

Delivering the Male:
The Effect of Stereotype Activation on Trait Inferences

Pamela J. Lundeberg
Oregon State University

Author Note

Pamela Lundeberg, Department of Psychology, Oregon State University.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Pamela Lundeberg,
Department of Psychology, Oregon State University, Corvallis, OR 97331. E-mail:
lundebep@onid.orst.edu

Abstract

The current study investigated the way in which gender of a character and the presence or absence of a male stereotype affect the perceived masculinity of said character. Forty undergraduates from Oregon State University completed a questionnaire rating the masculinity of one of four possible characters – one male without the stereotype present, one male with the stereotype present, one female without the stereotype present, and one female with the stereotype present. As hypothesized, it was found that the presence of a male stereotype significantly influenced the perceived masculinity of the character, as the masculinity ratings were higher for those characters with the stereotype present than those characters with no stereotype activation. There was no main effect for character gender, however, nor was there an interaction effect between stereotype activation and character gender. The results produced by this research can be used to develop studies to further investigate the effects of stereotype activation.

Delivering the Male: The Effect of Stereotype Activation on Trait Inferences

Gender stereotypes greatly influence how people view individuals they interact with and also how people view themselves. These stereotypes may cause individuals to make inferences about others before learning anything about them, and often times these inferences are not representative of the individuals' true character.

Aside from making inferences about others, which is a byproduct of the socialization process, these gender stereotypes that our society has adopted and reinforced affect how individuals develop the characteristics they take on and the actions they perform (Barg, Chen, & Burrows, 1996). Unknowingly, a majority of individuals are conforming to a set of gender roles that society has deemed appropriate (Gupta & Turban, 2008).

Gender roles are learned in a variety of ways. They are taught by family, in schools, in social groups, and through the media (McLean & Kalin, 1994). The acquisition of gender roles is a lifelong process in which individuals learn what traits or characteristics our society considers appropriate – or inappropriate – for each gender (Gupta & Turban, 2008). Gender roles are socially constructed, as societal expectations dictate what it means to be female or what it means to be male (Jabes, 1980). Because of this, women and men are socialized into different types of roles. Women tend to be socialized into expressive roles – nurturing and emotionally supportive roles – and men tend to be socialized into instrumental roles – task-oriented roles (Rudman & Phelan, 2010).

Naturally, gender socialization contributes to individuals' career aspirations, which in turn shapes various fields into being polarized in terms of gender. According to Rudman and Phelan (2010), men tend to be in positions of power – positions that require precision, forcefulness, and quick thinking. Entrepreneurship, engineering, and forestry, for example, are

fields that are dominated by males. Meanwhile, women tend to be in positions that require human contact or emotional appeal. Roles such as nurses, childcare workers, and secretaries are typical expressive roles (Rudman & Phelan, 2010). This trend in the work place leads to gender stratification, which perpetuates many of the gender stereotypes in our society (Rudman & Phelan, 2010).

When gender stereotypes are broken in society there can be strong backlash against the perpetrator(s). Especially when men deviate from the social norms, the consequences can be substantial. Research by Moss-Racusin, Phelan, and Rudman (2010) found that when men stray from stereotypic expectations they are perceived as being less confident, less ambitious, weak, and uncertain. Their research suggests that men who break the norms are immediately associated with traits consistent with a low economic status, such as weakness and indecisiveness. The fear of being perceived in such a negative light pressures men to conform to societal expectations and reinforces gender stereotypes (Moss-Racusin et al., 2010).

As gender stereotypes are widely held in society, individuals conform to them almost unconsciously. Gender stereotypes influence attitudes people have, behaviors they perform, and actions they carry out without conscious awareness (Bargh, Chen, & Burrows, 1996). Individuals often seek to perform activities that are positively associated with their gender, and also tend to avoid activities that are not associated with their gender. Gender stereotypes that are well-known influence people even when a reminder of the stereotype is not present (Gupta & Turban, 2008).

Because of the extensive presence of gender stereotypes and the impact they have on societal gender roles, certain traits are universally associated with males, just as certain traits are universally associated with females. Traits such as dominance, confidence, ambition, and

rationality are associated with males, while traits such as generosity, compassion, empathy, and irrationality are associated with females (Garcia, Calcáneo, Soto, & Rodarte de Lara, 2007).

When deviation from the social norm occurs in one form or another, the way the “deviant” is perceived may change. When a person strays from the social norm in one way, the way in which he/she is seen in other aspects of his/her life is affected as well (Berndt & Heller, 1986). A male in an expressive role, for example, may be seen as more feminine than a male who is in a typical instrumental role. What is unclear, however, is the extent to which this perception change occurs in certain instances.

In the present study, the effect of stereotype activation on the perception of traits an individual is perceived to possess is examined. This study was designed to determine whether the activation of a traditionally male stereotype could alter the way in which a person is viewed. Particularly, the focus of this study was the perception of educators, who are widely thought of as being feminine (Carrington, 2002). Education is a field that is dominated by females, and teachers are commonly thought of as caring, generous, and compassionate – all traits that coincide with society’s female gender roles (Garcia et al., 2007). This study sought to investigate whether the activation of a male stereotype could cause this feminine profession to be viewed in a more masculine light, or whether males who take part in this profession are thought of as more feminine, despite displaying otherwise masculine characteristics.

The goal of this study was to assess the extent to which stereotype activation plays a part in the inferences that people make about others – the extent to which deviation from the social norm affects how one is viewed in terms of his or her gender roles and/or traits. As this society continues to change, the gender gap between various fields of work is shrinking, but when

gender stereotypes influence the way people view and perceive others, the gap may not be shrinking as much as it seems.

This study contained two independent variables that were manipulated: gender of a character (with two levels: male or female) and presence of stereotype activation (with two levels: present or not present). The dependent variable was perceived masculinity or femininity and was rated on a 1 – 4 scale that assessed traits universally associated with males and/or females. These traits were attained from a study conducted by García, Calcáneo, Soto, and Rodarte de Lara (2007) that established various personality traits that are widely perceived as masculine or feminine.

Each participant was randomly given one of four scenarios that depicted four different characters – a male without a male stereotype present, a male with a male stereotype present, a female without the male stereotype present, or a female with the male stereotype present. The descriptions of these characters differed only on the gender of the character and whether the male stereotype was present. Upon reading the character description they received, the participants completed a questionnaire that assessed the masculinity of the character.

Based on the stereotype activation theory, a hypothesis was derived that predicted the presence of a stated male stereotype would increase the rating of masculinity, regardless of the gender of the individual being rated, but to a greater extent when the individual being rated was a male. The presence of a male stereotype in the character's description should negate the feminine qualities associated with being a teacher, as stereotype activation theory suggests that the responses given should be in accordance with the given stereotype (Bargh et al., 1996). In accordance with the gender role theory, the effect of the stereotype activation theory should not be as great when a male stereotype is applied to a female character. Because the evaluator

already possesses a set of unconscious opinions and attributions regarding female traits, his or her opinion of the character being evaluated should be harder to change toward a more masculine view (Berndt & Heller, 1986).

Method

Participants

Forty participants took part in this study, all of whom were undergraduate students at Oregon State University. Twenty-one of the participants were women, and 19 of the participants were men. No information regarding participant age was collected, but the majority of the participants were of typical college age. The participants were obtained on the Oregon State University campus via a convenience sample in the Memorial Union, the University's student center. Every fifth person who walked by was asked to participate in the study. The participants were volunteers who received no compensation for their participation.

Materials

Upon entering the study, participants were randomly given one of the four possible scenarios/character descriptions (see Appendix A). These descriptions were typed on standard copy paper and were attached to an index card. Upon reading the given character description, the participants then received the questionnaire, which was typed on standard copy paper as well and took up only one page. There was no time limit on the questionnaire, and therefore no time recordings were taken. In the questionnaire, the participants inferred personality traits/characteristics about the characters whose descriptions they read. The questionnaire contained five female characteristics and five male characteristics that were obtained from previous research (García et al., 2007). The traits were randomly positioned (in terms of order) on the questionnaire. The order of the traits remained the same for each participant. The

questionnaire used can be found in Appendix B.

The questionnaires were scored based on the participants' responses and rankings on the provided scale. Male traits were scored as is. Therefore, if a trait such as "dominance" was rated a 4 by a participant, it was transcribed as a 4. Female traits were reversed scored. For example, if a trait such as "generosity" was rated a 4 by a participant, it was transcribed as a 1. A lower total score indicated the character was perceived as feminine, while a high total score indicated the character was perceived as masculine.

Procedure

Participants for this study were recruited in the Memorial Union, Oregon State University's student center. The participants were first asked to read the informed consent form and were given a verbal description of its contents as well. Upon reading the document, participants were then asked if they had any questions regarding the study and if they were sure that they would like to participate. Before the participants agreed to be a part of the study and signed the informed consent document, they were assured their personal information would be kept confidential. They were told that only the researchers would see their filled out documents and that after the data were entered electronically (with no attachment to their identity) their documents would be shredded. Once this was established, participants were asked to read a description of a person and were told that they would be answering some questions about this character after reading about him/her.

As the study followed a between-subjects design, each participant was exposed to only one level of each independent variable. Therefore, each participant read only one of the four character descriptions. After the participants read the character description, they were given the questionnaire and were told to "rate the individual on the following characteristics/personality

traits.”

After the participants had finished the questionnaire, they were told the study was over and were then given the debriefing form and were encouraged to ask any questions they might have about the study. There was no deception used in this study. Participants were aware that their responses/inferences about characters were being observed; they just did not know that specifically masculine and feminine characteristics were being observed and that the effect of gender stereotype activation was being tested. This information was all clearly detailed in the debriefing form and resulting conversation.

Results

In this study, it was predicted that the activation of a male stereotype would increase the extent to which a character would be rated as masculine. It was predicted that the masculinity rating would increase at a greater level if the character was male, and the masculinity rating would increase more modestly if the character was female. Without the activation of a male stereotype, male characters were rated higher than female character in terms of masculinity on the likert scale. With the presence of a male stereotype, males were still rated as more masculine than female characters. See Table 1 for means and standard deviations of these groups.

The data were analyzed with a 2 (character gender) x 2 (stereotype activation) Analysis of Variance (ANOVA). As predicted, there was a significant main effect for stereotype activation, $F(1,36) = 7.679$, $p = .009$, with stereotype activation producing a higher masculinity score than a lack of stereotype activation.

There was not a significant main effect for character gender, $F(1,36) = 2.420$, $p = .129$. The gender of the character did not affect the extent to which he/she was perceived to be masculine or feminine.

In addition, there was not a significant interaction of character gender and stereotype activation, $F(1,36) = 0.635, p = .431$. Both male and female characters were perceived as more masculine when accompanied by the presence of the male stereotype.

Discussion

It was hypothesized that the presence of a male stereotype would increase a character's perceived masculinity, regardless of the character's gender, but to a greater extent when the character being rated was a male. The influence of the male stereotype was supported, as characters were rated as more masculine when the stereotype was activated. The effect of character gender was not upheld. The character was not rated more masculine or feminine based on his/her gender.

These findings are relatively consistent with previous research, especially affirming the notions explored by Moss-Racusin et al. (2010) and Bargh, Chen, and Burrows (1996). Stereotype activation theory was certainly present in this study, and it has consistently been found to have significant influence in other scenarios as well. Also, occupation appeared to play a role in perceived masculinity, much like it did in previous research. Educators are traditionally feminine, and the male characters that did not have the male stereotype activation were rated as being neither feminine nor masculine, falling into the neutral zone. Male characters with the male stereotype activation, however, were rated as being masculine. This suggests that without a male stereotype, males who are in the education field may be perceived as less masculine. Whether this is due to occupation, however, we cannot say, as there may be other factors associated with the low masculinity rating.

Regardless of the cause of gender stereotypes in this study, the current research affirms the stereotype activation theory and suggests that stereotypes are present and can indeed be

activated, at least in a circumstance similar to that in our study. Gender role theory also seems to be present in some form and may propose a possible explanation for the low masculinity ratings of male characters that did not have the male stereotype activation. Gender role theory suggests that people are socialized to think that women typically take on expressive roles (teaching included in this category), while men typically take on instrumental roles. The lack of perceived masculinity of our male character suggests that because he broke the traditional gender roles, he was thought of as being less masculine.

There is, however, the possibility of demand characteristics affecting the masculinity rating of our characters. Some of our participants seemed to be able to speculate as to what we were hypothesizing, asking questions of us that affirmed their knowing of our hypothesis. While only a few participants seemed to catch on, it is conceivable that other participants experienced the same thought process but simply did not express it to our researchers. While there is a chance that their speculation of our hypothesis did not affect their responses, it would be irresponsible for us to ignore the possibility completely, as it could potentially damage our internal validity.

The external validity of our study may also not be substantially high. The type of task that was performed in our study is something that would much more likely be done in a research setting than in the actual outside world. Yes, individuals do make inferences about others on a daily basis, but individuals are typically not presented with such blunt stereotype activation cues and are typically not asked to rate individuals whom they do not know on a variety of personality traits.

Future researchers who wish to further explore our findings would be wise to make the scenario more “life-like” and demand greater commitment from the participants. Perhaps instead of having participants read character biographies, they could meet individuals who either

displayed masculine qualities or displayed neutral traits. Participants could then be asked a series of questions about these individuals, but not simply rate the individuals on traits as they did in our study. The stereotype activation could also be varied to attain a greater spectrum of data to analyze and compare. While we simply had two levels – stereotype present or not – it would be interesting to see if a stronger male stereotype elicited a stronger rating of masculinity. Participant gender would also be an interesting participant variable to explore that our research team did not opt to investigate.

While our study cannot be directly applied to the “real world,” the findings from our study could be looked at in the context of daily living to determine a more appropriate way to ascertain the extent to which stereotype activation theory and gender role theory affect the lives of individuals. The results from our study suggest that stereotypes are present in individuals and can be activated by a relatively small cue. The extent to which various stereotypes affect the way in which certain individuals are perceived remains to be discovered.

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Table 1

Mean Masculinity Score by Character Gender and Stereotype Activation.

	Stereotype Present <i>Mean (SD)</i>	Stereotype Absent <i>Mean (SD)</i>
Male Character	28.36 (4.717)	22.2 (5.750)
Female Character	24.30 (5.851)	20.89 (5.487)

Appendix A

Character Descriptions

A. (Male, stereotype present)

Stan is an educator in the Corvallis school district. He is thirty years old and has been teaching for seven years. He teaches high school history and is very popular among the students and staff, who describe him as assertive and ambitious.

B. (Male, no stereotype present)

Stan is an educator in the Corvallis school district. He is thirty years old and has been teaching for seven years. He teaches high school history and is very popular among the students and staff.

C. (Female, stereotype present)

Sally is an educator in the Corvallis school district. She is thirty years old and has been teaching for seven years. She teaches high school history and is very popular among the students and staff, who describe her as assertive and ambitious.

D. (Female, no stereotype present)

Sally is an educator in the Corvallis school district. She is thirty years old and has been teaching for seven years. She teaches high school history and is very popular among the students and staff.

Appendix B

Trait Inferences Questionnaire

Character Rating

Please rate the extent to which you believe the character in the story possesses the following traits based on the following scale:

	1	2	3	4
Individual				Individual
Does not				Possesses
Possess Trait				Trait

1. Competitive

	1	2	3	4
Individual				Individual
Does not				Possesses
Possess Trait				Trait

2. Caring

	1	2	3	4
Individual				Individual
Does not				Possesses
Possess Trait				Trait

3. Independent

	1	2	3	4
Individual				Individual
Does not				Possesses
Possess Trait				Trait

4. Patient

	1	2	3	4
Individual				Individual
Does not				Possesses
Possess Trait				Trait

5. Rational

1	2	3	4
Individual			Individual
Does not			Possesses
Possess Trait			Trait

6. Generous

1	2	3	4
Individual			Individual
Does not			Possesses
Possess Trait			Trait

7. Dominant

1	2	3	4
Individual			Individual
Does not			Possesses
Possess Trait			Trait

8. Understanding

1	2	3	4
Individual			Individual
Does not			Possesses
Possess Trait			Trait

9. Aggressive

1	2	3	4
Individual			Individual
Does not			Possesses
Possess Trait			Trait

10. Indecisive

1	2	3	4
Individual			Individual
Does not			Possesses
Possess Trait			Trait

11. Please indicate whether you are male (m) or female (f).

M F