Gender, Evaluation, and Causal Attribution: The Double Standard is Alive and Well

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Brief behavioral descriptions were empirically judged to be stereotypically "male" or "female," and evaluated as "good" or "bad." Male and female subjects made causal attributions for these behaviors when performed either by sex-role-congruent or by sex-role-violating actors. Attribution patterns displayed an apparent "double standard," in which different criteria were applied to male and to female actors. For male actors, role violations elicited more personal causal attribution than role-congruent behaviors, regardless of the behavior's goodness or badness. For female actors, bad behaviors elicited more personal causal attribution than good behaviors, and role appropriateness was irrelevant. None of these differences in attribution patterns can be accounted for by evaluations of the behaviors themselves. The possibility that this procedure may circumvent social desirability biases in revealing subjects' sex-role stereotypes is discussed.

When people act in ways that violate traditional sex-role expectations, how does this affect the judgments made about them by observers? Most research has examined the effects on observers' evaluations of the stimulus persons. In some studies, females who performed "masculine" behaviors or expressed "masculine" values were less favorably perceived than those who conformed to traditional expectations (Feather & Simon, 1975; Seyfried & Hendrick, 1973; Shaffer & Wegley, 1974; Zeldow, 1976). In other contexts, sex-role violations by females resulted in more favorable evaluation than was accorded to males who performed the same behaviors (Spence & Helmreich, 1972; Spence, Helmreich, & Stapp, 1975; Taynor &
Deaux, 1973). In still other cases, evaluations of stimulus persons reflected an interaction between the gender of the actor and the outcome of the behavior. Successful males were rated more positively than successful females, but unsuccessful males were rated more negatively than unsuccessful females (Deaux & Taynor, 1973; Feather & Simon, 1975).

Presumably, such differences in evaluation were paralleled by differences in observers' perceptions of the causes of the role-congruent or role-violating behavior. Recent studies have made causal attribution the explicit focus of investigation, but have typically varied the stimulus persons' behaviors only along the success-failure dimension. For example, Deaux & Emswiller (1974) report that when subjects were asked to assign causes for the success of the stimulus person in an achievement situation, what was "skill" for the male was "luck" for the female. Other investigators have obtained results consistent with these findings and have further demonstrated that causal attributions for failure display a different pattern: Males' failure is seen as having been caused by bad luck, and females' failure by lack of ability (Feather & Simon, 1975). The general pattern, then, is one in which the success of males is attributed to an internal factor, and that of females to an external factor. Attributions for failure, however, tend to elicit external explanations for male actors and internal explanations for female actors.

Interestingly, no study manipulating sex-role congruence has measured causal attribution in relation to behaviors outside the arena of success or failure. It is clear, however, that the concept of gender appropriateness extends to many categories of behavior other than professional achievement or task performance. The present study was designed to investigate simultaneously the effects of subjects' sex, actors' sex, gender appropriateness, and behavioral evaluation on causal attributions for everyday behaviors.

The attribution literature generates several competing predictions. Correspondent inference theory (Jones & Davis, 1965) suggests that when a person performs an unusual or deviant act, perceivers are more likely to make inferences about the actor's personal characteristics than when he or she performs an expected behavior. The correspondent inference prediction would therefore be that violations of traditional sex-role expectations should elicit more personal causal attribution than behavior that conforms to gender stereotypes. On the other hand, unexpected outcomes tend to be attributed to external factors (luck, task difficulty), and expected ones to internal factors (effort, ability; e.g., Feather & Simon, 1971). This effect suggests the opposite prediction that role violations should elicit relatively more situational attributions, and role-congruent behavior relatively more personal attributions.