

BUSINESS EDUCATION

The Stereotypes in MBA Case Studies

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Stereotypes are often reinforced by the words we choose to use. For example, when researchers recently analyzed massive text datasets, they found that in the 1910s, Asians in the U.S. were often characterized by words like “barbaric” or “monstrous” while descriptors like “passive” and “sensitive” are more common today.

We see stereotypical word choices play out in the workplace. Job ads for professional roles are often peppered with stereotypically masculine words. Research from the Women’s Leadership Lab reveals that stereotypes also affect how managers write performance reviews and talk about people in talent reviews. These patterns have consequences. Word choices reinforce often inaccurate stereotypes about gender, race, national origin, age or other status characteristics, creating disadvantages when those stereotypes do not align with markers of success.

Based on our experience teaching in MBA programs, we suspected that similar word choices and stereotypes were playing out in the materials used in these programs. We already know from the work of Lesley Symons and Herminia Ibarra that women protagonists are not only scarce (only 9% of cases feature female protagonists), but that they show up in primarily “pink” industries or roles, are typically the only woman in the case, and are not described as in depth as their male counterparts. And while researchers have endeavored since then to write more diverse case studies featuring women protagonists (see the HBS Gender Initiative list of such cases here), we wondered if the *portrayal* of women and protagonists from other underrepresented groups has changed over time. Further, we wanted to examine whether case writers draw from stereotypical language to describe these protagonists.

In our study, we looked at the 249 case studies taught in Stanford’s MBA core curriculum from 2015-2017. We found similar trends described by Symons and Ibarra. Just 16% of the protagonists were women.

We then analyzed the text by teaching our research assistants to read the case studies and scrutinize the descriptions of the protagonists, their situations, and the cultural context to look for potentially stereotypical language patterns. We discovered four ways that writers rely on stereotypes to describe the people and situations in the cases.

Stereotyping Trends in Case Studies

Sweeping statements about cultures. Some of the case studies included generalized statements about a country's culture, often without context, data, or specific examples. In reality, the culture or a group of people is more nuanced than can be presented in a broad statement. Take these examples. In *Benihana of Tokyo*, the author describes:

“the rapidity with which [Japanese chefs in the U.S.] could rise in the American Benihana operation versus the rather rigid hierarchy based on class, age, and education they would face in Japan.”

This is an assumption based on stereotypes (which also further reinforces those stereotypes) instead of offering relevant examples of “rigid hierarchy” and how they might impact chefs in Japan. In *Azul Airlines*, the author quoted the protagonist to explain why he selected Brazil as the location for his company.

“I relearned the language, and just fell in love with everything about [Brazil]. Beautiful people, nice beaches, great food - what's there not to love? And I thought Brazilians were just the friendliest people in the world.”

Here, the author could've chosen another way to describe the protagonist's affinity for Brazil, including data or examples, instead of quoting his sweeping statement.

Lacking context and reinforcing stereotypes about consumer behavior. We also saw stereotypes in descriptions of consumer motivations or behaviors. Here are some examples from two different cases about Cialis, the prescription medication for erectile dysfunction (ED). In *Cialis: A Segmentation and Targeting Dilemma* (a Stanford case that's unavailable online) the author says that ED:

"...can lead to additional psychological effects, such as a reduction in feeling masculine and close to one's partner. Over 90% of men and women reported that confidence in a man's sexual ability is critical to having a good love relationship."

While the studies may have shown a reduction in feeling masculine, the statement, as written, reinforces the stereotype that a man's sexual ability is and should be important to his sense of masculinity. In *Product Team Cialis: Getting Ready to Market* the author includes a section about partners of men who experience erectile dysfunction and only women partners are described. If only women partners were included in the study, the author could acknowledge this and note that Cialis isn't only used by heterosexual men.

Promoting gender stereotypes and reinforcing gender roles. In cases with a women protagonist authors commonly included details that reinforced stereotypes of women as communal and men as agentic. We also found that authors used descriptors or highlighted details for women that are not typically used for male protagonists - and were not relevant to the teaching points. For example, in *Heidi Roizen*, the author included this quote:

“She’s fun, she likes to smile, and she’s really interesting. If you met her outside of a work setting when she was with her kids, you would probably think, ‘Now that’s a nice mom,’ and you wouldn’t realize you had been talking with a captain of industry.”

This type of description not only reinforces the stereotypes that women are communal, but it also unnecessarily pits “a nice mom” against “a captain of industry.”

Similarly, authors often included quotes that promote and reinforce gender roles. The case

Tamago-Ya of Japan: Delivering Lunch Boxes to Your Work includes a quote, “Of course, the lunch prepared by the wife is best and ours is the second.” This could easily have been edited to say that the protagonist acknowledged that “home cooked meals are best.” In *Lincoln Electric Co.*, the quote, “Most of them are just mamma’s boys and don’t want to do the work,” polices masculinity and reinforces the norm of men as breadwinners.

Conflating stereotypes and marketing segmentation. Case studies in marketing and advertising can be particularly challenging since authors need to capture how various organizations identify and describe personas, which often draw from stereotypes. Take this example. In the case *The Economist* the author writes: “The demographic on the Kindle is ‘not a 25-year-old male gadget nerd but a 50-year old novel-reading female.’” The point here is not that case authors shouldn’t include the marketing strategy or the language that companies use to describe customer segments. However, instructors using these cases can explain that market segments and stereotypes are not necessarily the same, and that when companies rely on stereotypes, they may be inadvertently leaving out certain employees or customers who don’t fit the stereotype.

Teaching to Challenge Stereotypes

Our goal as educators should be that students from every gender, race, national origin, age, or social status see themselves as leaders or learn about leaders who are not like them in authentic – not stereotypical – ways. This doesn't mean that case authors and instructors should pretend that stereotypes don't exist but they need to be aware of them and help their students develop that awareness as well.

We offer a few suggestions for instructors.

- **Conduct an audit of the language in the cases you are presenting.** When choosing cases to teach, review the language used carefully. Pay particular attention to the descriptions of cultures, protagonists, and consumer behavior or market segmentation. You may not be able – or want – to completely avoid cases with problematic language but if you're aware that it exists, you can help students learn from it (see below).
- **Remove or contextualize stereotypical language.** If you are writing a case, watch out for the stereotypical trends we identified. In most cases, descriptors like in the examples above are meant to enhance engagement with the characters but are not necessarily germane to the case. If you aren't sure if they're necessary, try removing them and see if the case reads just as well. If you can rewrite the case, do so. If the case reflects a real-life situation where stereotypes did affect the outcomes of the case, note that in the writing.
- **Teach students to identify stereotypes.** Write a cover letter with advice on how to catch these patterns and ask students to underline any potentially problematic language and be prepared to discuss how it affected their assessment of the protagonists, consumers, or the situation. Use the questions below to lead a discussion about the negative effects of these stereotypes. For any cases you've written, consider offering the cover letter to faculty teaching the cases.

We developed a series of questions to help both instructors and students identify stereotypes in cases and other classroom materials.

Questions to Identify Stereotypes in Business School Cases and Other Class Materials

Area of Focus	Questions to Ask
Country descriptions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How are cultures described? • Are they described in generalized sweeping statements? • Are those statements necessary? What additional details or context could be added?
Gender stereotypes and roles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How are women and men protagonists described? • Are stereotypically feminine or masculine words used? • What other leadership words could describe the same actions? • Are men and women described as filling stereotypical roles? • Are they described stereotypically as wives, sons, daughters, husbands, caretakers or breadwinners?
Other group stereotypes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How are members of the group described? • Are there any stereotypes of ethnic, racial, religious, sexual orientation groups? • Are there any sweeping statements made about the group?
Advertising context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How are customers described? • Are their needs, preferences and habits described in stereotypical ways? • How do the word choices reinforce stereotypes? • Who may be left out of the description?
<p>SOURCE: SARAH A. SOULE ET AL.</p>	<p>HBR.ORG ©</p>

These lessons are not exclusive to the classroom. The lessons here could also be used by people developing educational materials more broadly – in talent and learning organizations, in online tools, and in classrooms of all kinds. It’s imperative that educators train students about the ways word choices can hold back the very people we need more of in our organizations. By weeding out stereotypical patterns and rewriting the language of leadership, we can start to create change, one small and important step at a time.

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