Sex vs. Status in Sex-Associated Stereotypes

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The trait content of sex stereotypes can be created by social role status alone, without reference to sex. In contemporary culture sex and role status are confounded: Authority roles are played by men; women occupy subordinate positions. TV commercials encode the unequal status as tacit assumptions in brief scenarios. Videotaped reenactments of three such commercials served as stimuli. One reenactment of each duplicated the original network versions. In a second reenactment of the same commercials, the male and female actors switched roles. Subjects (n = 128 men and women) viewed the commercials and made personality attributions to each character on five sex-stereotypic dimensions, e.g., “dominant—submissive.” Stereotypic trait patterns commonly attributed to sex were determined more by the actor’s implicit role status in the portrayed relationship than by the actor’s sex. Showing women in high-status roles with the social support of coparticipants may be a means of breaking the stereotypes.

It was hypothesized that the stereotypic personality attributions commonly associated with sex could be created by unequal social role status. The female stereotype focuses on responsiveness and includes dependence, submissiveness, emotionality, sensitivity, nurturance, and compliance; the male stereotype focuses on physical and intellectual power and includes independence, dominance, rationality, objectivity, and leadership (Ashmore & Del Boca, 1979; Rosenkrantz et al., 1968). Most educated people sincerely disavow such stereotypes—when the topic is the focus of their

1The authors thank Dr. Phyllis Katz and an anonymous reviewer for excellent suggestions used in preparing this article.
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conscious attention. However, when conscious attention is focused on other matters, as it is virtually all of the time, the stereotypes operate unconsciously, as automatic assumptions. As a result, they still influence self-concepts, aspirations, opportunities, and life experiences (Bem & Bem, 1970). The stereotypic traits are correlated with sex, but correlation does not prove causation.

In contemporary culture sex and role status are also correlated. Males hold the authority roles, females subordinate ones. In 1970, 80% of employed women worked in the lowest job classifications. Most of the other 20% worked as secretaries, teachers, or nurses following the instructions of men who were bosses, school administrators, or doctors. In addition, traditional marriage roles define the husband's career and personal wishes as more important than the wife's. It is important to distinguish the person from the role. Although wives and husbands view each other personally as equals, the wife role is implicitly defined as subordinate in status to the husband role. All of these status inequalities are portrayed ubiquitously in the media (McArthur & Eisen, 1976).

The unequal status of the sexes follows the same principle as the stereotypes: Equality is sincerely endorsed when it is the focus of conscious attention, but most of the time habit and automatic assumptions create inequality. Thus, in contrast to our sincere but infrequent conscious rejection of stereotypes, we practice and observe the sex-correlated status inequalities continually. The present study tested whether high- vs. low-status role occupancy could create the same personality impressions culturally attributed to sex.

This study differed from most previous work on stereotyping: It did not investigate whether stereotypes exist, what their content is, the cognitive processes involved, or how children learn them. Rather, it began with the assumption that stereotypes exist and their content is well known. Their biasing of perception and evaluation has been documented (see Nieva & Gutek, 1980), as have relevant cognitive processes and inference errors (see Nisbett & Ross, 1980). In contrast, the present study was designed to investigate a situational condition, role status, that could create the stereotypes and could also, therefore, break them. A consistent finding of attribution research (Ross, 1977) is that observers attribute characteristics of an actor's behavior to dispositional traits of the actor, rather than to

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3 The correlation between sex and status is not symmetrical for the two sexes. The stereotypes require that all authority roles be held by men, but not that all men hold authority roles. In contrast, all women must hold subordinate roles, but not all subordinate roles must be held by women. That is, men can hold either authority or subordinate roles, and subordinate roles can be held by either sex. The empirical correlation is created by the restriction of authority roles to men only, and the restriction of women to subordinate roles only.