

The Effect of Teacher Gender and Gendered Traits on Perceptions of Elementary School Teachers

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Little is known about methods to address gender-based bias against male elementary educators. Framed by social role and role congruity theories, this study explored the effects of gendered traits and teacher gender on perceptions of elementary educators. Participants (N = 246) were randomly assigned to view websites that varied gendered traits (communal, agentic, neutral) and teacher gender. When choosing a teacher for their child, individuals preferred either neutral or communal teachers to agentic teachers. Additionally, participants reported that men were significantly less hireable than women, indicating a backlash against men who seek employment in traditionally feminine fields. This study suggests that individuals seeking entry into elementary education should avoid describing themselves in agentic terms.

Keywords: gendered traits, elementary education, female-dominated field, social role theory, role congruity theory

Despite efforts to increase gender diversity, elementary education remains an overwhelmingly female-dominated field. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (2014) states that only 13% of elementary school teachers are men. This underrepresentation of men may partially be due to prejudice, which occurs when members of a group attempt to enter social roles that are stereotypically incongruent for their group (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

Male educators report they often face prejudice for violating traditional gender stereotypes, specifically feminine ones (Anliak & Beyazkurk, 2008; Sumsion, 2000). For instance, using a focus group methodology, Cooney and Bittner (2001) interviewed several men in elementary education and discovered that they struggle with the fear of being accused of having improper physical contact with children and with feelings of isolation within female-dominated workplaces. Additionally, Nelson (2002) surveyed adults in elementary education on why they thought it difficult to find men in early childhood education. Common answers included negative stereotypes of male teachers, such as “weird,” “gay,” and “weak.”

Research indicates the current lack of gender diversity in elementary education may be problematic to young children. Studies show that lack of exposure to talented male teachers may negatively impact gender stereotype formation and future career aspirations (Dasgupta & Asgari, 2004; Mancus, 1992). The goal of the present study was to explore the effects of describing oneself in terms of gendered traits (communal, agentic, neutral) and of gender on perceptions of early elementary educators.

Social Role Theory

Social role theory (Koenig & Eagly, 2014) may underlie the social barriers to men entering elementary education. This theory holds that men and women take on certain roles because of different societal expectations. Gender-based division of labor leads to the false

notion that there is something inherent in men and women that allows them to undertake these tasks successfully (Clow, Ricciardelli, & Betray, 2014). Gender stereotypes of women as communal and warm and men as agentic and dominant arise from continually seeing each gender in its commonly accepted role (Clow et al., 2014). For example, as people observe men leading task-oriented activities, such as those involved in being a business executive or a manager, they will most likely assume that, in comparison to women, men have certain characteristics that allow them to be better suited for such jobs. When people assume that men and women have certain traits that make them particularly suited for different social roles, the gendered division of labor in society is perpetuated (Jost & Banaji, 1994).

Such assumptions are detrimental to society as they lead people to question men and women who take on roles that are typically fulfilled by the other gender (Eagly & Koenig, 2008). Consequently, individuals may view male elementary educators as inadequate in carrying out tasks typically associated with communal roles dominated by women. Social role stereotypes of women as elementary educators may lead to the stigmatization of men in teaching (e.g., people who excessively use feminine pronouns to refer to elementary educators, limited active recruitment of men into teaching, lack of mentorships for men).

Role Congruity Theory

Similar to how social role theory focuses on how the gendered division of labor contributes to the development of gender roles, role congruity theory proposes that people are more positively evaluated when their characteristics are perceived to be congruent with expected gender roles (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Garcia-Retamero & López-Zafra, 2006). Because separate expectations exist for men and women in different social roles, individuals may have preconceived notions of what is needed to succeed in fields that are dominated by a single

gender. For instance, Cejka and Eagly (1999) discovered that U.S. undergraduates rated communal traits (e.g., affectionate, sensitive) as the most important traits for success in female-dominated occupations (e.g., elementary school teacher, speech therapist) but agentic traits (e.g., competitive, aggressive) as the most important traits for success in male-dominated fields (e.g., airline pilot, computer programmer). Such perceptions may lead to more negative evaluations of individuals who work in fields that are viewed as incongruent with their gender. In a lab study by Garcia-Retamero et al. (2006), the researchers found that participants gave lower performance evaluations to women applying to a position in a male-dominated field, such as auto manufacturing, compared to male applicants. Negative evaluations toward women may arise because the communal characteristics associated with women are perceived as incongruent with the agentic qualities associated with success in positions in male-dominated field.

Past research has shown that women applying for male-dominated occupations may benefit from highlighting the masculine characteristics associated with success in such occupations. For example, Glick, Zion, and Nelson (1988) presented descriptions of fictitious applicants who provided information suggesting certain gender stereotypes to managers and professionals in business. The researchers mailed a cover letter and a fictional resume to participants and discovered that female applicants who were portrayed as having stereotypically masculine interests (e.g., played basketball, worked at a sporting goods store) were perceived to be more suitable for a male-dominated job of a sales manager than female applicants described to have stereotypically feminine interests (e.g., cheerleading, working with jewelry). In a similar fashion, Wessel, Hagiwara, Ryan, and Kermond (2014) manipulated the use of gendered traits in the context of employment interviews and found that fictitious female applicants were perceived to be more hireable and more competent for a male-dominated job (engineering manager) when

they described themselves using agentic traits (analytical, ambitious, assertive) as opposed to communal traits (compassionate, sensitive, nurturing). This body of research lays the foundation for our prediction that describing oneself using communal gendered traits may positively influence perceptions of elementary school teachers, but to our knowledge, this concept has yet to be empirically tested.

Because elementary education is an overwhelmingly female-dominated field, people may not associate men with communal attributes, putting male educators at a disadvantage. Although role congruity theory has typically been used for examining women in leadership roles (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Garcia-Retamero et al., 2006), it is equally plausible to apply this theory to men entering female-dominated ones (Clow et al., 2014).

The Current Research

Croft, Schmader, and Block (2015) issued a convincing argument to expand research on barriers to men's entry into female-dominated fields. Increasing representation of men in elementary classrooms is crucial both to broaden men's career opportunities so that they can achieve a better occupational fit and to broaden children's experiences because the behaviors of the adults to which they are exposed may shape their ideas about gender (Dasgupta & Asgari, 2004). More interactions with male teachers may counteract certain negative stereotypes of men (e.g., disciplinarian, dangerous) that are portrayed in media and in some homes (Malaby & Ramsey, 2011; Nelson, 2002; Washington, 2009).

While most studies on gendered traits have looked at women in male-dominated jobs, very few have looked at the opposite. The present study seeks to address this void. To determine the effects of gendered traits on perceptions of male and female elementary school teachers, the following hypotheses were tested:

Hypothesis 1: Compared to teachers described using agentic traits, teachers described using communal traits will be perceived to be (a) warmer, (b) more hireable, (c) more competent, and (d) more preferable.

Hypothesis 2: Compared to male teachers, female teachers will be perceived to be (a) warmer, (b) more hireable, (c) more competent, and (d) more preferable.

Method

Design and Procedure

The design of the study was a 2 (Teacher gender: Female vs. male) \times 3 (Gendered traits: Communal vs. Agentic vs. Neutral) between-subjects full factorial design.

After accepting the online task on Amazon Mechanical Turk (mTurk), an online system through which people are paid small amounts of money for completing small tasks, participating adults were directed to SurveyMonkey. After being presented with a click-through consent form, participants read a brief explanation of the importance of building parent-teacher relationships through technology and that the purpose of the study was to investigate perceptions of teachers based on their websites. Participants were randomly assigned to view one of six versions of a fictional teacher's website and then to complete a survey evaluating the teacher. Finally, participants reported their demographics and completed an attention and manipulation check.

Participants

Participants were recruited through mTurk. Existing literature has shown that workers on mTurk are predominantly Caucasian, with an average age of 32 years old, that 45% of workers on mTurk have a college degree or higher, and 38% are employed full-time outside of mTurk (Shapiro, Chandler, & Mueller, 2013). Previous studies have also indicated that samples

recruited from mTurk are comparable to or even better than undergraduate college students, who are a common population in behavioral science research done at most universities (Berinsky, Huber, & Lenz, 2012).

Participants were 246 adults in the United States (68.3% female). The mean age was 38.1 years old and ranged from 19 to 77. Participants were evenly divided between parents (49.4%) and non-parents (50.6%). Racial composition was 81.9% White, 7.2% Asian, 4.8% African-American, 3.2% Hispanic, 2.0% Multiracial, and 0.8% American Indian/Alaskan Native.

Experimental Stimuli

Six versions of a fictional first grade teacher's "About Me" page on his or her website were created for the study. To manipulate teacher gender, the website either had a title saying "Meet Mrs. Brown," followed by a greeting from a female teacher named Mrs. Jennifer Brown, or a title saying "Meet Mr. Brown," followed by a greeting from a male teacher named Mr. Jason Brown. The appropriate gendered pronouns were used throughout the website, and the gender of the teacher appeared five times on the page.

To manipulate the choice of gendered traits used by the teacher to describe her or himself, three categories of gendered traits were used. One-third of the participants saw the teacher use communal traits (compassionate, sensitive, and nurturing). Another one-third of the participants saw the teacher use agentic traits (assertive, analytical, and ambitious). The final one-third of the participants saw the teacher use neutral traits (reliable, conscientious, and adaptable). The gendered traits were taken from Wessel et al.'s (2014) study, which showed that the aforementioned communal and agentic traits were strongly associated with female and male gender stereotypes, respectively.

Dependent Measures

Perceived warmth. The Perceived Warmth Scale consists of three items from an earlier study (Rudman, Greenwald, & McGhee, 2001). These items use a 7-point bipolar scale that asks participants to rate people on three pairs of opposites (*cold* v. *warm*, *detached* v. *supportive*, *distant* v. *caring*). Ratings in this sample showed strong internal reliability with a Cronbach's alpha of .93.

Perceived hireability. The Perceived Hireability Scale is a 3-item measure that uses a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = *Strongly Disagree* and 7 = *Strongly Agree*). The scale was adapted from the one used by Rudman and Glick (2001), and items were modified to ask about a teacher as opposed to a manager. One item on this scale read, "This teacher would be hired for a primary school teaching job." The reliability of this scale in the present study was .92.

Perceived competence. The Perceived Competence Scale consists of five items adapted from Menon's (1999) study. The items were again measured on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = *Strongly Disagree* and 7 = *Strongly Agree*). The original scale was modified from first-person statements (e.g., "I have the capabilities required to do my job well") to third-person statements that fit under the context of elementary school teaching (e.g., "This teacher has the capabilities required to do an elementary school teaching job well"). The scale showed strong reliability on this sample with a Cronbach's alpha of .93.

Teacher preference. The Teacher Preference Scale consists of four items and was created for this study. The scale is measured on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = *Strongly Disagree* and 7 = *Strongly Agree*). Participants responded to questions such as, "I would feel comfortable with my child being in this teacher's first grade class." The Cronbach's alpha for this scale was .74.

Results

Analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were conducted to explore the effects of gendered traits and teacher gender on perceived warmth, hireability, competence, and teacher preference.

Additionally, three-way ANOVAs with gendered traits, teacher gender, and parental status were run. However, these results were not included because they were insignificant ($F_s < .43$, all $p_s > .09$). Three-way ANOVAs with gendered traits, teacher gender, and participant gender were also run. These results were insignificant as well ($F_s < .97$, all $p_s > .06$).

The Effects of Gendered Traits

As hypothesized, results revealed a significant main effect of gendered traits on perceived warmth, $F(2, 234) = 11.17, p = .001, \eta_p^2 = .09$. Post-hoc tests showed that participants who saw an agentic teacher viewed that teacher as less warm ($M = 2.23, SD = 1.46$) than either a neutral ($M = 2.90, SD = 1.07$) or communal ($M = 3.26, SD = 1.11$) teacher (see Figure 1).

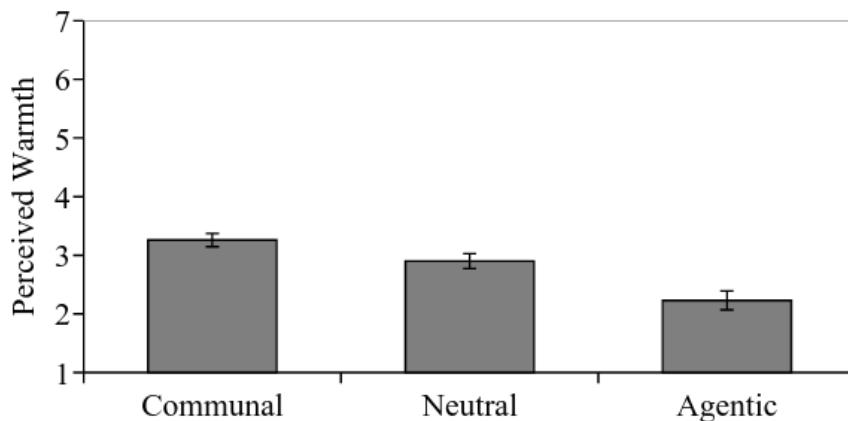


Figure 1.

The effect of gendered traits on perceived warmth

Similarly, gendered traits had a significant main effect on teacher preference, $F(2, 230) = 5.56, p = .005, \eta_p^2 = .06$. The post-hoc tests also demonstrated that participants indicated less

positive views about their child having an agentic teacher ($M = 4.56, SD = 1.52$) than participants who saw either a neutral ($M = 5.10, SD = 1.18$) or communal ($M = 5.32, SD = 1.11$) teacher (see Figure 2).

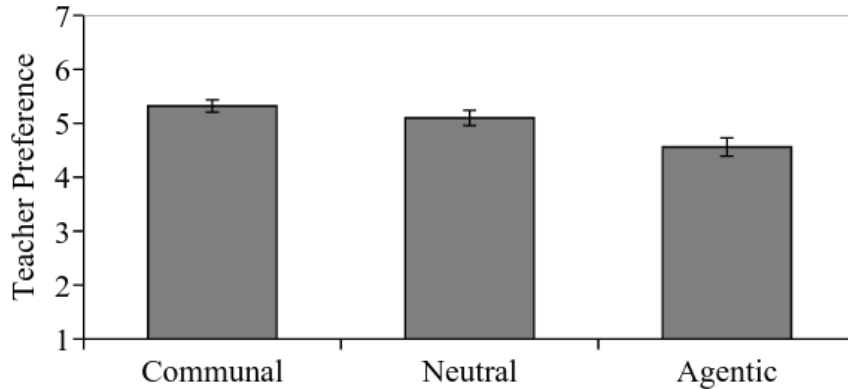


Figure 2.

The effect of gendered traits on teacher preference

Unexpectedly, there were no significant effects of gendered traits for either hireability, $F(2, 234) = 1.69, p = .19, \eta_p^2 = .01$, or competence, $F(2, 234) = .24, p = .79, \eta_p^2 = .00$. Table 1 represents the ANOVA findings for each of the dependent variables.

Table 1.

Results of ANOVA Findings for Gendered Traits

Variable/Group	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>F</i>
Warmth				11.17*
Communal	95	3.26	1.11	
Neutral	69	2.89	1.07	
Agentic	82	2.23	1.46	
Hireability				1.69
Communal	95	5.11	1.29	
Neutral	70	4.96	1.28	
Agentic	81	4.60	1.46	
Competence				0.24
Communal	95	4.71	1.17	
Neutral	69	4.83	1.08	
Agentic	82	4.57	1.19	
Preferability				5.56*
Communal	93	5.32	1.11	
Neutral	69	5.09	1.18	
Agentic	80	4.56	1.52	

Note. * $p < .05$. *N* = Sample Size; *M* = Mean; *SD* = Standard Deviation.

The Effects of Teacher Gender

As predicted by Hypothesis 2, the data show a significant main effect of teacher gender on perceived hireability, $F(1, 234) = 4.11, p = .04, \eta_p^2 = .02$. Male teachers were viewed as significantly less hireable ($M = 4.73, SD = 1.43$) in comparison to female teachers ($M = 5.09, SD = 1.25$), as shown in Figure 3.

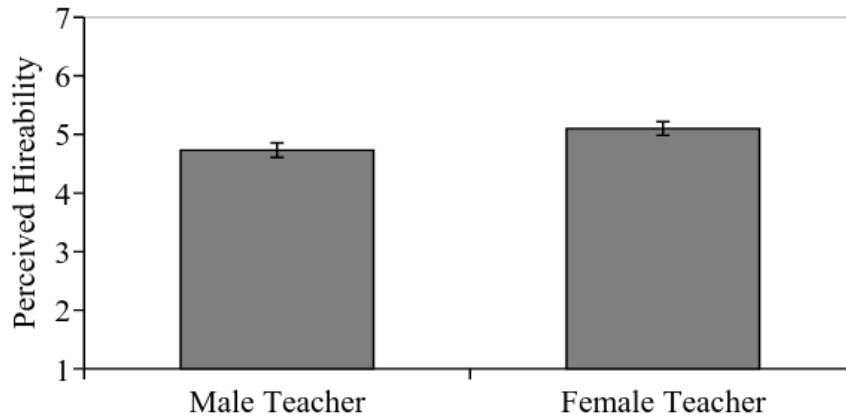


Figure 3.

Gender differences in perceived hireability

Contrary to the hypotheses, there were no significant main effects associated with perceived competence, warmth, and teacher preference ($F_s < .65$, all $p_s > .42$). In addition, none of the interactions between gendered traits and teacher gender were significant ($F_s < .60$, all $p_s > .39$). Table 2 presents the ANOVA results for each of the dependent variables.

Table 2.

Results of ANOVA Findings for Teacher Gender

Variable/Group	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>F</i>
Warmth				0.65
Female	115	2.97	1.21	
Male	131	2.68	1.36	
Hireability				4.11*
Female	116	5.09	1.25	
Male	130	4.73	1.43	
Competence				0.09
Female	116	4.72	1.15	
Male	130	4.67	1.16	
Teacher Preference				0.24
Female	111	5.09	1.31	
Male	131	4.93	1.32	

Note. * $p < .05$. *N* = Sample Size; *M* = Mean; *SD* = Standard Deviation.

Discussion

The Effects of Gendered Traits

The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of gendered traits and teacher gender on perceptions of elementary school teachers. In support of Hypothesis 1 and unsurprisingly, participants viewed teachers who used agentic traits as significantly less warm than teachers who used either communal or neutral traits. This finding was expected and concurs with previous studies (Cejka & Eagly, 1999; Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007) that found communal traits to be highly associated with warmth.

More interestingly, when asked to rate how much they would like to have the teacher for their own child, the results showed that participants rated teachers who used agentic traits to describe themselves as less preferable than teachers who described themselves using either neutral or communal traits. Because women dominate elementary education, the use of agentic traits may have triggered greater feelings of role incongruity in participants, resulting in negative perceptions (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

Contrary to the hypotheses, however, gendered traits had no effect on ratings of either hireability or competence. This combination of results indicates that participants may not be opposed to hiring teachers who describe themselves using agentic traits but would personally prefer their own child to be with either a communal or neutral teacher. There may have been a difference between how participants viewed these questions. The hireability and competence scales may have led participants to see themselves in the distant role of an employer, while the teacher preference scale might have tapped the closer and more personal role of a parent. The current study highlights a novel way in which the use of gendered traits may impact perceptions differently based on one's role.

The Effects of Teacher Gender

Turning to the effects of teacher gender, participants rated male teachers as significantly less hireable than female teachers. This finding confirms the idea that there is a backlash effect against men for violating gender stereotypes (Moss-Racusin & Johnson, 2016). No differences between male and female teachers were found in the other variables (warmth, competence, and teacher preference).

Contrary to Hypothesis 2, male and female teachers were perceived as equally warm. This suggests that people may assume everyone who pursues a career in elementary education to be warm. Additionally, while participants may have recognized that the male and female teachers were identically competent, people may hold a bias against male teachers in terms of hireability because they are perceived to be violating feminine roles (Clow et al., 2014; Jost & Banaji, 1994). The combination of lower hireability but equivalent preference ratings for the male teacher is especially noteworthy. A male first grade teacher may be so unusual that it triggers people's awareness of their own prejudices, leading them to inflate the preference ratings they give such a teacher in order to counter their prejudices. But when asked a less personal type of question (i.e., how hireable the teacher is), their prejudices may slip out. Given the novelty of this finding, further research on this subject is necessary.

Conclusion

To our knowledge, this study is the first to demonstrate the influence of describing oneself in gendered traits in a female-dominated field, specifically early elementary education. Our results provide abundant practical implications for men and women in female-dominated fields. In sum, we present strong support for role congruity theory: "womanning up" for a female-dominated role may be an effective strategy for creating more positive perceptions when

pursuing a career in a traditionally feminine field. The relatively subtle manipulations of gendered traits suggest that even small differences in the ways in which individuals present themselves can influence perceptions. People in elementary education may want to stress their more communal qualities in their résumés and interviews, and career counselors may want to coach people on how to combat bias in gender-incongruent work environments more generally.

Our study investigates a method of combating bias using gendered traits. However, it is important to note that the experiment focused on the effect of a small set of gendered traits. Thus, it would be worthwhile to look at a larger range of adjectives with which teachers commonly describe themselves. Additionally, researchers should look at the impact of other types of information that may trigger gender stereotypes, such as mode of dress or speaking style. Future research can also explore if people's aversion to agentic teachers dissipates with increasing age of children taught.

Finally, it would be worthwhile to replicate the study with school administrators because they have the greatest impact on actual teacher hiring. Still, nearly all children in the United States attend school of some sort, and teachers have shaped the memories of the vast majority of adults—even childless ones. As a result, everyone feels capable of evaluating teachers. Each summer, parents and children alike eagerly await the knowledge of who will be their new teacher for the upcoming school year. While few public schools encourage people to express preferences for specific teachers (Hopkins, 1999), it is common for parents and students alike to have such preferences.

Despite efforts to increase gender diversity, elementary education remains an overwhelmingly female-dominated field. Research shows that underrepresentation of talented male teachers may negatively impact gender stereotype formation and future career aspirations

of children (Dasgupta & Asgari, 2004; Mancus, 1992). For these reasons, future research should actively investigate ways to reduce bias against gender-stereotype-violating behavior.

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