Sex-Role Stereotypes: Self-Reports of Behavior

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The present study represents a self-reported behavioral approach to the study of sex differences and sex-role stereotypes. One hundred forty-eight undergraduate women and men responded anonymously in group testing sessions to two questionnaires. The first questionnaire asked them to report their own involvement in 45 masculine and feminine sex-typed behaviors; the second questionnaire asked for their perceptions of the involvement of men and women in the same behaviors. Major findings included (a) sex differences in reported ability, enjoyment, performance, and opportunity which mirrored traditional sex-role stereotypes and indicated greater competence at stereotypic behaviors (the majority of differences significant at $p < .001$); (b) perceptions of men and women's behavior also consistent with sex-role stereotypes; and (c) sex differences in the perceived appropriateness of behaviors ($p < .05$) which indicate greater sex-typing in men's (as compared with women's) perceptions of both sexes. The study focuses on the self-reported behavioral bases of gender-specific stereotypes and how these behaviors are influenced by aspects of the social environment (such as reinforcement contingencies) and by aspects of the person (such as simple learning and performance deficits), and suggests ways in which sex differences might be changed to provide increased behavioral options for women and men.

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Despite the interest in sex-role stereotypes, the research literature is limited in what it tells us about how men and women actually feel and behave. Traditional sex-role studies (Broverman, Vogel, Broverman, Clarkson, & Rosenkrantz, 1972; McKee & Sherriffs, 1957; Sherriffs & Jarrett, 1953) have identified the traits that comprise gender-specific stereotypes, but have provided no information on the accuracy of the stereotypes. While more recent research has concluded that sex-role stereotypes are fairly accurate representations of self-ratings of attributions (e.g., Spence, Helmreich, & Stapp, 1975), questions remain as to whether the attributes that are differentially ascribed to women and men are also indicative of observable differences between the sexes. In order to answer these questions, it may be necessary to compare the generalized stereotypes reported in previous research to reports of the actual attitudes and behaviors of men and women.

The trait approach to sex-role research is empirically constrained in this regard. Traits are inferred from behavior and therefore are vulnerable to idiosyncratic interpretations; for example, what is "aggressive" or "nurturant"? (Hall, Note 1). Adequate tests of the accuracy of sex-role stereotypes require operational definitions so that the existence of actual differences can be verified empirically. In other words, if men are in fact more aggressive than women, how would we know that by watching men? What would we observe or what would men tell us that would allow us to make this discrimination? If stereotypes are valid and, hence, based on real differences, a behavioral approach can identify these differences.

An additional advantage of a behavioral approach is the opportunity it offers to examine other relevant factors once the accuracy of sex-role stereotypes has been determined. If sex-role stereotypes are without basis (that is, men and women do not differ behaviorally), a behavioral approach can provide information regarding variables that might maintain prejudiced viewpoints. In the much more likely event that there are behavioral differences between women and men, a behavioral approach can examine factors that cause or maintain these differences. The trait approach does not allow for exploration of these questions in that it implies the presence of mystical, immutable qualities that are indicative of differences in the internal characteristics of men and women (Condry & Dyer, 1976).

A behavioral approach to sex differences and sex-role stereotypes based on social learning principles is summarized in Figure 1. From a social learning perspective, sex-role stereotypes are based on either actual sex differences or faulty perceptions. In the more likely case that the stereotypes

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3This diagram represents a modified and expanded version of a model from O'Connor (Note 2).