GENDER AND PERCEPTIONS ABOUT ENTREPRENEURSHIP: A SOCIAL ROLE PERSPECTIVE

Several studies in the organizational literature have sought to unravel gender stereotypical beliefs that create and maintain meaning about managerial activities, events, and objects people confront in professional domains, such as business and entrepreneurship (Jennings & Brush, 2013; Ryan & Haslam, 2005). There is now a long tradition of research focusing on the configuration of gender stereotypes associated with positions of organizational leadership (Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Duehr & Bono, 2006; Heilman, 2012). As knowledge in this area has expanded, increased attention is being paid to the contextual factors that may alter the nature or content of gender stereotypes about organizational leaders; the intention being to identify circumstances under which stereotypical beliefs hold similarly or vary drastically. In this vein, the present study investigates gender characterizations about entrepreneurs in two countries: United States and India. These two countries are similar in some ways (democratic with equal legal rights for men and women), but also differ substantially (for example, religion, role models, and regulations), thereby providing an interesting context in which to compare current gender stereotypes about entrepreneurship.

Social role theory (SRT; Eagly, 1987) provides a theoretical explanation of how gender differences in perceptions about leadership roles are created and reinforced in society. A core tenet of SRT is that gender stereotypes, like other stereotypes in general, reflect perceivers' observations of what people do in daily life (Eagly & Steffen, 1984). If a particular group of people is often engaged in a particular activity, others are likely to believe that the abilities and personality attributes required to carry out that activity are typical of that group of people (Eagly & Wood, 1999). These expectancies are then transmitted to future generations via socialization processes (Eagly, Wood, & Diekman, 2000). Because attitudes and behaviors emerge from the efforts of individuals to maximize the rewards and minimize the costs of the outcomes available to them within a local population and a particular society (Wood & Eagly, 2002), it is reasonable to expect variations in gender stereotypes about entrepreneurship across countries. For this reason, cross-cultural studies that pay close attention to relevant facts, events, and issues about human social organization across two (or more) societies can provide important insights into variability in the actual configuration of gender characterizations.

In this study, we examine the nature and content of gender stereotypes about entrepreneurs in two different countries: United States and India. Building on SRT tenets, we employ two paradigms- stereotype congruence (Schein, 1973) and agency-communion (Powell & Butterfield, 1979)- to understand the nuances of gender stereotypes about entrepreneurs. There is a long tradition of research within each of the two paradigms (Koenig, Eagly, Mitchell, & Ristikari, 2011), but they have rarely been brought together (e.g., Duehr & Bono, 2006) to cast light on stereotypical perceptions about organizational leaders as we do in the present study. Recent research has suggested that understanding the insidious ways in which gendered assumptions infiltrate social constructions of the entrepreneurial function will extend the knowledge frontier in entrepreneurship in new directions (Ahl & Marlow, 2014). Finally, there continues to be “overrepresentation of the United States” and “rarity of studies from non-Western nations” (Koenig et al., 2011: 636) in research on gender stereotypes about leadership

positions. We hope to provide a much needed comparative analyses across two countries in the present research.

Theory and Hypotheses

Entrepreneurship refers to the discovery and pursuit of new opportunities (Shane & Venkataraman, 2000), which is at the very heart of the new venture creation process (Chiles, Bluedorn, & Gupta, 2007). There is increasing scholarly agreement that entrepreneurship is about creating or starting a new venture (Reynolds et al. 2005). The past three decades have witnessed growing interest in entrepreneurship among educators, policy-makers, and thought leaders (Streb & Gupta, 2011). This trend has been accompanied by an increasing emphasis on issues related to gender in entrepreneurship (Jennings & Brush, 2013), with researchers seeking to explore and understand the infiltration of gendered assumptions in entrepreneurship (Ahl & Marlow, 2014).

Theories of entrepreneurship and organization are often built on an economic or meritocratic logic which stipulates that competencies and skills of enterprising actors are evaluated in an objective way (Yang & Aldrich, 2014). A growing body of research over the past few years has challenged this rational view of entrepreneurship (Jennings & Brush, 2013), arguing that the popular representation of entrepreneurship as an open socio-economic space for the revelation of enterprising capacity is inconsistent with reality. Specifically, scholars have raised concerns that research studies, foundational texts, and mass media are inherently biased in their representation of entrepreneurs and entrepreneurship, particularly drawing attention to the presence of 'gender bias' in conceptions of "what an entrepreneur is or should be" (Ahl & Marlow, 2012: 544). Consequently, there is now considerable interest in understanding the infiltration of gendered assumptions in conceptions about entrepreneurs.

Considerable research suggests that people are cognitive misers who rely on categorizing to simplify the external world, which provides a shared system of labels that facilitates communication and common understanding (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). Stereotypes are based on detectable categories "that single out an individual as sharing assumed characteristics on the basis of group membership" (Cauthen, Robinson, & Krauss, 1971: 103). In the case of gender, stereotyping results from classification of people into two groups based on visible biological markers (Bruni, Gherardi, & Poggio, 2004; Butler, 1990). Once classified, men and women are believed to differ according to divergent abilities, values, motives, and traits as per common beliefs and norms about what is typically masculine and typically feminine.

Evidence indicates two universal dimensions of human cognition: agency and communality (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007). The terms derive from Bakan (1966), where the former refers to an assertive instrumental orientation and the latter indicates an emotional, interpersonal proclivity. Agentic qualities are manifested by self-assertion, self-expansion, and the urge to master, whereas communal qualities are manifested by selflessness, concern with others, and a desire to be at one with others. Decades of prior research supports the importance and recurrence of the agency-communal dimensions, sometimes with different names and slightly different meanings (Fiske, Coddy, & Glick, 2007).

Commonly held beliefs about the typical man and the typical woman concentrate on the agentic-instrumental pole and the communality-expressive pole respectively. Men are considered characteristically agentic and women are considered characteristically communal. Several studies provide evidence that men are generally linked with agency and women with communality (Abele, 2003). According to the social role theory (SRT; Eagly & Steffen, 1994), stereotypical beliefs about gender in a particular society are a product of relations between people and the language they use to describe their world. From this perspective, agency is associated more with men because people see men engage more in achievement-oriented roles that are accorded higher status and afforded greater rewards. Conversely, communality is associated more with women as people see women engage more often in caring and nurturing roles that are considered lower in prestige and economic rewards.

A distinguishing feature of SRT is the idea that gender stereotypes are socially constructed so that there will be considerable variability across societies with different cultural and ecological conditions (Wood & Eagly, 2012). In effect, social role theory disagrees with the notion that classification of tasks as essentially male or female is a universal aspect of human social cognition based on either innate attributes of the human species (Buss, 1989) or widely shared social convention around the world (Bradley & Moore, 1996). For example, Murdock and Provost (1973) identified certain tasks as 'swing activities' that were performed mainly by men in some societies, mainly by women in other societies, and interchangeably by men and women in yet other societies. For example, pottery-making (defined as ceramic production) is a swing activity: Of the 76 societies for which Byrne (1994) could gather data, pottery-making is done exclusively or predominantly by men in 9 societies, equally by both men and women in 7 societies, and predominantly or exclusively by women in 60 societies. A large-scale investigation of 185 societies reveals that the total set of activities that seem to be performed interchangeably by men and women within a particular society range from a low of 0% to a high of 35% (Sanday, 1981).

At first glance, it seems that entrepreneurship is fundamentally masculine in nature (Marlow, 2014). Prior research suggests that contemporary descriptions of entrepreneurship- in media, texts, and classrooms- construe entrepreneurship as an "all-male concept" (Ahl, 2007). Entrepreneurs are frequently described as bold, aggressive, calculative, risk taking, and aggressive- traits stereotypically considered masculine (Baughn, Chua, & Neupert, 2006). Lewis (2006) observed that entrepreneurship is largely framed as an arena for men and constructed as masculine by researchers and practitioners alike. In scholarly texts and in everyday society, therefore, deep-seated cultural norms and values seem to motivate descriptions of entrepreneurs that align closely with those of contemporary masculinity (Ahl, 2007). A closer look at the literature, however, suggestions that definitions of entrepreneurship take for granted the 'American entrepreneurial archetype'- "mingling gender themes with American folklore and Western ethnocentrism- in casting entrepreneurs within a masculine gender framework (Jennings & McDougald, 2007). Consequently, it is possible that the nature or content of stereotypical conceptions about entrepreneurs may not be universal. In other words, entrepreneurship may be a 'swing activity' that is male-typed in some societies, but female-typed or gender-neutral in other societies.

Based on SRT, we hypothesize that:

H1a: Perceptions about entrepreneurs will be inconsistent with the feminine stereotype in the US, but consistent with the feminine stereotype in India.
H1b: Perceptions about entrepreneurs will be consistent with the masculine stereotype in both the US and India.

H2a: There will be higher ascription of agency to entrepreneurs in the US than in India
H2b: There will be higher ascription of communality to entrepreneurs in India than in the US

Method

Two separate studies were conducted to test the predicted relationships. Recent research has emphasized the need to demonstrate that findings obtained in one study are paralleled by observations made using different samples (Schmidt, 2009). In this vein, Hambrick (2004: 94-95) contend that "secure and established fields allow – and encourage – a constant regimen of replications, extensions and minor refinements, all as a way to gain understanding of which theories really hold water." Accordingly, we followed the same procedures and used the same measures in both studies.

Study 1 involved data collection from business students in US and India and Study 2 collected data from working professionals in the two countries. Both studies followed a similar design: Three forms of the 92-item Schein Descriptive Index (Brenner, Tomkiewicz, & Schein, 1989; Schein, 1973) were created (entrepreneurs in general, men in general, and women in general) and randomly assigned to participants for completion so that each respondent only filled out one form of the SDI. The SDI includes adjectives such as "submissive," "industrious," and "hasty" as well as phrases like "high need for power" and "strong need for social acceptance"

Each respondent's ratings of men in general or women in general or entrepreneurs in general were used to create measures of congruence. To calculate these congruence measures, we followed the analytic procedures used by Schein and her colleagues (Brenner et al., 1989; Schein, 1973; Schein et al., 1996). Specifically, each of the 92 descriptive items was considered as a class and within each class the mean ratings for men in general, women in general, and entrepreneurs in general were calculated. We then calculated the correlations of the mean ratings for entrepreneur in general with the mean ratings of men in general and women in general.

We formed agentic and communal scales using the relevant descriptors recommended by Duehr and Bono (2006). Based on the work of Eagly and her colleagues (Diekman & Eagly, 2000; Eagly & Karau, 2002), Duehr and Bono (2006) identified 14 adjectives from Schein's 92-item list to reflect agentic and communal characteristics. Specifically, the agency scale comprised of 'aggressive', 'ambitious', 'analytical ability', 'assertive', 'dominant', 'forceful' and 'self-confident', and the communality scale consisted of 'creative', 'helpful', 'kind', 'aware of others' feelings', 'passive', 'submissive', and 'sympathetic'.

Results and Discussion

Social scientists have long been interested in understanding implicit beliefs about organizational leaders. Because lack of fit with widely-held mental representations can impact the perceived suitability of men or women for particular tasks (Heilman, 1983), examining gender-relevant content of people's intuitive beliefs- implicit theories- about specific leadership positions would be crucial to understanding and eradicating the under-representation of women in such leadership roles. The purpose of the present study was to examine gender-relevant content of people's intuitive beliefs- or implicit theories- about entrepreneurs. Using SRT logic, we theorize that implicit gender characterizations about entrepreneurs are socially constructed, rather than based on essential components of sex differences. To test our predictions, we collected data from two independent samples- working professionals and business students- in the US and India, so as to strengthen confidence in the external validity of our findings and provide robust bases for future theory development.

Our research also has some limitations that must be acknowledged. First, we were interested in perceptions about entrepreneurs in general, rather than about specific kinds of entrepreneurial activities such as those captured by Dacin, Dacin, and Matear (2010)'s typology of conventional, institutional cultural, and social entrepreneurship. It is possible that the attributes people ascribe to the generic entrepreneur are not equally shared by entrepreneurs running specific types of ventures, an interesting topic for future investigation. Second, we directly asked responds to provide their ratings of the characteristics attributed to one of three conditions: men, women, or entrepreneurs. It would be informative to triangulate our results with more subtle measures such as those measuring reaction times to target stimuli (Rudman & Kilanski, 2000). Finally, US and India are large, heterogeneous countries with several different sub-cultures within them. The extent to which gender characterizations about entrepreneurs vary within these countries remains for future research to investigate.

Notwithstanding the limitations of our research, our study has several methodological strengths. First, the SDI is well appreciated for comprehensively measuring perceptions about a variety of occupational roles, ranging from athletic directors to managers to CEOs (Koenig, Eagly, Mitchell, & Ristikari, 2011). Second, following Duehr and Bono (2006), we assessed the content of the stereotypes using the agency-communion paradigm (Powell & Butterfield, 1979), which illuminates a different aspect of gender stereotyping. Third, we sampled college students as well as working adults, which helps compare our findings with previous studies as well as provides a more overall picture of gender characterizations about entrepreneurs than is possible with sampling from only one population. Finally, we focused on two countries that are very similar to each other, yet differ substantially in profound ways. Cross-cultural studies that pay attention to relevant facts, events, and issues in two (or more) societies and link them with observed findings in each of the countries are critical to meaningful theory development in a globalizing world.

References

Provided in the full paper.