIVE ACTIONS

Item	Male account- ant (<i>n</i> = 43)	Female account- ant (<i>n</i> = 46)	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Appropriateness of request	1.95	2.64	2.07	.05
Give leave without salary	2.88	4.06	3.12	.01
Do <i>not</i> allow accountant to take leave of absence	3.88	3.44	1.00	<i>ns</i>
Give leave with salary	1.69	1.43	1.07	<i>ns</i>

found with regard to administrative actions that were not unanimously perceived as clearly appropriate or clearly inappropriate. For example, discrimination was quite strong in the case where subjects were asked to judge the "potential for customer and employee relations" of a candidate for promotion to branch bank manager and also in the case where subjects were asked to determine the desirability of granting a leave of absence without pay to a bank accountant. In situations where the desirability or appropriateness of a particular administrative action is ambiguous and only partial information is available to the decision maker, subjects appear to fall back on preconceived attitudes (sex role stereotypes) to arrive at their ultimate decisions. In a sense, subjects may be providing more information for themselves by filling in either their own prejudices or some widely held societal expectations.

Our findings also demonstrate what may become an increasingly serious role conflict for male employees: the conflict between career and family responsibilities. While most of the discussion of sex role stereotypes has centered on female role conflicts between career and family, it is likely that male employees may soon experience a similar dilemma. In spite of the obstacles depicted in the Results section, more women are moving into managerial and professional careers. Accordingly, it seems reasonable to

assume that the husbands of career women will be expected to share many of the family responsibilities which previously had been considered the female's province. This means that changes in attitudes may be necessary with regard to the appropriate roles for both males and females in professional and private life.

One way to broaden managerial attitudes regarding male and female roles is to demonstrate to managers the restrictive effects of current stereotypes. The in-basket as used in this study offers some promise for this purpose. By collecting data early in the management training program, we were able to feed back our results to participants in a later session. This provided an opportunity to drama-

tize to our subjects the many subtle ways in which their own decisions were influenced by sex role stereotypes.

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