Power and Achievement Language in Written Evaluations Reveals Gender Role Biases in Hiring Decisions

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Introduction
- Previous research on workplace decision-making has focused largely on the applicant rather than the evaluator.
- Hiring biases exacerbate gender discrepancies in STEM fields and leadership positions.
- We examined interactive effects of evaluator and applicant characteristics on a hiring recommendation, focusing on evaluators’ gender roles and language use and applicants’ gender.
- Language use can be useful in examining implicit biases regarding gender and gender stereotypes (see Tausczik & Pennebaker, 2010).

Method
PROCEDURE & MATERIALS
- Participants completed an evaluation of two résumés, one characteristically feminine and one characteristically masculine, applying for a hypothetical university leadership position.
- Rated how personable (e.g., “Cares about students”) and competent (e.g., “Is well qualified”) they would be.
- Described their impression of the candidate in their own words (analyzed by LIWC 2015; Pennebaker, Booth, Boyd, & Francis, 2015), then provided an overall hiring decision.
- Completed the Big Five Inventory (John & Srivastava, 1999) and Dimensions of Gender Role Stereotypes (Diekman & Eagly, 2000).

Results

Achievement Language in Hiring Decision Rationale

- Participants with higher self-reported femininity scores, controlling for participant sex, rated the presumed female applicant as less personable (t = -2.13, p = .042) and were less likely to recommend them for the job (t = -2.81, p = .009) to the degree that they described them using more achievement language (e.g. ambitious, winner).
- Those associations were absent for the presumed male resume and for masculine participants rating either applicant (all p > .50).

Power Language in Hiring Decision Rationale

- Power was uncorrelated with personalableness for other femininity-applicant gender combinations, all p > .30.

Discussion
- Results suggest that, regardless of biological sex, feminine people are more likely to judge others based on adherence to their respective gender role norms in a hiring situation.
- If they see a woman as accomplished, they rate her as colder or less personable (and overall less hireable); if they see a man as dominant, they rate him as more personable or socially skilled.
- Consistent with Role Congruity Theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002), our findings indicate that women may experience backlash when their behavior deviates from traditional gender norms, such as being achievement focused.
- Likewise, men may be penalized if they are not seen as sufficiently powerful or dominant.

Implications & The Future
- Such biases may be particularly costly in hiring or promotion, where applicants must highlight their accomplishments.
- Unclear whether these specific biases are limited to hiring scenarios.
- Future studies will manipulate gender adherence of application content and analyze transcripts of dyads’ conversations about applicants.