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Gender Bias in Norwegian Job Advertisements

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1.0 Introduction to thesis

Dale Spender, the woman behind the book *Man Made Language* (1980) stress that language is not an insignificant dimension, thus when discussing and reflecting around gender and sexism, *language* matter. Based on an early assumption about patriarchy appearing everywhere (Beechey, 1979, cited in Spender, 1980), it is not surprising that masculinity is superior to femininity in most languages, resulting in woman being discounted in this manner. Moreover, Spender (1980, p. 10) emphasize how the language of women is inadequate in “authority, forcefulness, effectiveness and persuasiveness”, which is relevant when considering leadership in a hierarchical society. Among feminists it is a clear tendency to put importance on a prevalence to favor males in the construction of a society, as well as claiming that this bias is highly present in language- resulting in *sexism* (Spender, 1980, p. 15). Sexism in this context is understood as certain “manifestations of that order so that examples of the bias in favor of males” (Spender, 1980, p. 15). However, today, sexism may apply both ways, meaning that language can be both feminine- and masculine biased, thus work in favor of both men and women in different contexts. Katila and Eriksson (2013) stress how “micro” factors, such as for instance wording impacts the maintenance of gender inequalities, and that small changes and modifications has the potential to result in societal changes. Based on this we find it interesting to investigate the effect of wording and language in job advertisements, and thereby expose what impact this has on people's' inclination to apply for a given position.

2.0 Literature review- theoretical background

2.1 Language- feminine and masculine

Semin and Fiedler (1988) attempted to enlighten how language mediated the relationship between social cognition and social reality. Based on Semin and Greenslade's framework (1985, cited in Semin and Fiedler, 1988) they argued that choice of linguistics to a large extent contributes to systematic distortions, thus leading to biased perceptions and decisions about one self or others. Katila and

Eriksson (2013) also state how choice of linguistics (language) brings together social life, as well as takes part in the construction of it. Further, they stress the importance of discussing and reflecting around how we in our language breed and “do” gender. As stated above, Semin and Fiedler (1988) argue how language has the potential to result in biased perceptions, which is relatable to Katila and Eriksson’s (2013) understanding of language as something that is not a neutral medium of social life. Given the latter, it is reasonable to assume that use of language, thus choice of words, will result in different and varying experiences from individual to individual.

Stahlberg, Braun, Irmen and Sczesny (2007) underline how gender (referred to as sex) is one of the most important social categories, and how this also is reflected in most languages’ grammatical structures. They discuss how most languages have gender generics such as “policemen” and “firemen”, which we moreover can relate to the Norwegian language where these terms, as well as more feminine terms are present. Their review further point to how representation of the sexes in language further affects their visibility. In relation to this it is found how stereotypes can be strengthened or reduced dependent on the use of “sexist versus gender-fair language” (Stahlberg et al., 2007, p. 181-182).

However, gender bias is not solely a result of gender generics such as those exemplified above, but also related to adjectives used frequently in our language. More specifically, this means that many adjectives and descriptives are considered as either feminine or masculine, and this issue will be discussed and presented more in detail below.

2.2 Research on gender and wording

Amounts of research have been conducted in the area of gender, job advertisements, as well as what impact wording has on potential applicants, and it is a prevalent tendency to evaluate this in a managerial context. Schein (1973) established that when describing a successful manager, participants (three hundred male middle level managers) found characteristics, attitudes and temperaments frequently ascribed to men in general, decisive for high performance. This was further supported by Schein, Mueller, Lituchy and Liu in 1996, who also argued that apart from being decisive for leadership, masculine characteristics were also

more desired over feminine characteristics. These findings were later replicated and supported by Heilman, Block, Martel and Simon (1989). Willemsen (2002) did research somewhat similar in Netherland, and established how people rated masculine traits over feminine, when describing successful managers, but that gender-neutral attributes were rated as most applicable. Additionally, it was revealed a prevalence of imagining the manager as a man, in terms of how none of the respondents used the generic “she”, but rather “he” or gender neutral words (Willemsen, 2002).

Katila and Eriksson (2013) also discuss the latter, and stress how managerial characteristics and male characteristics often are seen as two sides of the same coin. Askehave and Zethsen (2014) investigated gender bias in Danish job advertisements, and found that desired described in top management advertisements, were all associated with male attributes. In correspondence with Katila and Eriksson (2013) they found that respondents assigned a masculine identity to the majority of the job advertisements, and concluded by stating that the inequality and imbalance at top level management in Denmark, may very well be due to masculine leadership traits ruling job advertisement language (Askehave & Zethsen, 2014). More specifically, this entails that both men and managers are commonly described as “ambitious, aggressive, competitive, forceful, self-confident, self-reliant, objective, emotionally stable, well-informed”, and lastly - also capable of leading (Schein, 1973, cited in Katila and Eriksson, 2013, p. 71-72).

Based on positioning theory, Katila and Eriksson (2013) suggested that choice of words induce subtle images and impressions of among others, individuals belonging in a given position. Thus, an understanding of *who* is suited for a position is in accordance with local expectations and assumptions related to capability to fulfill required demands (Katila & Eriksson, 2013). This is further interesting as it provides an understanding of *how* and *why* words implicitly induce perceptions about whether for instance a man or a woman is more capable of being a leader/manager.

Katila and Eriksson (2013) conducted research in Finland, and tried to expose how young Finnish business students indirectly relate gender and management, by dividing them in two groups, with gender as the only manipulated variable in the presented vignette. The purpose was to reveal their

gendered perceptions of a manager/leader (constructs used interchangeably) (Katila & Eriksson, 2013). Ultimately, they found that perceptions and associations towards a manager was highly stereotypical masculine. However, masculinity was not solely coupled with men, meaning that masculinity was ascribed to both the male and female vignette. Additionally, Katila and Eriksson (2013) found that when describing the female manager, participants found her to be more instrumental and agentic, whereas the male was considered to have a more optimal mix of agentic and communal traits, although their actions were similar. Lastly, they state that for the women to act in a managerial manner is contrary to the gendered expectations of a female, resulting in her losing the female “advantage”, which rather is ascribed to a man when he is acting in the same way (Katila & Eriksson, 2013). Thus, words produce expectations and associations, and form people’s perceptions of a given role.

Taris and Bok (1998) questioned how person characteristics in personnel advertisements influence the judgments of a position’s attractiveness. They based their research on an underlying assumption that person characteristics often are gender bound and related, and that this moreover has different effects on men and women’s evaluation of their eligible suitability for a position. Despite not being explicit, person characteristics in job advertisements give indications about whether a man or woman is most suited for the position (Taris & Bok, 2013). Thus, Taris and Bok (1998) propose that gender biased advertisements as such, results in a skewed balance of male and female applicants for a position. This might result in gender differences within certain sectors and roles, ultimately resulting in variety of unwanted consequences (Taris & Bok, 1998). By conducting research on students (potential future applicants) they found amongst others that women tend to feel ineligible for masculine worded positions, whereas men and women felt equally equipped for jobs that were advertised more neutral (Taris & Bok, 1998).

This is further relatable to the ideas of men being more agentic (like the traits described above from Schein, 1973), whereas women are seen as more communal, as there is an ongoing assumption about them being more helpful, kind and likeable (Heilman, 2012; Horvath & Sczesny, 2015). In relation to gender bias, Heilmann (1983; 2008) find the “lack of fit” model to be an explanatory concept. This is described as a phenomenon where the gap between

gender stereotypes and desirable work roles is conflicting, ultimately making people more biased when a gap is present (Eagly & Heilman, 2008). In line with statements from Schein (1973) and Katila and Eriksson (2013), Eagly and Heilman (2008) claim that typical female attributes tend to lack fit with those believed to accommodate success, thus resulting in low performance expectations when presented with for instance a job-applicant, holding communal attributes.

This “lack of fit” is relevant both when people consciously or unconsciously judge and misjudge others. However, people also tend to evaluate “fit” when positioning oneself in certain situations, thus becomes relevant when assessing how wording in job advertisements subjectively affect potential applicants. Further, Bosak and Sczesny (2008) found that women often judge themselves as less suitable for a leadership position than men, due to a *self-ascribed* lack of fit (Heilman, 1983). To investigate this further, the researchers manipulated a stimulus person to portray both female and male attributes - leading all participants to feel more suitable for the job. In other words, portraying leaders of both sexes will increase people's own perceived leadership-fit, and in turn allow more women to enter stereotypical male occupations.

Moreover, Gaucher, Friesen and Kay (2011) emphasize that perceptions of “belongingness” is what mediates the effect of gendered wording in regards to whether a job is perceived as appealing, and not necessarily “perceived skills”. They conclusively argue that biased wording in job advertisements may be an important and explaining factor for gender inequality in the workforce. In relation to the latter, Bem and Bem (1973) found that gender biased wording in job advertisements, prevent people from applying for “opposite-sex” jobs, despite the fact that they might be well qualified. They conclude their study by stating that advertisements focusing on female or male attitudes may produce a self-fulfilling prophecy, as gender biased wording alter perceptions, thus hindering women to apply for stereotypical male occupations. Their findings were applicable for both genders, meaning that both men and women could benefit from neutral worded advertisements.

Bian, Leslie and Cimpian (2017) additionally state that gender biased wording is not the only reason that women choose to not apply for a stereotypical male occupation. Thus may also be due to modesty norms, which apply more to women than men. More specifically, this leaves them to question their own

qualities and skills, and following this line of thinking, this might lead to a narrowing of women's interest, and possibly shape their choice of careers later in life (Bian, et al., 2017). In addition to being aware of modesty norms, Born and Taris (2010) suggest that describing the desired profile with behaviours and verbs, instead of nouns and adjectives, may arguably lead more women feeling inclined to apply, hence increasing the number of women in higher ranks of the workforce.

Furthermore, Gaucher, Friesen and Kay (2011) have studied job advertisements in light of Sidanus and Pratto's social dominance theory, which implies that certain mechanisms reinforce and maintain existing group-based inequalities. They further discuss how these mechanisms are present on an institutional level, and according to social dominance theory they are often so incorporated in the social structure - ultimately resulting in them being ignored and overlooked by the society in general (Deutsch, 2006, cited in Gaucher et al., 2011, p. 110). This is relatable to what was initially mentioned, namely that even micro factors existing in a society has the potential to breed and reinforce inequalities that to the "average person" is not visible.

2.3 Research on personality and traits

Based on the theory presented above, we argue that there is clear evidence that choice of wording has an impact on the perception of for instance a positions attractiveness or a person's evaluation of perceived self-eligibility. Based on these reasonings, we additionally want to look at how gender moderates the effect of biased linguistics, and explore if a selection of certain personality traits also have an affect. McCrae and John (1992, p. 175) consider *personality* as "the most important ways in which individuals differ in their enduring emotional, interpersonal, experiential, attitudinal, and motivational styles. Further, McCrae and Costa (1990, p. 23) define *traits* as "dimensions of individual differences in tendencies to show consistent patterns of thoughts, feelings and actions".

This topic is, to our knowledge, not extensively examined, and we therefore find it interesting to see if the effects of gender biased language may be equally, or even more so, regulated by traits than the gender one holds. Being i.e. self-conscious, impulsive, low on compliance or high on dominance has proven to foresee real life outcomes, and everything from the ability to think outside the box

and job performance have been anticipated using traits as predictors (McCrae & John, 1992).

We have chosen to base our selection of traits on the framework initially presented by Goldberg (1990), and later validated by Costa and McCrae (1992), more commonly known as the Five Factor Model or the “Big 5”. The Big 5 consists of five primary factors; Extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism and openness, and they all have 6 facets measuring each primary factor (Judge, Higgins, Thoresen & Barrick, 1999). The Big 5 has been reclaimed through various analysis, in multiple languages and cultures, and both factor analytic studies and numerous researchers validate the framework’s dimensionality and measures (McCrae & John, 1992, 1997 ; Pulver, Allik, Pulkkinen, & Hamalainen, 1995; Salgado, 1997). The dimensions and overall structure is also proven to be both credible and sustainable, and the Big 5 has proven relevant and applicable throughout decades (Jang, Livesley, & Vernon, 1996 ; Judge et al., 1999 ; Martinsen, Nordvik & Østbø, 2011).

As mentioned above, the Big 5 consists of 5 primary factors and 30 under-facets, and together they all try to grasp all dimensions of personality. In our paper however, we have chosen a selection of 10 different personality traits, chosen on the basis of Big 5 facets. The chosen traits arguably relate the best to our research question, and we want to investigate if any of them mediate the effect of gender biased wording, holding gender constant. Roberts, Kuncel, Shiner, Caspi and Goldberg (2007) argue that scoring high or low on a excerpt of facets may predict amongst other career choice, and people scoring high on e.g. extraversion, is more likely to choose leadership roles in their career life. They further point out that certain personality traits alter people's eagerness to actively shape their environment, making it relevant to argue that personality traits, more so than gender itself, may predict to what extent people get affected by biased linguistics. In other words, some people may consciously ignore gender bias exposed to them, as a result of actively choosing not to acknowledge it. Roberts et al. (2007) also emphasise how facets of conscientiousness, amongst others competence, cautiousness and achievement-striving, can predict decision making in general, leading us to argue that these also may predict whether people choose to “stay the course” and not get affected by i.e. perceived “lack of fit” when reading job advertisements. The researchers also point out that being high on extraversion and

for example positive emotions, may facilitate a more efficient process, leading people to channel complex information more quickly, in addition to being more creative in their problem-solving (Roberts et al., 2007). According to Martinsen et al. (2011), men are often more extroverted than women, but comparably, women are more conscientious. Moreover, gender differences also indicate that openness, neuroticism and agreeableness also correlates more positively with women (Martinsen et al., 2011).

In relation to the latter, Lebowitz (2016) point out that people high on facets of conscientiousness are more likely to be successful in their careers, due to a determination to pursue their goals. They are also, along with people high on extraversion, more likely to pursue and master leadership positions, and one may therefore assume that these traits could modify the effect of influence from gender bias, as they ensure some degree of persistence and dedication (Lebowitz, 2016; Judge et al., 1999). Schaefer, Williams, Goodie and Campbell (2004) also point out in relation to career success, that extraversion is predictive of effective behaviour, but it can also excel overconfidence in task performance. Low degree of self consciousness, or a high degree of impulsivity may also affect performance, and Judge and Ilies (2002) underline how these traits may lead to poorer motivation, goal setting and self-efficacy.

Straightforwardness, modesty and compliance are all facets measuring agreeableness, and they are by Roccas, Sagiv, Schwartz, and Knafo (2002) proven to be important in relation to how comfortable people are with holding both power and pursuing achievements. Being low on these traits correlates negatively with desiring high power positions or seeking self pleasures (Roccas et al., 2002), and based on these lines of reasoning, one may argue that people being high on these traits to a lesser extent will pursue challenging assignments and advancements.

Based on the discussion above, one may argue that certain traits can predict diverse outcomes, and that distinctions in people's personality are decisive for, or mediate whether they are affected by gender biased wording or not. As pointed out above, some traits are more relevant than others in relation to decision-making and the ability to resist influence (Roberts et al., 2007), hence only a selection of traits/facets we find relevant will be included in our research.

2.4 Brief description of primary traits and facets

A short and summarized overview of primary traits and our chosen facets from the Five Factor Model is given below. The description is based on a reports provided from Hogrefe, which for the time being is not available for reference.

The first primary trait is neuroticism, where we have chosen two facets; *self consciousness* and *vulnerability*. Self consciousness involve amongst other, degree of sensitivity towards criticism and negative attention, and people that are highly self conscious have a tendency to feel inferior to others. Vulnerability concerns to what extent a person is able to handle stress and challenging situations, and being high on this dimension is positively correlated with being fragile, rather than more robust when faced with a difficult environment. The second primary trait is extroversion, where we have chosen to emphasize the facets measuring *assertiveness* and *excitement-seeking*. Assertiveness is associated with being socially brave and daring to be dominant, and people that are high on this dimension is often noticeable in social situations. Those who are low on assertiveness stay more in the background - leaving the attention to others.

The facet regarding excitement-seeking is associated with seeking out new and exciting situations, and people high on this dimension often feel the need to be stimulated both cognitively and physically. The third primary trait is openness, and we have chosen to emphasize the facet of *feelings*. Being high on feelings means to be aware and attentive of one's own feelings, and also acknowledging them as an important aspect of one's own life. People that score high on this dimension tends to experience both good and bad emotions more strongly than others, while scoring low would indicate a more "flat" range of emotions. The fourth primary trait is agreeableness, where we emphasize *straightforwardness* and *modesty*. Straightforwardness relates to being credible and real, and scoring high on this dimension reduces the desire or need to be manipulative and cunning. Scoring high on modesty however, is corresponding with being modest or self-effacing, and rarely brag or gloat. The latter does not necessarily relate to lack of self-respect or self-esteem, but rather to refrain from arrogance and vanity. The last primary measure is conscientiousness, where we accentuate *competence*, *cautiousness* and *achievement-striving*. With competence we measure self

perceived competence, and whether people find themselves capable, reasonable and effective. By looking at cautiousness, one measures the degree to whether people think before they act, along with whether they choose to take unnecessary risks without weighing possible consequences. Achievement-striving relates to aspirations and hard work, and people high on this dimension feel a need for success and a clear, as well as an ambitious direction in life. Scoring low on this dimension may on the other hand relate to low ambitions, but does not necessarily excel distress on the person lacking initiative.

3.0 Research question

Our research question is developed based on the theory presented above, in addition to topics we find interesting and intriguing to fill. Therefore our main research question is;

To what extent does gender affect the degree of influence of gender biased wording in job advertisements?

Additionally, we want to check for potential interaction effects of certain personality traits. Hence our sub- research question is;

To what extent do certain personality traits moderate the effects of influence of gender biased job advertisements?

3.1 Hypotheses

Several hypotheses are developed, and these are anchored in assumptions based on the theory presented above, and will enable us to answer the research questions.

H1a: *Women, compared to men, are less inclined to apply for a job where the job advertisement is influenced by masculine words*

H1b: *Men, compared to women, are less inclined to apply for a job where the job advertisement is influenced by feminine words*

Additionally, we are interested in testing the effect personality traits, thus the hypotheses below are as follows;

H2a: *People high on self- consciousness will be more influenced by gender biased wording*

H2b: *People high on vulnerability will be more influenced by gender biased wording*

H2c: *People high on assertiveness will be less influenced by gender biased wording*

H2d: *People high on excitement-seeking will be less influenced by gender biased wording*

H2e: *People high on feelings will be more influenced by gender biased wording*

H2f: *People high on straightforwardness will be less influenced by gender biased wording*

H2g: *People high on modesty will be more influenced by gender biased wording*

H2h: *People high on competence will be less influenced by gender biased wording*

H2i: *People high on cautiousness will be more influenced by gender biased wording*

H2j: *People high on achievement- striving will be less influenced by gender biased wording*

3.2 Method

In order to check for general tendencies, and peoples' inclination to be affected by gender biased wording in job advertisements, we have chosen to apply a quantitative method, using an experiment. More specifically, a web-based survey will be distributed through social media channels, such as Facebook and LinkedIn, pursuing to obtain a large sample. Two vignettes will be constructed comparable to a "regular" job advertisement found online, with female/masculine attributes/adjectives as the only manipulated variable. The participants will thus be randomly assigned to either a masculine or feminine vignette, whereas overall

information will be held constant. As the survey will be administered in Norway, the vignettes and following questions will be written in Norwegian.

3.3 Measures

As stated earlier, in order to measure participants' personality, traits and facets from Big Five/ NEO PI-R will be applied, as this is a well known and acknowledged way to assess how people rate themselves (Costa & McCrae, 1992). Given that the survey will be distributed and conducted in Norway, it is of importance that the measures being used is translated in way as to ensure validity outside the original context (Martinsen et al., 2011). The Norwegian translation of NEO PI-R was first conducted by Martinsen (Martinsen et al., 2011) using a translation - back translation procedure, which lastly was accepted by McCrae.

Based on four studies, using three existing translations of NEO PI-R, Martinsen et al. (2011) were able to assess a translation with a reliability close to the values established by Costa and McCrae (1992, cited in Martinsen et al., 2011). As stated, this suggests a satisfactory similarity between the Norwegian translation and the original American version (Martinsen et al., 2011). In order to measure participant's scores on facets relevant for the topic, items/questions used in the translation of NEO PI-R will be applied. These are to indirectly measure participant's scores, and assess whether participants are high or low on our chosen facets.

This will ensure use of valid and reliable items, known to measure desired facets within each primary trait. As of now, we have the NEO PI-R manual, including all items, but await approval to use them in our actual survey. Based on the latter, our measures will be equal to the translations made by Martinsen et al. (2011).

Self consciousness= Selvbevissthet

Vulnerability= Sårbarhet

Assertiveness= Selvmarkering (selvsikkerhet)

Excitement-seeking= Spenningsøkende

Emotionality= Følsom

Straightforwardness=Rettfremhet

Modesty= Beskjedenhet

Competence= Kompetanse

Cautiousness= Betenksomhet

Achievement-striving= Prestasjonsstreben

3.4 Provisional procedure

As mentioned above, participants will be asked to take part in an experiment, using a survey tool (Qualtrics). When analyzing data, SPSS will be applied to conduct a one-way ANOVA, to check for main effects of gender on degree of influence of gender biased wording. This allows us to reveal potential significant findings (Pallant, 2016). To check for interaction effects of the moderators (personality traits), a two-way ANOVA will be used. Thereafter results will be interpreted carefully and discussed accordingly.

4.0 Plan for completion of thesis

In order to move forward with our thesis work, a survey will be developed as an initial step, but this is dependent on a permission to use both the items and facets from the NEO PI-R. Before distributing it, a pilot-study will be completed as a mean to ensure validity. Additionally, as a part of gathering data, we have a meeting with Nikolai Winge, a researcher and associate professor, with interest and knowledge about our topic. Besides this, continuous reading and assessment of applicable and relevant theory will be obtained.

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