

## **Sex Stereotypes: Issues of Change in the 1970s**

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*A sample of 128 college males and females rated a typical and desirable man or woman on 54 items taken from the Personal Attributes Questionnaire (PAQ). Comparisons of the ratings of a typical man versus a typical woman yielded significant differences ( $p < .01$ ) on 53 of the 54 items. Thus, stereotypes of the sexes apparently remained strong during the 1970s. Comparisons of the ratings of a desirable man versus desirable woman yielded significant differences on only 12 of the 54 items. These results are interpreted as reflecting a difference between stereotypes (of the typical person) and attitudes (about desirable characteristics). While attitudes may have changed in the 1970s, stereotypes remained remarkably stable.*

There appears to be ample evidence that sex-role attitudes changed in the 1970s (Huston-Stein & Higgins-Trenk, 1978; Mason, Czajka, & Arber, 1976; Thorton & Freedman, 1979). However, it is not clear that stereotypes about differences in the personal attributes of men and women have undergone similar changes. For example, a study conducted in the early 1970s found no evidence of change in stereotypes held by college students (Neufeld, Langmeyer, & Seeman, 1974). Moreover, after reviewing several studies, Huston-Stein and Higgins-Trenk (1978) concluded that negative sex stereotypes of feminine competence remained strong and pervasive, even though attitudes about work and family roles had changed.

Despite some evidence that sex stereotypes remained stable in the 1970s, a recent study concluded that changes in stereotypes occurred between 1968 and 1975 (Petro & Putnam, 1979). In the late 1960s Rosenkrantz, Vogel, Bee, Broverman, and Broverman (1968) developed the Sex Role Stereotype Questionnaire (SRSQ). In 1975, Petro and Putnam administered the SRSQ to a sample of school counselors. Compared to the original student sample of Rosenkrantz et

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al., the sample of school counselors identified far fewer characteristics as differentiating men and women. Unfortunately, the composition of the 1968 and 1975 samples differed substantially in terms of age and education. The instructions to the school counselors also differed from those of the original investigation. Thus, the difference in results from 1968 to 1975 may be attributed to numerous factors other than changes in stereotypes.

Since the research of Petro and Putnam fails to support the conclusions of Huston-Stein and Higgins-Trenk, additional research seems to be warranted. Thus, the present research is concerned with identifying different types of sex-based beliefs that may or may not have changed during the 1970s. Specifically, two types of sex-based beliefs are examined: (1) beliefs about the personal characteristics considered desirable for men and women, and (2) beliefs about the typicality of these characteristics in men and women. Beliefs about desirable characteristics seem to correspond to one's attitudes about the sexes, while beliefs about typical characteristics seem to correspond to one's stereotypes of the sexes.<sup>2</sup>

## METHOD

In developing the SRSQ, Rosenkrantz et al. (1968) started with 122 bipolar items (e.g., "not at all aggressive – very aggressive"). College students were asked to rate the extent to which each item was characteristic of an adult male and adult female. An item was considered "stereotypic" if at least 75% of the raters rated one pole as more typical of one sex than the other. Using this arbitrary criterion, 41 items were designated as stereotypic. Another 48 items also differentiated males from females (at  $p < .05$ ), but did not reach a 75% level of consensus.

Using the SRSQ item pool, Spence, Helmreich, and Stapp (1974, 1975) obtained extensive data from college students on perceptions of the typical and the ideal member of each sex. Using  $t$  tests to identify stereotypes, Spence et al. selected 54 items for which significantly different ratings for the typical man and woman were consistently found in raters of both sexes in two independent samples. These items formed the basis for their Personal Attributes Questionnaire (PAQ), a self-report instrument with items divided into three scales on the basis of the "ideal" ratings. These are the Masculinity scale (consisting primarily of instrumental personality traits), the Femininity scale (consisting primarily of

<sup>2</sup>The beliefs about typical characteristics simply reflect the person's perceptions of current realities. These perceptions may or may not be veridical. The present study is not concerned with the accuracy or inaccuracy of the beliefs, but merely with identifying the pattern of beliefs.

expressive personality traits), and the Masculinity-Femininity scale (whose content is mixed).

### *Instrument and Procedure*

The items contained on the PAQ were chosen as appropriate indicators of stereotypes because these items have been involved in the continuing stream of research since 1968. The present research is based on data collected in the fall of 1978. The 54 items of the PAQ were rated in terms of (1) how typical it would be for a man (woman) to possess each characteristic and (2) how desirable it would be for a man (woman) to possess each characteristic. Using 6-point scales, each subject rated one target (man or woman) on both typical and desirable characteristics. The order of presentation (desirable versus typical) was counterbalanced across subjects and the first set of ratings was collected before the second set of items was rated.

### *Subjects*

The subjects were 128 undergraduates from a midwestern university. They participated to satisfy a course requirement in an upper division course in organizational behavior; 32 males and 32 females rated each of the targets (man or woman).

## **RESULTS**

For each item, two between-subjects comparisons were made: (1) typical of a man versus typical of a woman and (2) desirable for a man versus desirable for a woman. Independent-groups *t* tests were performed with a confidence level of at least  $p < .01$  required to indicate a significant difference. The results of these comparisons are presented in Table I. The ratings of the typical man versus woman were clearly different from the ratings of the desirable man versus woman.

In 53 of the 54 comparisons, the ratings of the typical man versus woman yielded significant ( $p < .01$ ) differences. The vast majority of these comparisons (51 of 54) were different at  $p < .001$ . From these results one must conclude that sex stereotypes remain strong for this sample of undergraduates.

Previous research on this set of 54 items (Spence et al., 1974) found that ratings of the ideal man versus ideal woman were slightly less polarized than ratings of the typical man versus the typical woman. In the 1974 sample, ratings

Table I. Typical and Desirable Characteristics: Differences in Ratings of Male Versus Female Targets

	Man > woman		Woman > man	
	Typical	Desirable	Typical	Desirable
Masculine items <sup>a</sup>				
Independent (1)	.001	<i>ns</i>	.001	<i>ns</i>
Aggressive (3)	.001	.001	.001	<i>ns</i>
Not excitable in minor crisis (4)	.001	.001	.001	<i>ns</i>
Skilled in business (7)	.001	<i>ns</i>	.01	<i>ns</i>
Mechanical aptitude (9)	.001	.001	.001	.01
Outspoken (10)	.001	<i>ns</i>	.001	.01
Acts as leader (13)	.001	.001	.001	<i>ns</i>
Self-confident (15)	.001	<i>ns</i>	.001	<i>ns</i>
Takes as stand (17)	.001	<i>ns</i>	.001	<i>ns</i>
Ambitious (18)	.001	<i>ns</i>	.001	<i>ns</i>
Not easily influenced (19)	.001	<i>ns</i>	.001	<i>ns</i>
Dominant (21)	.001	.001	.001	<i>ns</i>
Active (22)	.01	<i>ns</i>	.001	.01
Knows ways of world (25)	.001	<i>ns</i>	.001	<i>ns</i>
Loud (27)	.001	<i>ns</i>	.001	<i>ns</i>
Interested in sex (28)	.001	<i>ns</i>	.001	<i>ns</i>
Makes decisions easily (31)	.001	<i>ns</i>	.001	<i>ns</i>
Doesn't give up easily (33)	.001	<i>ns</i>	.001	.01
Stands up under pressure (35)	.001	<i>ns</i>	.001	.01
Not timid (36)	.001	<i>ns</i>	.001	<i>ns</i>
Good at sports (37)	.001	.01	.001	<i>ns</i>
Likes math and science (39)	.001	<i>ns</i>	.001	<i>ns</i>
Competitive (40)	.001	.001	.001	<i>ns</i>
Adventurous (43)	.001	<i>ns</i>	.001	.001
Sees self running show (45)	.001	<i>ns</i>	.001	<i>ns</i>
Outgoing (46)	.001	<i>ns</i>	.001	<i>ns</i>
Feels superior (51)	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	.001	<i>ns</i>
Forward (53)	.001	<i>ns</i>	.001	<i>ns</i>
Feminine items <sup>a</sup>				
Emotional (2)			.001	<i>ns</i>
Grateful (5)			.001	<i>ns</i>
Home-oriented (6)			.001	<i>ns</i>
Strong conscience (8)			.01	<i>ns</i>
Kind (11)			.001	.01
Cries easily (12)			.001	.01
Creative (14)			.001	<i>ns</i>
Understanding (16)			.001	<i>ns</i>
Considerate (20)			.001	<i>ns</i>
Devotes self to others (23)			.001	<i>ns</i>
Needs approval (24)			.001	<i>ns</i>
Gentle (26)			.001	.01
Aware of others' feelings (29)			.001	<i>ns</i>
Excitable in a major crisis (30)			.001	<i>ns</i>
Expresses tender feelings (32)			.001	.01
Enjoys art and music (34)			.001	<i>ns</i>
Doesn't hide emotions (38)			.001	<i>ns</i>
Tactful (41)			.001	<i>ns</i>
Feelings hurt (42)			.001	<i>ns</i>
Helpful to others (44)			.001	<i>ns</i>
Neat (47)			.001	.001
Religious (48)			.001	<i>ns</i>
Likes children (50)			.001	<i>ns</i>
Warm to others (52)			.001	<i>ns</i>
Need for security (54)			.001	<i>ns</i>

<sup>a</sup>Number in parentheses indicates order of items on questionnaire.

of the ideal man versus woman differed significantly on 44 of 53 items (83%)<sup>3</sup>. In the present research, only 12 of the 54 comparisons for the desirable man versus woman yielded significant differences (22%). Thus, this sample's sex-based attitudes appear to differ from stereotypes and to express a less polarized view of the "ideal" man and woman compared to the 1974 sample.

In general, male versus female raters differed significantly ( $p < .01$ ) on very few items. In rating the typical woman, male raters and female raters differed on only 1 of the 54 items (98% agreement). In rating the typical man, male versus female raters differed on 10 of the 54 items (81% agreement). In the ratings of desirable men and desirable women, male versus female raters agreed 83% and 81% of the time, respectively. Overall, the average level of agreement between male and female raters exceeded 85%.

## DISCUSSION

Recent studies have disagreed on whether sex stereotypes changed in the 1970s. Huston-Stein and Higgins-Trenk (1978) concluded that negative stereotypes of women remained strong and pervasive, even though sex-role attitudes had changed. In contrast, Petro and Putnam (1979) concluded that changes in stereotypes had occurred between 1968 and 1975. The results of the present research support the conclusions of Huston-Stein and Higgins-Trenk (1978). Specifically, sex stereotypes seemed to remain strong in the late 1970s, while sex-based attitudes apparently changed to a less polarized point of view.

On the basis of their research, Petro and Putnam (1979) also challenged the use of the SRSQ as a measure of stereotypes. While the present study does not bear directly on the original SRSQ, the results suggest that the PAQ remains a viable instrument for assessing sex stereotypes. It seems that the PAQ can be used in future studies to clarify whether changes in sex stereotypes are occurring in different segments of our society. Since numerous forms of discrimination against women have been attributed to sex stereotypes (e.g., Gordon & Strober, 1975), it seems important to continue investigations of potential changes. Hopefully, we will soon be able to conclude with confidence that changes in both attitudes and stereotypes have taken place.

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<sup>3</sup>One item of the current PAQ, "Stands up under pressure," was apparently not included in the 1974 study.

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