Teaching Gender-Related Material: The Effect of Group Sex Composition on Perceptions of a Female Instructor

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This study investigated how group sex composition affects female and male students' perceptions of female instructors who teach in the area of counseling women. Three components of person perception were assessed: cognitive, affective, and behavioral. The cognitive domain included evaluations of the instructor and the subject matter presented; the affective domain included emotional responses to the instructor and the subject matter; and the behavioral domain included actions in response to the instructor, operationalized as the number of questions asked by students. Students with some interest in a career in the helping professions viewed one of two videotapes either with a group of same-sex peers or in a group in which they were the only male or female. One tape described a gender-neutral topic (psychology and the law) and the other described a female gender-related topic (sex bias in counseling women). The same female instructor made both presentations. Students then completed the measures. As predicted, the sex composition of the student group affected person perception, especially in the affective and behavior domains. Recommendations are made for future research.

Imparting new knowledge to future psychologists is an essential part of graduate education. Effectively teaching such material, however, may present a...
unique challenge for female instructors, particularly those who teach gender-related material.

Psychologists have long known that perceptions of persons involve attitudes toward them (Wallston & O'Leary, 1981). These attitudes are essentially likes or dislikes that have behavioral consequences. Recent research documents the influence of gender on person perception and highlights the importance of understanding how this influence moderates behavior (O'Leary, Unger, & Wallston, 1985). Males and females are socialized in the same social context, and therefore acquire many of the same views of gender-related status attributes. As a number of studies indicate, members of both sexes hold less favorable views of women than men, and assign higher ratings to a man than an "equivalent" woman in such areas as task performance and job qualifications (Deaux, 1985).

Studies that specifically investigated responses to individuals who teach gender-related material report similar findings. Gilbert, Lee, and Chiddix (1981) found that both male and female students evaluated a male instructor teaching the counseling of women more favorably than a female instructor. A later study by Gilbert, Long, and Holt (1988) broadened evaluations of students' perceptions to include the affective and behavioral components of person perception in addition to the cognitive component assessed by Gilbert et al. (1981). Both male and female students in this study perceived the male instructor more positively than the female instructor on all three dimensions of person perception.

Factors in addition to instructor's gender and students' sex can influence person perception in teaching situations. One relevant factor for students is group sex composition. Because more female than male students are attracted to courses on counseling women, men in these classes typically are in the minority. In many other academic classes and training settings, however, women are in the minority both as students and faculty.

According to Dion (1985), the numerical distinctiveness of one's sex, in particular, plays a crucial role in person perception. The fewer the members of one's sex in a group, the greater the salience of gender and the stronger the proneness to perceive self, others, and the group in terms of gender categories. A case in point is a study by Cota and Dion (1986) in which gender was more salient in the spontaneous self-concepts of members of the minority sex in mixed-sex groups than in the spontaneous self-concept of members in same-sex groups.

The present study manipulated the group sex composition of students instructed either on counseling women or on a gender-neutral topic, and then compared the responses of students who were in same-sex groups with the responses of students who were the only (minority) male or female in mixed-sex groups.