Male and Female Careers: Sex-Role and Occupational Stereotypes Among High School Students

Sylvia Lifschitz

State University of New York at Stony Brook

The present study combined two areas of research, occupational perceptions and sex-role stereotypes, in a 2 (Gender of Subject: male, female) × 2 (Gender of Character: male, Paul or David; female, Paula or Susan) × 2 (Gender of Occupation: male, doctor or lawyer; female, nurse or secretary) between-subjects factorial design. High school students rated male and female characters in traditional and nontraditional occupations on the following six personality traits: ambitious, effective, emotional, intelligent, responsible, and traditional. The main finding was that occupational stereotypes were more prevalent than sex-role stereotypes. Reasons for this outcome are discussed and the implications of the study in light of past and future research are considered.

Inasmuch as research has indicated conclusively that people have definite, quantifiable attitudes about the personality characteristics associated with males and females (Broverman, Vogel, Broverman, Clarkson, & Rosenkrantz, 1972; Williams, Bennett, & Best, 1975) and with various occupations (O'Dowd & Beardslee, 1967), the next research issue should be the interface of these two stereotype systems. Limited research combining sex-role and occupational stereotypes has demonstrated that subjects' ratings of occupations are most influenced by the interaction of the gender of the stimulus person and the sexual dimension of the occupation.

1 This article is based on part of a doctoral dissertation submitted by the author to the State University of New York at Stony Brook. The research was supported by U.S. Public Health Service Biomedical Support Grant 5 S07 RR 07067-12 to the State University of New York at Stony Brook during the summer of 1977. The author would like to thank Drs. Robert M. Liebert and Beverly Birns for their comments and the principal and teachers at Ward Melville High School in Setauket, New York, for their cooperation.

2 All correspondence should be sent to Dr. Sylvia Lifschitz, 2130 Elder Street, Reading, Pennsylvania 19604.
occupation (Shinar, 1978; Suchner & More, 1975; Touhey, 1974). Increased flexibility in occupational roles for both males and females raises questions about the limiting effects of existing sex-role and occupational stereotypes on career choice. Albrecht (1976) and Shinar (1975) found that male and female college subjects, as well as nonstudents, agreed on the characterization of over 100 occupations as masculine, feminine, or neutral. The specific parameters defining these gender-based distinctions in occupations need clarification.

Rosenkrantz, Vogel, Bee, Broverman, and Broverman (1968) developed a sex-role questionnaire in the first study of a series that has since been used by other researchers (Touhey, 1974; Williams & Best, 1977). Bipolar adjectives are arranged with some number of dots between them, and the subject is asked to complete the task by marking between the two extremes the point that he or she feels is appropriate. The present study uses adverbs with adjectival bipolar opposites as rating scales in order to make the task more similar to the way people generally talk about others. People rarely talk about someone as being "7 on ambition" outside the laboratory, although use of the words "very" or "extremely" with adjectives is quite common. Empirical examination of the difference between rating scales with adverbial phrases and those with only adjectival points has yet to be conducted and is essential for determining the more accurate type of scale.

Each subject was asked to rate one stimulus person, either a traditional (male in male occupation, female in female occupation) or a nontraditional (male in female occupation, female in male occupation) character on the following six personality traits: ambitious, effective, emotional, intelligent, responsible, and traditional. These adjectives were chosen from studies of sex-role stereotyping (Broverman et al., 1972) and occupational stereotyping (O'Dowd & Beardslee, 1967) to be different from each other and to distinguish males from females.

Several considerations dictated the choice of occupations for this study. First was their usual characterization by subjects in several studies (Albrecht, 1976; Shinar, 1975) as male (lawyer, doctor) and female (secretary, nurse). Examination of the 1970 United States Bureau of the Census report revealed that there were an approximately equal percentage of people in the gender nontraditional roles represented by these four occupations. Another requirement was flexibility in which gender filled the role. In other words, it had to be relatively easy for subjects to imagine a female or male in the gender nontraditional occupation. Within the occupational sets (legal: lawyer/secretary; medical: doctor/nurse), people performed similar functions and worked in similar work environments. Although the traditionally female occupations in both pairs were the subordinate ones, this was more a reflection of the actual position of women in the workplace than of any shortcoming in the choice of occupations. The chosen occupations also needed to be familiar to high school students.