PSYCHOLOGY AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT, (ISSN: 2537-950X), 1984, *1*(1), 33–40

http://dx.doi.org/10.2224/phd.6254

RECOGNITION OF SEX-ROLE STEREOTYPES IN PRIME-TIME TELEVISION

PAULA M. POPOVICH AND ELIOT J. BUTTER
University of Daytona

While traditional television characters have typically been portrayed as sex-stereotyped, recently, more unstereotyped characters have been introduced into programming. We proposed that college-age participants, when presented with prime-time characters that have been prerated as examples of stereotyped and unstereotyped portrayals, would perceive the differential stereotypes as represented by ratings of sex-typed traits. Attractiveness and liking ratings were also taken for each of the characters, and sex differences in all of these ratings were explored. Results showed that male and female television characters were rated at the male and female extremes of the scale. Means for the unstereotyped characters were between the masculine and feminine extremes of the stereotyped character means. There was a significant sex of rater × trait interaction, whereby female participants rated the characters as more feminine on the female-valued traits than did male participants. Unstereotyped characters were considered more attractive and more liked than stereotyped characters. Implications for modeling of television characters are discussed.

Keywords: sex-role stereotypes, television, prime-time television, television characters, sex differences.

In recent years, there has been a marked move to reduce sex-role stereotyping. Once a goal of only the more extreme factions of the women's rights movement, this move toward equalization of the sexes has

Paula M. Popovich and Eliot J. Butter, Department of Psychology, University of Dayton.
Paula M. Popovich is now at the Department of Psychology, Michigan State University.
An earlier version of this research was presented at the 56th Annual Meeting of the Midwestern Psychological Association, in 1980.
The content and formatting of this article were edited and updated in 2016, with efforts made to preserve the original meaning.
Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Eliot J. Butter Department of Psychology, University of Dayton, Dayton, OH 45469, USA.

since become an accepted goal by much of the American population. Both women and men no longer wish to restrict their behaviors to the rigid categories that have been developed more from vague traditions than from any true differences between the sexes (Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974) Television, as a capsulized view of society and itself a means of socialization (Elkin & Handel, 1960), has reflected this move by introducing a new genre of programming containing more unstereotyped character portrayals for both sexes.

Television, however, has not always been so liberated in its programming. Since 1954, there have been at least 20 studies in which sex-role differences in television character portrayals have been investigated, with the majority of results showing that these portrayals continue to be stereotyped (Perloff, Brown, & Miller, 1978). In view of these consistently sex-typed characterizations, Busby (1975) commented that the images of male and female characters in television has become an important consideration. However, there has been little research to determine exactly how adults perceive these images, especially regarding level of stereotyping.

Busby (1974) indirectly addressed this question as part of a project designed to investigate sex-role stereotyping in children's programming. She utilized male and female undergraduate and graduate students to rate children's cartoon programming, using adjectives designed to distinguish male from female traits, and found that raters perceived the cartoon characters to be stereotyped. Further, Busby found no differences in how male and female raters responded to the characters using this scale.

This type of research on adults' perceptions of television characters has, however, not been conducted using prime-time programming, which is the type of television that most adults watch and react to. Thus, we investigated adults' perceptions of both stereotyped and unstereotyped television characters in prime-time programming. Although Busby (1974) did not find any sex differences in perceptions, these differences may occur in a sample that is less aware than Busby's participants were of what is being investigated.

Comstock, Chaffee, Katzman, McCombs, and Roberts (1978), in their study on television and behavior, pointed out that males and females have different television viewing patterns, as well as different preferences for shows. The literature on imitation also shows that, within shows, children tend to attend to and imitate a same-sex character more often than they do a character of the opposite sex (Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1961, 1963).

At the adult level, Lull, Hanson, and Marx (1977) examined perceptions of characters in sex-typed television commercials, and found that male participants attended more to even peripheral male characters than to female characters. Lull et al. also revealed that female participants were

more sensitive to the female stereotypes presented in these commercials and perceived them more often than did the male participants.

With attempts being made in television programming to introduce fewer sex-typed character portrayals into prime-time viewing slots, it is important to determine whether or not adults perceive these characters as stereotyped (i.e., possessing mainly the sex-typed characteristics usually associated with their sex) or unstereotyped (i.e., possessing traits of the opposite sex, as well as the characteristics of their own sex).

Our major hypothesis was that college-age participants, when presented with examples of stereotyped and unstereotyped television characters, would perceive stereotyped male and female characters as being more masculine and feminine, respectively, than the other characters. We further posited that unstereotyped male and female characters would be perceived as possessing more feminine and masculine traits, respectively, than the other male and female characters. The outcome will be reflected in the sex of character × stereotyped interaction.

Possible differences between male and female participants in terms of their perceptions of the characters were also investigated, although no specific hypotheses were offered because of the exploratory nature of the study. Additionally, attractiveness and liking ratings were obtained for the characters, although no hypotheses were made regarding these measures.

Method

Participants

Participants recruited for the pilot study to select the characters were 17 male and 34 female undergraduate students enrolled in upper-level psychology courses at the University of Dayton. Participants for the main part of the investigation—all of whom were familiar with the characters chosen in the pilot—were 50 male and 50 female undergraduate students enrolled in the Introductory Psychology paper at the University of Dayton.

Procedure

Participants were run individually or in groups of up to 10, and were told that the study dealt with perceptions of television characters. Responses to items were made on a 7-point rating scale, using the point that best reflected participants' feelings about the character regarding each particular trait. Participants were asked to rate only those characters who they themselves had seen at least once on television, and to fill out each of the 26 sets of traits for each character with which they were familiar.

Fifty major prime-time television characters (25 male and 25 female) were rated on their stereotyped behavior to reduce the large pool of characters to a small sample of stereotyped and nonstereotyped characters.

A *stereotyped character* was defined as possessing sex-typed traits (taken from Broverman, Vogel, Broverman, Clarkson, & Rosenkrantz, 1972) whereas a *nonstereotyped character* was defined as one who did not exhibit these traits. Ratings for each character were made on a 5-point scale, with 1 = *stereotyped* and 5 = *nonstereotyped* as the bipolar anchors.

In this way, mean ratings were obtained for each character and the two characters with the lowest and highest means within each sex were chosen as examples of stereotyped and nonstereotyped portrayals, respectively. Female unstereotyped characters were Margaret Hoolihan of *M*A*S*H* (*M* = 3.447) and Ann Romano of *One Day at a Time* (*M* = 3.256). Female stereotyped characters were Edith Bunker of *All in the Family* (*M* = 1.417) and Marion Cunningham of *Happy Days* (*M* = 1.326). Male unstereotyped characters were Mork from *Mork and Mindy* (*M* = 4.159) and John-Boy Walton of *The Waltons* (*M* = 3.787). Male stereotyped characters were Steve McGarrett of *Hawaii 5-0* (*M* = 1.422) and Theo Kojak of *Kojak* (*M* = 1.370).

Measure

We developed a questionnaire to assess the perceived sex stereotypes of the abovementioned eight television characters. The questionnaire consisted of the names of each of the characters, followed by a list of 26 bipolar adjectives separated by a 7-point rating scale to be marked by the participant at the point that best reflected his/her feelings about the character regarding each trait. The adjectives included eight male-valued and eight female-valued traits (scored as 1 = *feminine* to 7 = *masculine*), representing the male and female stereotypes used in the definitions of the pilot study and taken from the Broverman et al. (1972) list of sex-typed traits. This list of adjectives also contained eight "filler" items to deter participants from recognizing the true purpose of the questionnaire. Finally, attractive/not attractive (1 = *not attractive*, 7 = *attractive*) and like/dislike (1 = *dislike*, 7 = *like*) dimensions were included in the list of adjectives.

The ordering of the 26 traits was random but kept constant across all characters. The poles of half of the traits were reversed to preclude response biases. The packets of eight characters were assembled in eight random orders, utilizing a Latin square design.

Study Design

A five-factor hierarchical mixed design was employed, combining four of the factors: sex of the rater (male vs. female), sex of the character (male vs. female), level of stereotype of the character, and male- and female-valued traits. A fifth variable, character pair, which referred to the two

male or female stereotyped or nonstereotyped characters in each cell, was nested within sex of character and stereotype.

Results

Sex-Typed Traits

To simplify presentation, the 16 sex-typed traits were collapsed into the male-valued or female-valued clusters following the procedure of Broverman et al. (1972). Scores on the eight male-valued and eight female-valued trait clusters were averaged, yielding two composite scores for each of the eight characters. A high composite scores for either would mean a more masculine rating, whereas a low value would indicate a more feminine rating. A hierarchical analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed on the composite trait scores for each character, with sex of the rater, sex of the character, level of stereotype of the character, and trait value being factorially combined, and the character variable being nested within the sex of the character and stereotype.

As we had hypothesized, the sex of character × stereotype interaction was significant, $F(1, 98) = 989.289$, $p < .001$, showing that male and female stereotyped and unstereotyped characters were rated differentially. This interaction, however, is also represented in the significant higher-order interactions of sex of character × stereotype × trait, $F(1, 98) = 44.126$, $p < .001$, sex of character × trait, $F(1, 98) = 63.298$, $p < .001$, and stereotype × trait, $F(1, 98) = 117.248$, $p < .001$. Figure 1 portrays the sex of character × stereotype interaction in terms of the significant higher-order interaction, and shows that it is approximately the same for both male- and female-valued traits, which is the third variable in the higher-order interaction. This two-way interaction is apparently unconfounded by the trait variable and is interpretable in itself. Variations on the ratings of the female characters account for the significant sex of character × stereotype × trait interaction. As can be seen in Figure 1, the difference between ratings for the stereotyped male and unstereotyped male characters is about the same for both male- and female-valued traits. However, the difference between the stereotyped female and unstereotyped female characters is greater for male-valued than for female-valued traits. Unstereotyped females were rated as much more masculine than stereotyped female characters were.

In terms of the significant sex of character × stereotype interaction, Figure 1 also shows that stereotyped males were rated as more masculine than stereotyped female characters were. Unstereotyped male characters were rated as more feminine than unstereotyped females were. Unstereotyped males were also rated as more feminine than stereotyped males, while unstereotyped female characters were rated as more

masculine than stereotyped females were. These differences were significant according to a Scheffé test of multiple comparisons (.3151).

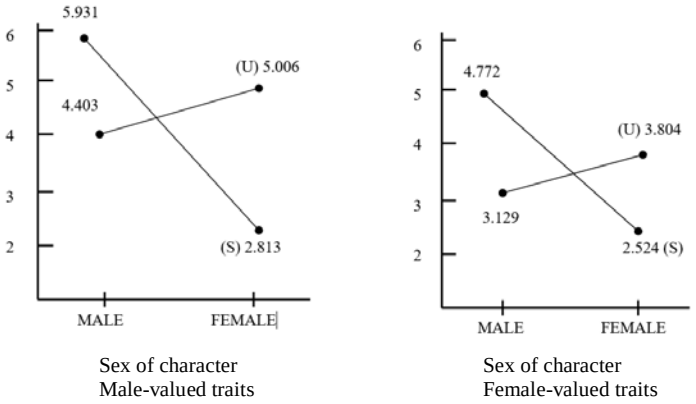

Figure 1. *Mean trait values according to sex of character and stereotype.*
Note. S = stereotyped, U = unstereotyped.

Providing support for the possibility of sex differences in the participants' ratings was a significant sex of rater × trait interaction, $F(1, 98) = 8.630$, $p < .004$. A post hoc Scheffé test of multiple comparisons was performed on the male- and female-valued traits, as rated by the male and female participants. The analysis revealed that all characters were generally rated higher (i.e., more masculine) on the male-valued than on the female-valued traits (.1434), by both sexes of raters. However, the female-valued traits as given by the female participants were significantly lower (i.e., more feminine) than the ratings for the female-valued traits given by the male participants. Thus, female participants tended to have a different perception than the males when rating the female-valued traits.

The interaction of trait × character nested within sex of character and stereotype was also found to be significant, $F(1, 98) = 109.761$, $p < .001$, indicating that differences existed in the trait ratings for the two characters paired in the same grouping.

Significant main effects included sex of character, $F(1, 98) = 718.384$, $p < .001$), with male characters ($M = 4.559$) being rated as more masculine than female characters were ($M = 3.536$). The main effect of stereotype was significant, $F(1, 98) = 4.968$, $p < .028$, with unstereotyped characters ($M = 4.085$) being rated as more masculine than stereotyped characters were ($M = 4.010$). Trait was significant, $F(1, 98) = 514.363$, $p < .001$, with male-valued traits ($M = 4.538$) being rated as more masculine than female-valued traits were ($M = 3.557$). Another significant main effect was found for character nested within sex of character and stereotype, $F(1, 98) =$

33.594, $p < .001$. There were no other significant main effects or interactions.

Attractiveness

A separate 2 (sex of rater) × 2 (sex of character) × 2 (stereotype of character) × 2 (character pair) ANOVA was performed on attractive/not attractive ratings for each of the eight television characters. A high value on the attractiveness dimension indicates a more attractive rating, whereas a low value would signify a more unattractive rating. Results revealed a significant sex of rater stereotype × sex of character interaction, $F(1, 98) = 13.840$, $p < .001$. A post hoc Scheffé test of all possible comparisons was performed for male and female stereotyped and unstereotyped characters as rated by male and female participants. These comparisons showed that when rating characters of the opposite sex (e.g., male participants rating female characters), participants found the stereotyped characters significantly less attractive than the unstereotyped characters (.9082). When rating characters of the same sex, however, the differences in means, although in the same direction, were not significant. Opposite-sexed stereotyped characters were, therefore, not perceived as being very attractive by male or female raters.

Significant main effects for the attractiveness ratings included sex of rater, $F(1, 98) = 8.040$, $p < .006$, with female participants giving higher ratings ($M = 4.960$) than male participants did ($M = 4.593$). Sex of character was also significant, $F(1, 98) = 14.979$, $p < .001$, with female characters receiving higher ratings ($M = 4.943$) than male characters did ($M = 4.610$). Stereotype was also significant, $F(1, 98) = 75.658$, $p < .001$, with unstereotyped characters receiving higher attractiveness ratings ($M = 5.173$) than stereotyped characters did ($M = 4.38$). Character nested within sex of character and stereotype main effect was also significant, $F(4, 392) = 73.7904$, $p < .001$, pointing to character differences in the ratings.

Liking

A further 2 (sex of rater) × 2 (sex of character) × 2 (stereotype of character) × 2 (character pair) ANOVA was performed for the like/dislike dimensions. Results showed a significant sex of rater × stereotype × sex of character interaction, $F(1,98) = 15.475$, $p < .001$, as well as a significant sex of character × stereotype interaction, $F(1, 98) = 104.611$, $p < .001$, which is represented in the higher-order interaction. A Scheffé test of multiple comparisons for the sex of rater × stereotype × sex of character interaction revealed that stereotyped male characters were rated lower (i.e., liked less) than stereotyped female characters, although this difference was only significant for female participants (.9654). Stereotyped male characters were also rated lower than unstereotyped male characters, again

being significant for the ratings of female participants only. However, stereotyped female characters were rated higher (i.e., liked more) than unstereotyped female characters, and again this was only significant for the ratings of the female participants.

Significant main effects included sex of character, $F(1, 98) = 5.837$, $p < .018$, with female characters receiving higher liking ratings ($M = 5.415$) than male characters did ($M = 5.137$). The character nested within sex of character and stereotype main effect was also significant, $F(4, 392) = 31.032$, $p < .001$, again showing character differences in the ratings. No other significant main effects or interactions were found.

Discussion

Consistent with our main hypothesis, college-age participants did perceive specific prime-time television characters as being stereotyped or unstereotyped. Female stereotyped characters (Marion Cunningham and Edith Bunker) were rated as the more feminine characters, whereas male stereotyped characters (Steve McGarrett and Theo Kojak) were perceived as the more masculine characters. Unstereotyped characters were rated between the masculine and feminine extremes of the stereotyped characters, with unstereotyped males (Mork and John-Boy Walton) being rated as more feminine, and unstereotyped female characters (Margaret Hoolihan and Ann Romano) being rated as more masculine. These ratings for both sexes of unstereotyped characters were more toward the neutral point of the rating scale than were the ratings for the stereotyped characters. This recognition of the characters' differential stereotypes provides support for the contention that the newer, more unstereotyped characters that are now being introduced into television programming are being noticed and discriminated from the more stereotyped characters.

Lending support to the contention that there could be sex differences in the participants' ratings was a significant interaction between sex of the rater and male- and female-valued traits. Analysis of this interaction revealed that female participants tended to perceive the female-valued traits as more feminine than did male participants. This difference may be accounted for by a female tendency to be more sensitive to the portrayals of women in television. Lull et al. (1977) examined stereotyped commercials and found that female college-age participants were more sensitive than male participants were in recognizing the negative stereotypes of women (i.e., the presentation of women in extremely feminine portrayals). Our female participants may have rated the female-valued characteristics as more feminine because they, too, were more acutely aware of the portrayals of these more stereotyped traits.

We also found that participants, especially when rating characters of the opposite sex, perceived stereotyped characters as less attractive than unstereotyped characters. The strength of the relationship between participants and their ratings for the opposite sex suggest greater acceptance of out-of-role (i.e., unstereotyped) behavior for characters of the opposite sex than for characters of the same sex as the rater.

There is, however, some question as to whether participants understood the attractive/not attractive dimension to represent an affiliative type of interpersonal attraction or physical attractiveness, a difference that could alter the interpretation of the results. Nevertheless, there are several possible explanations that could be applied to both types of attractiveness. One explanation is that stereotyped characters, who are more rigid in their behavior, were perceived as less appealing than unstereotyped characters, whose ability to utilize both male-and female-valued traits in the most effective way portrays a more competent and stable individual.

Unstereotyped characters may have also been considered more attractive because of their youth and the fact that they were nearer in age to the participants than were the stereotyped characters. The youth of the unstereotyped characters may have led our participants to infer a greater attitude similarity, which has been shown to be a factor in interpersonal attraction (Byrne, 1971). The fact that these unstereotyped characters were younger and more attractive was not really avoidable, however. In reviewing the original list of 50 characters from which the examples used were chosen, it was found that, with only one exception, those characters who were rated as more unstereotyped (i.e., had a rating of 3 or higher on a 5-point scale from 1 = *stereotyped* to 5 = *unstereotyped*) were younger. It appears that, at least in prime-time television, unstereotyped behavior is attributed more often to younger individuals.

The like/dislike ratings showed that, in general, male stereotyped characters were liked less than stereotyped female characters were, especially when rated by female participants. Female participants also liked stereotyped male characters less than they did unstereotyped males. However, when rating female characters, participants, especially females, liked stereotyped females more than unstereotyped females. Although both sexes of raters seemed to like the more traditional stereotyped female than the more assertive and independent unstereotyped female, female raters seemed particularly sensitive to the difference.

This differential liking rating between the two sets of female characters may be understood in terms of a phenomenon investigated by Goldberg (1976), which concerns the prejudice that women have against women. Goldberg found that women did consider their own sex inferior, and that, actually, "…even when the facts give no support to this belief, they will

persist in downgrading the competence—in particular, the intellectual and professional competence—of their fellow females" (p. 128).

The female unstereotyped characters used in the present study were characters who are portrayed as intelligent women, operating at a fairly high level of professional competence. It is possible that the female participants may have downgraded these female characters to the point where their obvious competence was rejected and disliked. This uniquely female phenomenon would also explain why no such significant liking differences occurred in the ratings made by male participants.

These findings have important implications for television characters as a source of modeling. Bandura (1977) pointed out that attention paid to models can be a function of their attractiveness and appeal, proposing that "models who possess engaging qualities are sought out, while those lacking pleasing characteristics are generally ignored or rejected" (p. 24)

It is significant that college-age adults recognize and attend to differences in stereotyped behavior because, in their potential capacity as young parents, they will be in a position of great influence to young children, who often respond to the modeling influences of television. If adults recognize and prefer more unstereotyped (or androgynous) characters, they may pass this preference on to their children, who may then model these particular characters to a greater extent.

References

Bandura, A. (1977). *Social learning theory*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Bandura, A., Ross, D., & Ross, S. (1961). Transmission of aggression through imitation of aggressive models. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, *63*, 575–582.

Bandura, A., Ross, D., & Ross, S. (1963). Imitation of film-mediated aggressive models. *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, *66*, 3–11. **http://doi.org/d3hqv4**

Broverman, I. K., Vogel, S. R., Broverman, D. M., Clarkson, F. E., & Rosenkrantz, P. S. (1972). Sex-role stereotypes: A current appraisal. *Journal of Social Issues*, *28*, 59–78. **http://doi.org/bqf46g**

Busby, L. J. (1974). Defining the sex-role standard in network children's programs. *Journalism Quarterly*, *51*, 690–696. **http://doi.org/c3mxjz**

Busby, L. J. (1975). Sex-role research on the mass media. *Journal of Communication*, *25*, 107–131. **http://doi.org/djjq3d**

Byrne, D. (1971). *The attraction paradigm* (Vol. 11). New York, NY: Academic Press.

Comstock, G., Chaffee, S., Katzman, N., McCombs, M., & Roberts, D. (1978). *Television and human behavior*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

Elkin, F., & Handel, G. (1960). *The child and society: The process of socialization*. New York, NY: Random House.

Goldberg, P. (1976). Are women prejudiced against women? In B. Watson (Ed.), *Women's studies: The social realities*. New York, NY: Harper's College Press.

Lull, J. T., Hanson, C. A., & Marx, M. J. (1977). Recognition of female stereotypes in TV commercials. *Journalism Quarterly*, *54*, 153–157.

Maccoby, E. E., & Jacklin, C. N. (1974). *The psychology of sex differences*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Perloff, R. M., Brown, J. D., & Miller, M. M. (1978, August). *Mass media and sex-typing: Research perspectives and policy implication*. Paper presented at the 86th Annual Meeting of the American Psychological Association, Toronto, Canada.