The Impact of the Wording of Employment Advertisements on Students' Inclination to Apply for a Job

Marise Ph. Born & Toon W. Taris

To cite this article: Marise Ph. Born & Toon W. Taris (2010) The Impact of the Wording of Employment Advertisements on Students' Inclination to Apply for a Job, The Journal of Social Psychology, 150:5, 485-502, DOI: 10.1080/00224540903365422

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/00224540903365422

Published online: 13 Sep 2010.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 3672

View related articles

Citing articles: 21 View citing articles
The Impact of the Wording of Employment Advertisements on Students’ Inclination to Apply for a Job

MARISE PH. BORN
Erasmus University, Rotterdam

TOON W. TARIS
Utrecht University

ABSTRACT. Students’ inclination to apply for a job was examined as a function of (1) the wording of the desired candidate’s profile specified in the employment advertisement and (2) applicant gender. Previous research found that women are more inclined than men to apply for jobs that include a profile corresponding to their gender (i.e., a profile containing prototypically feminine instead of masculine personal characteristics). Based on Fiedler and Semin’s (1996) Linguistic Category Model, we expected that this effect would decrease if the desired profile was worded in terms of behaviors/verbs instead of nouns/adjectives. ANOVA supported this reasoning for women but not for men. We conclude that organizations may increase the number of women applying for particular jobs by changing the presentation form of the advertisement.

Keywords: career development, classified advertising, discrimination, employment issues, gender issues

FROM AN ORGANIZATIONAL POINT OF VIEW, the employee recruitment process consists of three stages involving attracting the interest of job candidates, selection of applicants, and attempts to tie the desired candidate to the organization, respectively (Barber, 1998; Rynes & Cable, 2003). Interestingly, at present, comparatively little research deals with the first stage (Jones, Shultz & Chapman, 2006), in spite of the fact that the quality and quantity of the pool of applicants

We thank Linda Acitelli and Chet Robie for their constructive comments on an earlier draft of this paper.
Address correspondence to Toon W. Taris, Ph.D., Department of Work and Organizational Psychology, Utrecht University, P.O. Box 9104, NL-3508 Utrecht, The Netherlands; t.taris@uu.nl (e-mail).
generated in this stage will be related to the quality of the candidate that is ultimately selected for the job.

In the first stage of the recruitment process, organizations must draw job seekers into the applicant pool (Rynes & Cable, 2003), making potential applicants aware of the vacancy as well as of the degree to which they are eligible for the position. At present, one of the most commonly used means to do so is to place job advertisements in newspapers (Jones et al., 2006, for an overview). Previous research has shown that the specificity and type of information presented in employment advertisements affects the decision to apply for a position (among others, Feldman, Bearden & Hardesty, 2006; Lievens & Chapman, 2010; Rynes & Cable, 2003, for reviews). In the past, researchers have applied these findings in the context of diversity management and affirmative action programs. For example, the impact of inclusion of equal employment opportunity statements in job advertisements has been examined as a predictor of organizational attractiveness (McNab & Johnston, 2002) and the willingness to apply for a job (Bem & Bem, 1974; Brown, Cober, Keeping & Levy, 2006).

Building on this work as well on job attraction theory (Rynes, 1991) and similarity-attraction theory (Byrne, 1971; Drigotas, 1993; Johnson, Winter, Reio, Thompson, & Petrosko, 2008), the present study focuses on how the profile of the desired applicant presented in employment advertisements affects male and female students’ inclination to apply for this position. Moreover, we examine how the wording of this profile (that is, in gender-specific traits versus gender-neutral behaviors) affects this inclination. As such, the research reported in this paper extends prior knowledge on the effects of differences in the wording and content of employment advertisements on job attractiveness and applicant self-selection, by focusing on subtle differences in the perception of phrases that seem to be gender-neutral.

Personal Characteristics in Recruitment Advertisements and Gender

Employment advertisements typically contain a profile of the applicant who would be perfectly suited for the position (Johnson et al., 2008). This profile usually includes the level of education and amount and type of labor market experience needed for the job, but often also a set of personal characteristics believed necessary for successful job performance (e.g., candidates should be “creative” or have “excellent social skills”). The average U.S. employment advertisement mentions about 1.7 such characteristics (Allen, 1995; Brinkmeyer, 1995). Similarly, Dutch employment advertisements mention on average 3.5 personal characteristics (Taris & Bok, 1998). Interestingly, many personal characteristics are deemed more typical of one gender than of the other (Das Gupta & Asgari, 2004; Eagly, Mladinic & Otto, 1991; Johnson, Murphy, Zewdie & Reichardt, 2008; Lall, Holmes, Brinkmeyer, Johnson & Yatko, 1999). Krefting and Berger (1979) and Taris and Bok (1998) demonstrated that their samples of
male and female university students perceived personal characteristics presented in the form of job requirements as differentially appropriate for men and women, which is in line with existing stereotypes.

How may the male and female personal characteristics mentioned in the desired applicant’s profile affect potential applicants’ reactions to advertisements? Job attraction theory (Rynes, 1991; Rynes & Barber, 1990; Schwab, Rynes & Aldag, 1987) postulates that personal characteristics of the job applicant are among the most salient influencers of applicant ratings of jobs described in recruitment media. Byrne’s (1971) similarity-attraction hypothesis posits that, in the employee recruitment context, job applicants are attracted to organizations and recruiters with personal characteristics similar to their own (Johnson, Winter et al., 2008). In conjunction, job attraction theory and similarity-attraction theory suggest that when the personal characteristics mentioned in the employment advertisement match with the applicant’s characteristics, job candidates will feel more attracted to the job than when such a match is absent. As the personal characteristics mentioned in the desired applicant’s profile are often more typical for one gender than for the other (Eagly et al., 1991; Taris & Bok, 1998), male job candidates may on average feel more attracted to positions featuring a masculine profile of the ideal candidate, whereas the reverse should apply to female candidates (Johnson, Winter et al., 2008).

Taris and Bok (1998) partly confirmed this reasoning, showing that female college students felt more attracted to job descriptions, including feminine profiles, than to descriptions with masculine profiles. However, for male students, no such effect was found; they felt equally attracted to all positions, irrespective of the type of profile included in the job description. One explanation is that socialization processes may encourage men to be more career-oriented than women (Eccles, Freedman-Doan, Frome, Jacobs & Yoon, 2000; Watt & Eccles, 2008). Men may care less than women about what is actually being expected from them; they want to move up, using any opportunity that occurs to get there. Thus, they could be less reactive to the gender-typicality of the requirements in an employment advertisement than women. Another explanation is that men are more self-confident than women (Kling, Hyde, Showers, & Buswell, 1999; Pallier, 2003), to the degree that they feel that they can perform well at any job, even if the desired candidate’s profile includes person characteristics that are more typical of the average female than of the average male. For example, Furnham, Crawshaw, and Rawles (2006) showed that males estimated their overall IQ to be significantly higher than females, with effect sizes around 0.5. Similarly, Matsui, Ikeda, and Ohnishi (1989) showed that male Japanese students were equally confident they could make a career in male versus female-dominated occupations, whereas their female colleagues reported higher self-efficacy in female-dominated occupations but lower efficacy in male-dominated occupations. Based on this reasoning, we expect that women will be more inclined to apply for a position if an advertisement for this position includes a feminine rather than a masculine
profile (Hypothesis 1a). Conversely, men will be inclined to apply for positions to the same extent, irrespective of whether the job description includes a masculine profile or a feminine profile (Hypothesis 1b).

**Wording of Personal Characteristics**

A major line of research on the effects of language on cognition (Douglas & Sutton, 2003; Fiedler & Semin, 1996; Semin, 2008; Wigboldus & Douglas, 2007) has demonstrated that the way personal characteristics are presented influences people’s inferences concerning the centrality of these characteristics. If personal characteristics are presented as traits (that is, using *nouns* and *adjectives*—e.g., “John is aggressive”), people tend to consider this information as more revealing about a person’s nature than if the same information is presented in terms of behaviors (*verbs*, e.g., “John beats David”; Fiedler & Semin, 1996). In the latter case, the aggressive behavior is judged less in terms of a stable, unchangeable disposition than in the first case where John is described as aggressive *in general*. Thus, nouns and adjectives emphasize what an individual *has* or *is*, rather than what this individual *does*; the reverse applies to verbs (Semin, 2008).

In the context of employment advertisements, these findings suggest that when the personal characteristics mentioned in the desired candidate’s profile are presented in the form of traits, potential applicants will interpret these requirements as referring to stable dispositions, the candidate should *possess* in order to be eligible, asking themselves whether they are the *kind of person* that is wanted for this job. Conversely, when the same information is presented in the form of behaviors/tasks that the applicant should *master*, potential applicants will focus on the performance expected by the organization—i.e. on the degree to which they can and are motivated to *perform* (i.e., whether they can carry out the tasks), and to a lesser extent on underlying dispositions. As these underlying dispositions are often deemed more applicable to one gender than to the other (Johnson, Murphy et al., 2008), this reasoning suggests that profiles that gender-specific personal characteristics in the form of traits will be considered more applicable to one gender than profiles in which the same personal characteristics are presented in the form of concrete behaviors. If this is correct, women’s inclination to apply for a position with a profile including masculine personal characteristics versus feminine personal characteristics should vary as a function of the way this profile is presented (i.e., in terms of traits versus behaviors). Thus, the type of profile in the employment advertisement (including masculine versus feminine personal characteristics) should affect women’s reactions to this advertisement in conjunction with the way this profile is presented (cf. Johnson, Winter et al., 2008). As men would be unresponsive to the type of profile (Taris & Bok, 1998, Study 3), presentation form should not have any additional effect on them.

In sum, we assume that there will be a three-way interaction between applicant gender, type of profile (masculine vs. feminine), and presentation form (verbs vs.
traits), such that the effect of gender typicality of job profiles on response rates among female applicants diminishes when behaviors/verbs rather than traits are used to describe the profile of the desired applicant, whereas for men neither the typicality of job profile nor presentation form will be relevant (Hypothesis 2).

**Method**

*Materials: Selection of Personal Characteristics/Behaviors/Job Titles*

Taris and Bok (1998, Study 1) compiled a list of 20 personal characteristics that were most frequently mentioned in Dutch employment advertisements for higher staff. This list was based on a survey of the personal characteristics mentioned in 512 employment advertisements that appeared in six major Dutch newspapers. All characteristics on this list were judged by 20 male and 20 female psychology undergraduate students on their typicality of the average man and woman of their own age and level of education, using a 7-point Likert-type scale. For the purpose of the present study, we selected those characteristics where the difference between the typicality ratings for males and females was both statistically significant and larger than 1.00, representing considerable effect sizes (\(\eta\)) of 0.47 and higher. From the 7 remaining person characteristics, we selected two non-overlapping typically male and two non-overlapping typically female characteristics. For example, whereas “communication skills,” “customer-orientedness,” and “contactual skills” were typically female characteristics, conceptually they all cover the domain of interpersonal skills: therefore, only one of these (“good communication skills,” being the characteristic that was most often mentioned in employment advertisements) was retained for the present study. For the current study, two typically masculine and two typically feminine characteristics were taken from this list, namely “solid business sense” and “decisiveness” (both masculine), and “communication skills” and “creativity” (both feminine).

In the current research, these four personal characteristics were presented to one male and three female judges (all Psychology Ph.D. candidates) who were unaware of the goals of the study. They independently generated a list of behaviors (verbs) that they considered typical of each of the four traits (personal characteristics/nouns). The authors of the present study independently ranked these behaviors in terms of their correspondence with the underlying person characteristics and selected the behaviors that represented these characteristics best. In case of differences, the behaviors were discussed until agreement was reached.

Finally, the authors generated four job titles. These job titles should represent jobs (1) for which a particular personal characteristic-behavior combination was appropriate; (2) that required a university degree, but not any particular type of schooling or experience. Thus, persons with very different educational backgrounds might apply successfully for all four jobs; and (3) that were gender-neutral, in that in reality men and women are about equally represented in the job
The Journal of Social Psychology

(CBS, 2005); thus, the chances that the participants would infer the gender-specificity of a particular job title from the frequency with which they were personally confronted with men and women holding that position were minimized. The job titles were selected from a list compiled by the Dutch census (CBS, 2005).

The resulting four job title/trait (personal characteristic)/behavior (verb) combinations were: (1) Public relations officer—Communicative skills—“developing and maintaining contacts within and outside the organization”; (2) Junior journalist—Creativity—“generating original ideas and solutions for particular issues”; (3) Management trainee—Solid business sense—“adequately serving and representing the business interests of the organization”; and (4) Policy analyst—Decisiveness—“taking decisions on how important issues can best be tackled.” These four sets of information were used to create the employment advertisements used in the present study (see below).

Participants and Experimental Design

The participants in the study were 78 students of a medium-sized Dutch university in Amsterdam, The Netherlands, who were drawn from a pool of students who had previously indicated (e.g., during class or after having been contacted by the second authors’ assistants) to be interested in participating in psychological experiments. Only students who were in the master’s phase of their study were contacted ($M_{age}$ was 21.2 years, $SD = 1.1$; 40% male). Half of the participants (52%) studied humanities (including sociology, economics, psychology, and education); 21% studied law; 19% studied arts (philosophy, history, language); the remaining 9% studied in other areas (e.g., computer science and medicine). They volunteered to participate in the study and received €4,- for their cooperation. Because the study was concerned with characteristics of the job-seeking subpopulation, it was important to ensure that the participants were likely to be searching for a job at some time in the near future. All participants were in the final stage of their study; all said they were orienting themselves towards the labor market (e.g., by reading employment advertisements); and all indicated that they were more or less familiar with judging the content and attractiveness of positions offered in employment advertisements in relation to their own capacities and interests.

The current study employed one within-participants variable (Type of profile: masculine vs. feminine) and three between-participants variables (Gender participant: male vs. female; Presentation form: trait vs. behavioral presentation; and Gender contact: male vs. female contact person of the organization). The latter factor was added because one of the dependent variables involved judgments on the chances that one would contact the person mentioned in the advertisement, and we felt that this person’s gender might influence results. No a priori expectations were formulated for this factor. Medium-sized effects ($\eta = 0.28$) had a 70% probability to be detected in our study (Cohen, 1988).
Procedure

The participants completed a structured questionnaire via a computer. After a brief introduction to the experiment, the participants provided some background information (e.g., their age and gender). They then received four short employment advertisements in random order. These advertisements were designed to resemble “real” advertisements as closely as possible—in fact, the descriptions of the four organizations were adapted from real employment advertisements. The advertisement for the management trainee (a position with a masculine profile) read as follows (in the trait-presentation/female contact person condition):

EuroConsult is an Amsterdam-based, medium-sized consulting firm. We assist in policy development, and we specialize in environmental issues, traffic and transportation, and intercultural issues in Europe. Our clients include both profit and not-for-profit organizations. Your future colleagues have a sociological/behavioral, technical, or linguistic background. We currently have an opening for a management trainee (if/m), who has recently completed his/her studies, and who has a solid business sense. Inquiries should be made to Mrs. __, MSc. Direct your application letter to Mrs. __, Ph.D. (managing director EuroConsult), within two weeks after publication of this advertisement.

In the behavioral-presentation condition, the last part of the fifth sentence read “… who has recently completed his/her studies, and who can adequately serve and represent the business interests of our organization.” In the male contact condition, the indications that the contacts were female (“Mrs.”) were replaced with indications that they were male (“Mr.”). The advertisement for the junior journalist (which had a feminine profile) was (in the trait-representation/male contact person condition):

The Voice is a medium-sized regional newspaper in the vicinity of Amsterdam. Our readers appreciate it to be informed about the developments in their area, but do also want to stay up-to-date with the national and international news. We are currently looking for an all-round junior journalist. Your educational background is unimportant, but you should have (or be about to complete) a university education. Moreover, a successful candidate should possess high levels of creativity. Inquiries should be made to Mr. __, MSc. Direct your application letter to Mr. __, Ph.D. (Deputy Editor of The Voice), within two weeks after publication of this advertisement.

In the behavioral-presentation condition, the last part of the fifth sentence read “… a successful candidate should be able to generate original ideas and solutions for particular issues”. Further, in the female contact condition, the indications that the contacts were male (“Mr.”) were replaced with indications that they were female (“Mrs.”). The two other advertisements featured a district council (policy analyst) and a branch organization (public relations officer). In order to ensure comparability, all advertisements included similar information
about the size and location of the organization (all were medium-sized, and located in or around Amsterdam), and a general description of the fields in which the organization was involved. Care was taken that all participants could feel eligible for all positions, irrespective of their educational backgrounds. Further, all advertisements mentioned explicitly that the candidate should have completed or should be about to complete a university study, but that the direction in which one was majoring was unimportant. The advertisements were completed by inserting the respective job titles and personal characteristics (in terms of traits or behaviors, depending on the presentation-condition), and adding the lines about whom to contact (Mrs. or Mr. __, depending on the contact-condition). All participants received all four job descriptions.

Dependent Variable

Inclination to apply for the position was measured with two items, namely “What are the chances that you would ask the person to be contacted mentioned in the advertisement for more information about this job, were you looking for a job?” (0–100%) and “What are the chances that you would actually send in an application letter to the person mentioned in the advertisement, were you looking for a job?” (0–100%). The correlation between these items exceeded .91 for all four advertisements, \( p’s < .001 \). Therefore, the two items were averaged for each advertisement.

Manipulation Checks

After rating a particular advertisement, the participants were either given a list of the four traits employed in this study (if they were in the behavioral presentation condition), or a list of the four behaviors (if they were in the trait presentation condition). Then they had to indicate which of these traits (behaviors) they felt was most important for performing well in this particular position. This allowed us to check whether the participants linked the traits and behaviors to the correct job titles/positions.

After all advertisements had been rated, the participants in the trait presentation condition received one of the four traits (in randomized order). They then had to match this trait to one of the four behaviors (“Which of the four behaviors below represents the above trait best?”), after which they proceeded with the following trait, until all four traits had been matched to a behavior. Note that a particular behavior could be matched to two or more traits—e.g., one might feel that “developing and maintaining contacts within and outside the organization” applied to both “communicative skills” and “solid business sense.” Conversely, the participants in the behavioral presentation condition received the four behaviors, which they were to match with the corresponding traits. This enabled us to check
whether our assumption of a one-to-one correspondence between traits and behaviors was warranted.

Finally, the gender-specificity of the characteristics included in the study was checked by asking the participants to rate the degree to which they felt that these were typical of the average man and woman of their own age and level of education (1 = “not typical”, 7 = “very typical”).

**Analytic Approach**

The key hypotheses in this study were tested using analysis of variance (ANOVA). We proposed that women would be more inclined to apply for a position if an advertisement for this position includes a feminine rather than a masculine profile (Hypothesis 1a), whereas men would be inclined to apply for all positions, irrespective of whether the job description includes a masculine profile or a feminine profile (Hypothesis 1b). Further, Hypothesis 2 proposed that the gender-specificity of the profile would affect women’s judgments more strongly if the profile is presented in the form of traits rather than in behavioral terms. To test these hypotheses, we analyzed the inclination to apply for a particular position in a four-factor ANOVA, with Type of profile (masculine vs. feminine) as a within-participants factor and Presentation form (trait vs. behavior), Gender contact (male vs. female person to be contacted), and Gender (male vs. female) as between-participants factors.

For Hypotheses 1a-b to be confirmed, there should be a Gender × Type of profile interaction effect, such that females’ inclination to apply for a position is higher when a female profile is presented (Hypothesis 1a); for males, Type of profile should be irrelevant (Hypothesis 1b). Hypothesis 2 is supported when there is a Gender × Type of profile × Presentation form interaction effect, such that Hypothesis 1a is confirmed for profiles that are presented in the form of traits, but not for behaviors.

**Results**

**Manipulation Checks**

*Gender-specificity of the traits.* Ratings of gender-specificity of the traits selected for this study were analyzed in a three-factor ANOVA, with Target of Judgment (average male vs. average female) and Type of profile (masculine vs. feminine) as within-participant factors and Gender (male vs. female) as a between-participant factor. This analysis revealed a main effect of Target of Judgment, $F(1,75) = 4.07, p < .05$, and an interaction between Type of profile and Target of Judgment, $F(1,75) = 28.45, p < .001$. As expected, post-hoc tests indicated that the participants felt that the masculine traits applied more strongly to the average male than to the average female ($M$’s were 5.58, $SD = 0.66$, and 5.34, $SD = 0.82$),
The inclination to apply for a particular position was analyzed in a four-factor ANOVA. Table 1 presents the $F$-values and effect sizes for this analysis. This table only includes the statistically significant effects: Effects not mentioned were included in the analysis but failed to reach significance. Table 1 shows that there was a main effect of Gender. Follow-up tests showed that on average, men considered the positions less attractive ($M = 34.11$, $SD = 20.10$) than women did.
Born & Taris

Further, we found a main effect of Type of profile. Post-hoc probing revealed that positions with a masculine profile were considered less attractive ($M = 34.68, SD = 22.13$) than if a feminine profile was presented ($M = 53.69, SD = 22.52$), $F(1,46) = 16.65, p < .001, D = 0.84$ (Hypothesis 1a supported). For men, the inclination to apply did not depend on whether a masculine or a feminine profile was presented ($Ms$ were 33.43, $SD = 12.73$, vs. $M = 34.79, SD = 24.04$), $F(1,30) < 1.00, ns, D = 0.07$ (Hypothesis 1b supported).

Central to our study is Hypothesis 2 that states that the gender-specificity of the profile should affect women’s judgments more strongly if the profile is presented in the form of traits, than if it is presented in behavioral terms. Relevant to this hypothesis, we found a significant Type of profile $\times$ Presentation form interaction effect. Post-hoc tests showed that if information about the required personal characteristics was offered in the form of traits, participants found masculine profiles less attractive ($M = 30.52, SD = 20.39$) than feminine profiles ($M = 49.97, SD = 26.71$), $F(1,42) = 16.29, p < .001, D = 0.81$. When the same information was presented in the form of behaviors, no such difference occurred ($Ms$ were 38.69, $SD = 22.99$, and 41.53, $SD = 21.70$), $F(1,34) < 1.00, ns, D = 0.13$. However, in order for Hypothesis 2 to be confirmed, this interaction should be moderated by gender; women should be less inclined to apply for jobs with a masculine profile than for jobs with a feminine profile. But this difference would

---

**TABLE 1. Summary of the Main Findings of a Four-Factor ANOVA**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effects</th>
<th>$F$</th>
<th>$\eta$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Main effects</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>5.94*</td>
<td>0.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of profile</td>
<td>11.09***</td>
<td>0.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Two-way interaction effects</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of profile $\times$ Gender</td>
<td>8.30**</td>
<td>0.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presentation form $\times$ Type of profile</td>
<td>4.16*</td>
<td>0.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Three-way interaction effect</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presentation form $\times$ Type of profile $\times$ Gender</td>
<td>4.93*</td>
<td>0.26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. All effects have (1, 70) degrees of freedom. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. Effects that are not mentioned here were included in the analysis but not statistically significant, $p > .05$. 

$(M = 44.18, SD = 15.61), D = 0.55$. Further, we found a main effect of Type of profile. Post-hoc probing revealed that positions with a masculine profile were considered less attractive ($M = 34.18, SD = 21.84$) than if a feminine profile was presented ($M = 46.18, SD = 24.79$), $D = 0.52$.

According to Hypotheses 1a and 1b, women will be more inclined to apply for advertisements including a profile specific to their own gender, whereas men would be unresponsive to the gender typicality of the profile. Relevant to this hypothesis, our analysis revealed a Gender $\times$ Type of profile interaction. Post-hoc tests showed that women were less inclined to apply if a masculine profile ($M = 34.68, SD = 22.13$) than if a feminine profile was given ($M = 53.69, SD = 22.52$), $F(1,46) = 16.65, p < .001, D = 0.84$ (Hypothesis 1a supported). For men, the inclination to apply did not depend on whether a masculine or a feminine profile was presented ($Ms$ were 33.43, $SD = 12.73$, vs. $M = 34.79, SD = 24.04$), $F(1,30) < 1.00, ns, D = 0.07$ (Hypothesis 1b supported).
decrease if this profile was coded in behaviors rather than traits. Conversely, men would be inclined to apply for jobs irrespective of the profile and the presentation form. The corresponding three-way interaction effect of Type of profile, Presentation form and Gender was indeed significant. Figure 1 presents the relevant means.

Follow-up tests indicated that for men there was no interaction between Type of profile and Presentation form, \( F(1,29) < 1.00, \ ns \). They were equally inclined to apply for all positions, regardless of the gender-specificity of the profile and the form in which the profile was presented. Conversely, for women we observed a reliable Type of profile \( \times \) Presentation form interaction, \( F(1,45) = 11.19, \ p < .01 \). Follow-up tests revealed that if the profile presented traits, their inclination to apply was lower if a masculine profile was presented (\( M = 28.76, \ SD = 18.84 \)) than if a feminine profile was given (\( M = 59.90, \ SD = 22.36 \)), \( F(1,26) = 32.16, \ p < .001, \ D = 1.50 \). Consistent with Hypothesis 2, this difference disappeared when the profile presented behaviors, \( M \)'s were 42.68 (\( SD = 24.14 \)) for a masculine profile and 45.30 (\( SD = 20.37 \)) for a feminine profile, respectively, \( F(1,19) < 1.00, \ ns, \ D = 0.06 \). Thus, Hypothesis 2 was supported for women as well.

**Discussion**

The current study examined male and female students’ inclination to apply for a job as a function of the gender-specificity of the profile included in the description of the desired applicant, and the way this profile is presented. Based
on job attraction theory (Rynes, 1991) and similarity-attraction theory (Byrne, 1971; Drigotas, 1993; Johnson, Winter et al., 2008), we expected that female potential job applicants would feel especially attracted to employment advertisements featuring a typically feminine profile. For male applicants, such a preference should be absent. Moreover, findings in the area of social psychology and language suggested that the wording of these profiles could affect the attractiveness of employment advertisements (cf. Semin, 2008). Females’ preference for feminine profiles rather than masculine profiles should be strongest when these profiles are presented as stable traits; this preference should be weaker if the advertisement would describe the same personal requirements in terms of behaviors. For men, the form of presentation of the required candidate’s profile would be irrelevant.

The current study supported these hypotheses. Women were sensitive to the gender-typicality as well as the presentation form of these requirements, whereas men were indifferent to the gender-typicality of the requirements and the presentation of these (i.e., as traits or behaviors). Where the effects were significant, they were medium-sized and therefore of notable interest. These results are in line with earlier notions that the gender-typicality of job requirements influences female, but not male applicants (Taris & Bok, 1998). Women are possibly substantially more aware of their own gender than men, and therefore distinctly perceive and react to differences in appropriateness of the job requirements for their own gender. This phenomenon is generally recognizable in minority group members, who are more aware of their lower status than majority group members (Ellemers, Van Dyck, Hinkle & Jacobs, 2000; McGuire, McGuire, Child & Fujioka, 1978). Although our manipulation checks revealed that men also endorse the gender-typicality of personal characteristics employed in this study, this seems to become irrelevant when they react to an advertisement. In a similar vein, women were less inclined to apply for masculine positions than for feminine positions when the personal requirement was presented as a trait, but they were inclined to apply to the same extent to masculine positions when the same requirement was presented as a behavior. In contrast, the form in which the requirement was presented—as either a trait or a behavior—did not make any difference for men. They were equally inclined to apply for all positions, irrespective of gender-typicality of the profile presented in the advertisements. This pattern of effects confirms the notion that males are more career-oriented than women, and that they will use any opportunity to move up. This may be due to gender-specific socialization processes (e.g., Watt & Eccles, 2008) or simply to the fact that males are more self-confident than females (Furnham et al., 2006; Kling et al., 1999; Matsui et al., 1989).

Study Limitations

Two major limitations of this study must be discussed. First, this study included a limited number of job titles and personal characteristics. This begs the
question whether our results can be generalized across other job titles and personal characteristics. As regards the restricted number of job titles, we deliberately only included jobs that were more or less gender-neutral, in that in reality men and women are about equally represented in these jobs. However, it would seem possible that the magnitude of the effects reported in this study depends on the skewness of the actual gender distribution in a particular job. For instance, if there is virtually no supply of female welders, it would seem unlikely that the number of female applicants for this position can be substantially increased by simply mentioning that the female trait of “creativity” is indispensable to succeed in this job. Therefore, the current findings are especially relevant for jobs for which there is a sufficient supply of masculine and feminine labor. However, it should be noted that the gender segregation of the labor market is slowly declining (Tomaskovic-Devey et al., 2006), meaning that our findings are relevant to a growing part of the labor market.

The second issue—whether the four characteristics included in this study cover the full range of personal characteristics—is easier to deal with. Whereas the four characteristics included in this study were chosen from a list of the 20 most frequently mentioned terms in Dutch employment advertisements, these characteristics were chosen because they were among the most gender-specific personal characteristics on this list. Therefore, effects may be less pronounced for other, less gender-specific, personal characteristics. However, as at least 49% of the personal characteristics mentioned in employment advertisements is to some degree more typical of one gender than of the other (Taris & Bok, 1998), it is likely that most profiles will include at least some gender-specific characteristics.

**Study Implications**

Albeit preliminary and with limitations, we believe that our results extend current knowledge on employee attraction and recruitment in several respects. Most importantly (and consistent with attraction-similarity theory, Johnson, Winter et al., 2008), we found that female job applicants are more likely to apply for a job if the advertisement for that job included a profile listing typically feminine qualities (e.g., creativity), and they were less likely to apply if that profile included typically masculine qualities (such as decisiveness). This effect was especially present if the profile was presented in terms of stable traits and disappeared if the profile listed specific behaviors corresponding with these underlying traits. Male applicants seem to be indifferent to both the gender-typicality of the profile of the desired job candidate and the way this profile is presented.

These findings may have implications for the way employment advertisements are designed. First, an emphasis in the advertisement on prototypically feminine characteristics could clearly influence the number of female applicants positively, whereas male applicants might not be discouraged (cf. Oakenfull,
McCarthy & Greenlee, 2008, for a similar approach in the context of advertising among gays and lesbians).

Second, the finding that female applicants were inclined to apply for a masculine position significantly more often when the requirement was behaviorally formulated instead of in the form of a trait suggests another possibility to influence the phenomenon of female self-selection. By converting prototypically masculine characteristics into specific behaviors, organizations may be able to boost the response of eligible women. Thus, the impact of subtle differences in the wording of employment advertisements on applicant self-selection may have the potential to improve the chances for women to catch up with men at the beginning of their careers by adding themselves to the selection pool for jobs they might not otherwise perceive as appropriate.

Finally, as neither presentation form nor the gender-typicality of the profile affected the inferences of male applicants, it would seem unlikely that organizations will be confronted with claims of discrimination by men because of these differences in advertisement design. Strong and explicit affirmative action programs have been debated and criticized fiercely (cf. Buster, Roth & Bobko, 2005; Pyburn, Ployhart & Kravitz, 2008). Changing the “make up” of employment advertisements might be a subtle and less explicit way to foster equal job opportunities for women.

It is interesting to speculate on the potential impact of the subtleties in wording tested in this study on the initial position and career advancement of male and female workers. It would seem possible that our finding that the desired applicant’s profile and the way this profile is worded is especially applicable to inexperienced populations: In more experienced populations, factors such as the amount and type of labor market experience could well be considerably more important in determining whether one is inclined to apply for a particular position. However, it should be noted that one’s current position largely determines the amount and type of labor market experience one will have later in life (cf. Scherer, 2004), meaning that the very first job one holds may already constrain the opportunities one will have in a later stage of one’s career. Therefore, it remains important to study the factors that influence the choice to apply for a particular job, even if these factors are especially relevant for the initial position one holds. Moreover, it is conceivable that our findings also apply to the later stages of one’s career, in that organizations must also frequently fill vacancies requiring higher levels of experience and expertise. By presenting the job requirements in terms of specific behaviors rather than traits, organizations may be able to increase the interest from experienced female applicants. In this way, they could attempt to increase the number of women in their higher ranks.

**AUTHOR NOTES**

**Marise Ph. Born** is a full professor of work and organizational psychology in the Psychology Department at the Erasmus University, Rotterdam.
Toon W. Taris is a full professor of work and organizational psychology in the Department of Work and Organizational Psychology at Utrecht University, The Netherlands. Both hold a PhD in Work and Organizational Psychology from the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

REFERENCES


*Received January 14, 2009*

*Accepted April 1, 2009*