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Reginald O. York  
*East Carolina University*

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# SEX-ROLE STEREOTYPES ABOUT SOCIAL WORK ADMINISTRATION

REGINALD O. YORK

School of Social Work  
East Carolina University  
Greenville, N. C.

*In this article, the issue of sex-role stereotype about administration was examined through a survey of social workers in one state. The analysis of data revealed that, in their descriptions of the good social work administrator, females held a greater preference for the male stereotype than did males. This female preference substantially explained the overall preference for the male stereotype over the female stereotype for the entire sample. The need for further examination of this female preference for the male stereotype about administration is discussed.*

For more than a decade, a growing body of literature has called our attention to the role of sex-role stereotypes in the perpetuation of sexual discrimination in the workplace. By picturing the ideal manager as one who has a set of traits that are fundamentally perceived as masculine in nature, the sex-role stereotype inhibits the advancement of women in the organization and promotes sexual segregation in the workplace. Not only is female advancement curtailed in the presence of sex-role stereotypes, but women in positions of authority are expected to behave differently than men in the same positions. If they exhibit "female" behavior, they are viewed as inadequate for the management job. If they exhibit "male" behavior, they are resisted for acting inappropriately.

While attempts have been made within the social work field to assess sex-role stereotypes about ideal qualities of people in general, there is little data which offers evidence of the

extent to which social workers possess sex-role stereotypes about administration. The purpose of this article is to report the findings of a survey of social workers in one state which addresses this issue. The research question was whether social workers would be more likely to select characteristics normally perceived as masculine as the description of a good social work administrator than characteristics normally perceived as feminine. Additional questions focused upon the identification of the variables which predicted a tendency toward a sex-role stereotype about social work administration.

### SEX-ROLE STEREOTYPES

A sex-role stereotype is a standardized mental picture of gender differences in socially designated behaviors which represents an oversimplified opinion or uncritical judgment. While certain role perceptions such as parent, teacher, and supervisor can be socially functional, a problem emerges when one overgeneralizes about the qualities required for certain roles. Such is the case with gender and administration. For various reasons, the qualities perceived by some to be associated with competent administration are dominated by characteristics popularly perceived as being more like men than women. These stereotypes, however, are without foundation in empirical research. Many stereotypes are more mythical than real and some of the differences in actual gender behavior are promoted by cultural norms and organizational practices designed to keep women in a place of relative powerlessness. Furthermore, there is little evidence that the popular stereotypes of masculine qualities offer a better guide for predicting administrative effectiveness than the popular stereotypes of feminine qualities.

Unfortunately, many women possess this popular misconception as well. In a review of the literature on women in management in various fields of work, Terborg (1977) concluded that women describe themselves and are described by others as having self-concepts that are not suitable for management. Discussions of the effects of such stereotyping upon the social work field are contained in works of several writers (See,

for example, Kravetz, 1976; Rubenstein, 1981; Faver, Fox, and Shannon, 1983). It is their contention that social work is not immune to the discriminatory effects of this condition even though it is dominated numerically by women.

It is recognized that there are differences between men and women. The cause of these differences, however, is not readily apparent (See, for example, Constantinople, 1979; Lewis & Weinraub, 1979). A key question in the literature on sex differences is whether differences are genetically or culturally determined. But neither the fact of difference nor its cause is the central question in the dialogue about sex-role stereotypes. The key questions are twofold: (1) Are perceived differences real?; and, (2) Are gender differences relevant to administration?

The issue of sex-role stereotype has inspired a number of studies on the social desirability of perceived differences between the sexes. One of the earliest such studies revealed a higher valuation of stereotypically masculine than feminine characteristics among college students (Rosenkrantz, Vogel, Bee, Broverman, and Broverman, 1968). A review of various such studies by Broverman and others a few years later led to the following conclusion:

Women are perceived as relatively less competent, less independent, less objective, and less logical than men; men are perceived as lacking interpersonal sensitivity, warmth, and expressiveness in comparison to women. Moreover, stereotypically masculine traits are more often perceived to be desirable than are stereotypically feminine characteristics (Broverman, Vogel, Broverman, Clarkson, & Rosenkrantz 1972, p. 75).

The results of such works as those above, however, have been challenged by more recent studies. Silvern and Ryan (1983) found that five out of six categories of students characterized the ideal person as more feminine than masculine, the only exception being males who were categorized as traditional. In a study of school counselors, Petro and Putnam (1979) found that three-fourths of the items found to be stereotypic in the 1968 Rosenkantz study were not seen as differentiating males from females in their more recent study.

The study by Petro and Putnam, however, was rather different from the earlier one in that the subjects of the later study were practicing professionals rather than students and were in only one field of endeavor. Thus, while the latter study may not be a full refutation of the Rosenkrantz findings, it may be quite instructive to our analysis of sex-role stereotypes among social workers who would be expected to have more in common with practicing school counselors than with college students from various fields.

### SEX-ROLE STEREOTYPES ABOUT ADMINISTRATION

Two studies were undertaken by Schein which pursued the issue of sex-role stereotypes about management. In the first study, Schein (1973) asked 300 male middle managers in nine insurance companies to identify the characteristics of men in general, women in general, and successful middle managers. They did so by responding to the same set of descriptive terms but they were divided into three groups with one group only being asked to describe men; another, women; and the third, successful middle managers. The results revealed that successful middle managers were viewed as being significantly more like men in general than like women in general. This study was replicated by Schein (1975) with a sample of 167 female managers in 12 insurance departments. The results were similar to the first study. A replication of these two studies was undertaken by Massengill and DiMarco (1979) with results that were quite similar to those of Schein's studies. The latter study employed a sample drawn from the mailing list of a continuing education program from a School of Business Administration.

A study by Rosen and Jerdee (1978) employed a national sample of 884 male managers from a variety of organizational types including government agencies, insurance companies, professional firms, heavy manufacturing, retail stores, hospitals and others. In this study, females were perceived to rate lower than males on skill, work motivation, temperament, and work habits.

Brenner and Bromer (1981) took a slightly different ap-

proach to the examination of sex stereotypes. In their study, sixty-six pairs of male and female middle managers from several business firms were asked to rate a number of leadership behaviors according to the extent to which each described their own behavior. The behaviors had been matched with the descriptors from the studies by Schein so that one-half were associated with the female stereotype and one-half, with the male stereotype. The results were that both male and female managers tended to select the male stereotyped behaviors as descriptions of their own managerial behavior.

Thus, behaviors and traits commonly thought to be more descriptive of men than women are viewed by many as more important for managerial effectiveness than are the characteristics commonly associated more with women than men. Two questions emerge from this conclusion. First, are these stereotypes accurate in describing the differences between men and women? If they are not, then women are being fundamentally misunderstood. The second question is whether any differences between men and women that are supported by research are instrumental in determining managerial effectiveness.

Numerous studies have pursued the first question. Typical among them is the study by Powell, Butterfield, and Mainiero (1981) which found that gender was not a predictor of leadership style as measured by the Least Preferred Co-worker Scale, a measure of the extent to which one is task-oriented or relationship-oriented. Day and Stogdill (1972) also found a lack of gender difference regarding leadership style. In their study, an instrument was employed which measures one's emphasis upon two dimensions: (1) consideration, and (2) initiating structure. A study by Yago and Vroom (1982) found that both female students and female managers were more participative in leadership style than were male students and male managers. According to participative leadership theory, the results of this study would favor females.

Another study of gender differences revealed that there were very few differences in perceptions of job dimensions and work outcomes between men and women (Rosenbach, Dailey,

and Morgan, 1979). Further data drawn from two mental health organizations revealed no consistent effect of leader sex on either leader behavior or subordinate satisfaction (Osborn & Vicars, 1976).

Overviews of research on this issue have been offered by Bartol (1978) and by Reif, Newstrom and Monczka (1975). In both cases, conclusions were reached that sexual segregation in the workplace was not supported by the results of research on gender differences. The differences that were found to exist were clearly not differences that would favor the male stereotype.

The research overview by Bartol examined leadership style, subordinate satisfaction, and job performance. The general conclusion was that there was little evidence of gender differences in leadership style, job satisfaction among subordinates, and performance as a leader. Thus, one must look elsewhere for explanations of the sex structuring of organizations.

One such place is the potential for gender difference in reactions to bureaucracy. The features of the classical bureaucratic model is a firm organizational reality, both within and outside the human service sector. Various writers have suggested that the woman's reaction to bureaucracy is different from the man's reaction. Kanter (1977), for example, has pointed out the detrimental effect of the emphasis in bureaucracies upon formality and rationality which have been viewed as the special province of the man. Gilligan (1982) has pointed out that the early socialization of women encourage them to place emphasis upon care and responsibility in contrast to the socialization of men which emphasizes rights and rules. The emphasis upon formal rules in the bureaucracy, therefore, places the man at an advantage. An analysis of the literature on women and bureaucracy has been offered by York and Henley (1986) who undertook an empirical study on this issue. Their survey of social workers in one state revealed no difference between males and females on the degree to which each accepted the level of bureaucracy in their organizations as being appropriate.

While there is a dearth of empirical support for contentions that male stereotyped behaviors are more effective than female

stereotyped behaviors in the managerial role, there is evidence of the detrimental effect of these stereotypes in the workplace. Petty and Miles (1976), for example, found that satisfaction with human service supervisors was more positively related to male task behavior and female relationship behavior. In other words, line staff in these organizations expected female and male supervisors to behave differently. In the previously mentioned work by Yago and Vroom (1982), it was found that autocratic females were evaluated negatively whereas autocratic males were given a modest positive rating (Participative females and males were both rated positively). Thus, it has become increasingly clear that one of the effects of sex-role stereotypes is that females are not allowed to engage in certain kinds of behavior without suffering a negative fate in the ratings of others, a fate which is not shared by males.

Much attention has been directed to the notion of the attribution of success. The question here is whether the perceived cause of the success of men and women is different. In a laboratory experiment, Deaux and Emswiller (1974) found that the success of males on a "masculine" task were attributed to skill by the participants but the success of females on the same task was attributed to luck. On a "feminine" task, however, there was no difference in the attribution of success for males and females. A summary of research on this subject has been offered by Powell and Butterfield (1982). While it has been found that the woman's success is more often attributed to luck than is the case with men, it has also been found that this difference is diminished in the face of objective evidence.

One of the practical effects of the above is that women are more often promoted on the basis of hard evidence rather than potential whereas men are often promoted on the basis of "potential." Such was the finding in a survey of 360 participants in a public welfare management training program. In that survey, Ezell and Odewahn (1980) found that female respondents were more likely than male respondents to believe that men were more actively recruited for management positions and that men were more likely to be selected on the basis of potential whereas selection for women was more likely to be solely on the basis of actual job performance.



## SEX-ROLE STEREOTYPES AMONG SOCIAL WORKERS

The perceptions of social work students regarding what characterized a healthy person were analyzed by Harris and Lucas (1976) to determine if the male stereotype differed from the female stereotype. The results indicated that these social work students did not differ in their perceptions of what characterized a healthy male, a healthy female, and a healthy adult. Festinger and Bounds (1977), however, had different results in another study of social work students. Both female and male students in the latter study indicated that masculine traits were more socially desirable than feminine traits.

A study by York, Henley, and Gamble (1985) was undertaken of social work students in which the subject was sex-role stereotypes about management. Students were asked to select the characteristics that best described the good social work administrator. The list from which they selected characteristics was drawn from the list developed by Schein (1973). One half of the items were those which Schein had found to be more associated with a female stereotype and one-half were in the male stereotype. These students tended to select a rather even number of male stereotyped items (4.28) as female stereotyped items (3.72) but their preference for the male stereotype was statistically significant. Given the obvious closeness of these two means, it was concluded that the differences had statistical significance but had a questionable level of practical significance.

The finding that social work students did not embrace a sex-role stereotype about administration to a substantial degree is consistent with several observations. First, social work values mitigate against the stereotyping of individuals and promote social justice. Second, it has been found by several researchers that the female orientation may be more effective than the male orientation when it comes to the human service environment (See Munson, 1979; Scotch, 1969; Yago and Vroom, 1982). Perhaps a relationship-oriented and participative type of manager would be more effective in the

human service organization. Even if there are no gender differences with regard to these qualities, the perception of such may not result in a lower evaluation of female characteristics in the determination of the good administrator in social work.

Another finding is also relevant to this discussion. It has been found, for example, that education tends to influence the presence of sex-role stereotypes in that persons with more education tend to be less prone to embrace sex-role stereotypes (See Hall and Frederickson, 1979). Social workers are above average in education and, thus, would be expected to be less prone to the sex-role stereotype. Further evidence of the influence of education is offered by Brenner (1982) who found that education tends to reduce gender differences regarding such traits as dominance and nurturance.

To summarize, sex-role stereotypes about the qualities of the good administrator have been found in studies outside the human services. These stereotypes exist in the clear absence of evidence that "male" traits are superior to "female" traits in the determination of managerial effectiveness. They also exist despite the lack of evidence that females and males actually differ in significant ways on the traits which serve as the basis for the stereotypes. Because social workers are well educated, are socialized into a value system that mitigates against stereotyping, and operate in an environment that may have greater need for behaviors stereotypically viewed as female, it would be expected that social workers would not embrace a stereotype about social work administration, and, thus, would be different on this issue from persons in industry.

## STUDY DESIGN

To examine whether social workers embrace a sex-role stereotype about social work administration, a study was undertaken with a random sample of members of the North Carolina Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers in the spring of 1986. A sample of 146 of the 1400 members of the North Carolina Chapter was drawn through a systematic random sampling procedure. Excluded from the list of potential

respondents were members who were retired, were full-time students, or were faculty members. As nearly as was feasible, therefore, the sample contained persons employed in typical agency settings.

These individuals were mailed a survey which asked them to select eight characteristics that best described a "good social work administrator." They selected these eight characteristics from a list of sixteen items which had been drawn from a more extensive list from the studies conducted by Schein (1973; 1975). This list of 16 items contained 8 characteristics which Schein's respondents had found to be descriptions of how managers were more typical of men than women and 8 items wherein managers' traits had been perceived as more typical of women than of men. The 8 "female" items were all 8 of the characteristics in which the respondents in the Schein studies had viewed the manager as more similar to women than to men while the 8 "male" items were selected from a list of 15 items in which managers were found to be perceived as more similar to men than to women. The selection of the 8 items from the list of 15 was designed to avoid duplication and obvious negative or positive bias. To avoid duplication, for example, the item "logical" was left off because the item "analytic" was included. To avoid bias, the items "leadership ability" and "emotionally stable" were excluded. Other items excluded from the list of 15 were (1) no desire for friendship, (2) forceful, (3) desires responsibility, and (4) steady.

Thus, the respondents in this survey were given an opportunity to identify as many as eight "male" descriptors of the good social work administrator or as few as none. By the same token, they could identify their good social work administrators as possessing as many as eight "female" characteristics or as few as none. Respondents in the survey were also asked questions about their gender, age, years of experience, and position level.

The dependent variable was sex-role stereotype which was measured by the number of "male" characteristics chosen to describe the good social work administrator. Independent variables included gender, age, years of experience, and position level.

## FINDINGS

Of the 146 persons included in the sample for the survey, a total of 102 persons returned the questionnaires, a response rate of 70 percent. Of those who responded, 72 percent were female and 92 percent were white. A majority (51 percent) indicated that they were in direct service positions while 17 percent listed supervision as their work positions, and 22 percent, administration. Ninety-five percent of the respondents indicated that they held the MSW degree while the other five percent had received the BSW degree. The mean age of the respondents was 41.5 while their mean years of experience was 14.5.

The responses of these individuals for the descriptors of the good social work administrator are summarized in Table 1. The item which was chosen by the highest percentage of re-

TABLE 1  
CHARACTERISTICS OF GOOD SOCIAL WORK  
ADMINISTRATORS (N = 102)

Percent Who Selected Item	Rank	Item	Stereotype
97	1	Well informed	Male
91	2	Aware of feelings of others	Female
89	3	Humanitarian values	Female
85	4	Creative	Female
79	5	Objective	Male
76	6	Consistent	Male
69	7	Self confident	Male
60	8	Analytic	Male
52	9	Intuitive	Female
35	10	Helpful	Female
17	11	Aggressive	Male
15	12	Cheerful	Female
10	13/14	Competitive	Male
10	13/14	Ambitious	Male
3	15	Sophisticated	Female
2	16	Modest	Female

spondents was "well informed" which was a "male" item but the next three items in this ranking were the "female" items of "aware of feelings of others," "humanitarian values," and "creative." The top ten items were evenly divided between gender categories.

The mean number of "male" items chosen by the respondents was 4.25 which was rather close to the value of 4.0 that one would expect to find in the absence of a sex bias in favor of either feminine or masculine stereotypes. However, with an N of 102 and a standard deviation of 0.9, the resultant t value of 2.81 between the means of 4.25 and 4.0 was significant at the .01 level. Thus, it was concluded that these respondents had a significant preference for items in the masculine stereotype in their descriptions of the good social work administrator.

The significance of this mean score is somewhat surprising in view of the surface impression that one might have from a comparison of a value of 4.0 with a value of 4.25. One of the reasons for the degree of significance of this mean lies in the large size of the sample from which it was calculated. Another way to examine these data is to look at the frequencies related to sex-role stereotype scores. Nearly one-half (46 percent) of these respondents had a score of 4 which places them in the position of having no preference for either "male" or "female" items. But the number of persons expressing a preference for the masculine stereotype (36 percent) was double the number expressing a preference for the feminine stereotype (18 percent).

These results were quite similar to the results of a survey of students in one school of social work which utilized the same instrument (See York, Henley, and Gamble, 1985). The rank order of the first three items by the students was identical to the ranks revealed by this study of practicing social workers and there were only a few differences in ranks for other items. The top ten items were the same for both groups although there were some differences in the actual ranks assigned to items. Of the top ten items, the greatest difference between the two groups was that the students ranked "self-confidence" as

fourth with a percentage of selection of 79 whereas the practicing social workers in this survey ranked it seventh with a selection percentage of 69. The greatest difference regarding percentage was with the item, "ambitious." Thirty-five percent of the students selected this item among their eight descriptors of a good social work administrator whereas only ten percent of the practicing social workers selected this item.

Sex-role stereotype scores for respondents in this survey were analyzed to determine whether they were influenced by age, experience, gender, and position level. Neither age ( $r = 0.08$ ) nor years of experience ( $r = 0.03$ ) were found to be remotely close to statistical significance with the employment of Pearson's product moment correlation coefficient. The comparison of scores by position level is presented in Table 2. For the sake of statistical analysis with chi square, the positions of supervisor and administrator were collapsed into one category. Ten persons who listed "other" as their position level were excluded from this analysis. With two degrees of freedom, the chi square of 1.49 was not significant at the .10 level.

The sex-role stereotype scores (i.e., the number of "male" items chosen) for males and females were compared. The mean for females was 4.34 (standard deviation = 0.92) which was higher than the mean for males of 4.03 (standard deviation = 0.82). This difference, however, was not statistically significant

TABLE 2

THE ASSOCIATION OF POSITION LEVEL AND  
SEX-ROLE STEREOTYPE

Position Level	Traits of the Good Administrator			Total
	Majority Female	Equal Male/Female	Majority Male	
Direct Service	11	25	16	52
Supervision and Administration	6	17	17	40
Total	17	42	33	92

at the normally accepted level of 0.05 ( $t = 1.65$ ;  $p = 0.10$ ). Furthermore, gender was found to explain less than three percent of the variance in sex-role stereotype scores ( $r = 0.16$ ;  $r^2 = 0.026$ ).

A chi square analysis was undertaken for the association of gender and each of the sixteen items on the sex-role stereotype scale. None of the chi square values were significant at the 0.05 level. Two of the items revealed a gender difference at or close to the 0.10 level, however. These were "helpful" and "analytic" with the gender differences being the opposite of what one might expect in that a higher proportion of males than females selected the "female" item of "helpful" and a lower proportion of males than females selected the "male" item of "analytic." In the case of "helpful," only thirty-one percent of the females selected this item as compared to nearly one-half (48%) of the males. On the other hand, nearly two-thirds (64 percent) of the females selected "analytic" whereas only about one-half (48 percent) of the males did so.

## DISCUSSION

In this article, the issue of sex-role stereotypes about social work administration has been examined. The research question was whether social workers viewed the good social work administrator as more like the popular stereotype of the male than of the female. A survey was undertaken of social workers in one state. From the results of this study, the answer to the research question was a qualified "yes." It was found that the mean number of "male" items selected to describe a good social work administrator was significantly different from that which would be found in the total absence of a preference based upon gender stereotype. The proportion of respondents who expressed a preference for the masculine stereotype was double the proportion of respondents with a preference for the female stereotype although a near majority indicated no preference for either of the gender stereotypes.

Furthermore, this preference expressed by the total group was greatly influenced by the fact that females, who constituted 72 percent of the total sample, had a greater preference

for the masculine stereotype than did males. In fact, the mean score on the dependent variable for males was almost identical to that score which would have indicated a complete absence of influence of sex-role stereotypes about administration. Neither age, nor experience, nor position level, however, were found to be correlated with a preference for the masculine stereotype.

The qualification of the affirmative answer to the research question is based upon the limitations of the extent of the preference for the male stereotype. While the male preference did exceed the no-preference score by a statistically significant level, it was not a difference that can be viewed as profound. A near majority, after all, expressed no influence of gender stereotype. Perhaps this is one of those situations in which there is statistical significance but little practical significance.

It is perhaps noteworthy that preference for the masculine stereotype was held by a higher proportion of females than of males even though this difference was not significant at the generally accepted level of 0.05. A relatively small sub-sample of males had some influence upon the failure to achieve statistical significance. In fact, it is clear from the mean scores on sex-role stereotype that female preference for the masculine stereotype was the prime determinant of the statistically significant results for the overall group of respondents. A limitation to the interpretation of these results is that we do not know whether these respondents viewed the listed characteristics as being either "male" or "female" descriptors. The determination of the gender categories of each item had been derived from studies of other samples.

One recommendation that emanates from these results calls for the further exploration of the extent of the preference for the masculine stereotype for females. To the extent that females view the good administrator as possessing more "male" traits than "female" traits, a barrier to gender parity can be envisioned because women are not likely to harbor an ambition for advancement if they do not view themselves as possessing traits that are most suitable for the job. Consciousness-raising experiences for females can be useful. In this regard, social work education can surely play a vital role.



In this study, perceptions of the traits of the good administrator have been examined in relation to sex-role stereotypes. Two caveats are in order. First, the study of leadership traits has produced rather disappointing results. Research on the characteristics of leaders suggest that the traits and abilities required of a leader tend to vary from one situation to another (See, for example, Stogdill, 1974). The second caveat to be explored is that the studies of sex-role stereotypes examine perceptions of gender differences, not gender differences in actuality. For this reason, the terms "male" and "female," when referring to stereotypes, were placed in quote marks to remind the reader that these were only perceptions.

Finally, it is acknowledged that the phenomenon of sex-role stereotype about administration is only one small factor in the quest for gender parity. The extent of its existence will hinder the advancement of women within the human service organization. But there are other barriers as well. The eradication of sex-role stereotypes about what it takes to be a good administrator will take care of only one of those problems.

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