Sex Effects in Evaluating Applicant Qualifications: A Reexamination

Donald G. Gardner and Richard Discenza
University of Colorado–Colorado Springs

It has been hypothesized that female applicants for male sex-typed jobs are evaluated using different selection criteria than males for the same jobs (E. A. Cecil, R. J. Paul, and R. A. Olins, "Perceived Importance of Selected Variables Used to Evaluate Male and Female Job Applicants," Personnel Psychology, 1973, 26, 397–404). The present study examined this hypothesis in two separate experiments, in an attempt to replicate the findings and conclusions of Cecil et al. Results do not support the hypothesis that applicant sex affects the ratings of importance of applicant qualifications for sex-typed jobs, although raters do appear to stereotype the kinds of jobs for which males and females are likely to apply. Type of job for which applicants apply is a stronger determinant of what qualifications are evaluated as important in an interview situation. Use of selection criteria (e.g., tests) that validly predict later job performance and that are standardized for all job applicants, might prevent sex discrimination more than training raters to be wary of sex stereotyping of required applicant qualifications.

A major concern for most work organizations is ensuring equality in the utilization of human resources. One aspect of that concern involves the effective utilization of women in jobs that were previously sex typed as male. Human resource managers are being required to proactively respond to demands for job opportunities, responsibilities, and working conditions that in previous years were dominated by men. Their responses include developing new training programs, recruiting from sources not previously tapped, and increasing compensation levels to correct sex discrimination in pay. Another major fo-

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Several studies on selection (staffing) decisions have reported tendencies for raters to depreciate the qualifications of females relative to comparable males (cf. Powell, 1987, for a review). For example, Taynor and Deaux (1975) found that performance judgments were more favorable when the mode of behavior in a feminine sex role task was feminine, or consistent with gender. Similarly, Parsons and Liden (1984) concluded that job applicants were more likely to be rated highly when their sex (and associated stereotypes) was congruent with the stereotyped demands of the job than when they were incongruent. It is fairly clear that under certain circumstances there are differences in how highly male and female applicants for a specified job are rated (e.g., Tosi & Einbender, 1985).

But it is also important to know whether raters use different evaluation criteria (objective and subjective assessments of applicant qualifications) in evaluating applicants for a given job as a function of the sex of the job applicants. For example, a rater might consider appearance more important for a female applicant than a male applicant for a managerial job (c.f., Heilman & Stopeck, 1985), and rate only female applicants on the appearance selection criterion. However, little research exists that explicitly considers whether female applicants are evaluated on different selection criteria than male applicants for any given job. Indeed, a recent review of the sex discrimination research literature (Powell, 1987) does not address this important question, perhaps because of a dearth of empirical examinations of the question.

The 1978 Uniform Guidelines on Employee Selection Procedures (Section 11), which interpret Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, clearly state that criteria used in employment selection procedures must be standardized across all job applicants. However, some selection procedures, although uniformly applied across applicants, allow for the possibility that applicant qualifications are differentially evaluated by applicant raters (e.g., unstructured interviews, subjectively evaluated application blanks; cf. Arvey, 1979). Because raters have greater freedom to ask/evaluate whatever they want of an applicant with such subjective techniques, there is a greater tendency for raters to be inconsistent in evaluating qualifications of applicants than with more objective techniques (e.g., paper-and-pencil ability tests). This of course contributes to the well-known poor predictive validity of subjective selection procedures (Hunter & Hunter, 1984). More importantly in terms of Equal Employment Opportunity legislation, such differential evaluations of applicant qualifications may be linked to demographic characteristics (viz., sex) of the applicant. That is, it is possible that for certain jobs different qualifications are expected of applicants as a function of their sex, perhaps because of stereotypes used by raters in evaluating the applicants.