

# Inferences about the Brand from Counterstereotypical Service Providers

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We compared effects of information about a stereotypical service provider with that about a counterstereotypical service provider on inferences about the similarity of employees within the firm and the firm's similarity to other firms (across-brand differentiation). Our three experiments varied the provider's gender so that it was either stereotypical or counterstereotypical for an occupation. Consistent with previous research, information about a counterstereotypical employee whose behavior violated expectancies decreased the perception of similarity between the individual and other employees compared with when the employee was stereotypical. However, that same information increased the perception that the firm was superior to other firms.

Most marketing efforts are directed toward creating customer perceptions of within-brand similarity and across-brand differentiation. Firms hope that consumers will use experience with one product or service provider to form expectancies that the firm's other products or services will be of similar high quality (within-brand similarity) but to infer that competitors' products or services will be inferior in quality (across-brand differentiation). Whereas the uniformity of mass-produced goods facilitates within-brand similarity inferences, service providers' heterogeneity does not. Service personnel may differ in a variety of ways, such as age, gender, or ethnicity, that are irrelevant to the quality of service provided but may influence consumers' perceptions of service quality. From the fear that consumers expect counterstereotypical service providers to supply poor service, employers sometimes refrain from hiring people for positions in which they might be perceived as counterstereotypical (e.g., Grayson and Shulman 2000).

Previous consumer research indicates that a counterstereotypical service provider is evaluated differently from a stereotypical service provider (Iacobucci and Ostrom 1993). However, empirical evidence is needed to address whether the service delivered by a person who is different from the occupational stereotype influences evaluations of the firm's

service. This is an important issue, because stereotypes about the characteristics of those in various occupations are widespread, with some of those stereotypes being relevant to service quality and some not. We propose that stereotypes do influence perceptions of service, though not in the simplistic manner that is suggested by hiring biases against counterstereotypical individuals.

Our interest lies in understanding limits on the inductive process, in which consumers use information about one service provider to make inferences about others in the same firm. Frequently, consumers acquire their impressions of a service (or product) brand through their exposure to a firm's service provider (or product), and these impressions form the basis for generalizations about other service providers. We conducted a series of experiments that investigated perceptions of (1) the individual service provider who is counterstereotypical, (2) the individual service provider as compared with the firm's other service providers (within-brand similarity), and (3) the firm that employs the service provider compared with other firms (across-brand differentiation).

## ACQUIRING INFORMATION ABOUT SERVICE PROVIDERS

Learning about service brands can be conceived as a process in which a consumer acquires a theory about some group of service providers (e.g., expectancies about lawyers) and assumes that the theory applies generally to all who provide that service (e.g., to lawyers across law firms). That assumption might be updated with new information (e.g., meeting a firm's lawyer can suggest ways in which that law firm differs). One type of theory that can precede information about a specific individual is a stereotype about a

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particular occupation. A stereotype is “a cognitive structure that contains the perceiver’s knowledge, beliefs, and expectations about a human group” (Hamilton and Trolie 1986, 133). Stereotyped groups include occupations, such that people have knowledge, beliefs, and expectations about the typical characteristics of many service providers (e.g., the typical lawyer’s characteristics; Weber and Crocker 1983).

When an individual’s characteristics contravene the expectations created by a stereotype, expectancy violation theory predicts that evaluations are contrasted so that they are more extreme (Jussim, Coleman, and Lerch 1987). Hence, a counterstereotypical person who behaves more positively than expected is evaluated even more positively than the stereotypical person who behaves just as positively. For example, a female financial analyst who delivers excellent service should be evaluated more positively than a male financial analyst because women are not expected to perform well in that occupation. Evaluations do not differ when a service provider with a counterstereotypical characteristic behaves consistent with expectations. A female financial analyst who delivers mediocre service behaves consistent with low expectations.

**H1:** Information that a service provider with a counterstereotypical characteristic provided excellent service leads to more positive evaluations of competence than the same information about a stereotypical service provider. Information that a service provider with a counterstereotypical characteristic provided mediocre service does not lead to more positive evaluations of competence than the same information about a stereotypical service provider.

### Within-Brand Similarity

More central to our purposes is investigating the effect of counterstereotypical individuals on updating perceptions of the firm. People use information about a category exemplar to infer the characteristics of other category members when they have low levels of experience with the category (Sherman 1996). For example, consumers lacking experience with financial analysts should use information about a financial analyst’s competence to infer that the firm’s other financial analysts are similarly competent. Consumers seem particularly likely to engage in induction from the individual service provider to other service providers because people tend to perceive groups of which they are not members as homogenous (Linville, Fischer, and Salovey 1989; Park and Rothbart 1982).

Yet, not all exemplars have the same effect. Information about a stereotypical individual tends to be generalized from the specific individual to the group as a whole (for a review, see Hewstone and Lord 1998). Perceivers tend to individuate the stereotype disconfirmer, which breaks the link between the individual and the category. Deviant examples are “iso-

lated and fenced off from the group, and therefore dismissed” (Kunda and Oleson 1997, 965). Because the counterstereotypical target person does not represent the category, people are less inclined to use that information to update their knowledge. For example, students used information about an individual fraternity member’s political orientation to infer the other members’ voting behavior when the individual was described in a way that fit with the stereotype for fraternity members but not when described in a way that did not fit (Rothbart and Lewis 1988).

That research suggests that inferences about a firm’s other employees will be less similar to perceptions of the individual service provider with a counterstereotypical characteristic than to perceptions of an individual service provider with stereotypical characteristics. For example, information that a female service provider in a stereotypically male profession delivers excellent service will lead to inferences about her competence that are different from inferences about the ability of other service providers employed by the firm. Although the counterstereotypical individual might be evaluated more positively, an individual who disconfirms the stereotype is often seen as an exception to the group, rather than as similar to the group. In contrast, information that a male service provider in a male-dominated profession delivers excellent service will lead to inferences about his ability that are similar to inferences about the ability of the firm’s other service providers. People are more likely to use information about the stereotypical exemplar to infer characteristics of other group members.

**H2:** Information about a service provider with a counterstereotypical characteristic leads to more discrepant inferences between the individual and the firm’s other service providers compared with when the service provider is stereotypical.

### Across-Brand Differentiation

A relatively neglected issue is the extent to which stereotypicality influences perceptions of intergroup differences. In the highly cited Rothbart and Lewis (1988) study, the tendency to draw inferences from the typical fraternity member to the local fraternity appeared stronger than inferences from the typical fraternity member to fraternities in general (the superordinate group). However, the results were ambiguous as to whether information about the individual influenced the larger category (all fraternities) or differentiated the local fraternity from other fraternities.

On the one hand, the widely accepted notion that those who disconfirm stereotypes are perceptually isolated suggests that information about the counterstereotypical person is not integrated into the holistic perception of the firm. Hence, a service provider with a counterstereotypical characteristic (e.g., a male in a female-dominated occupation) would have little influence on brand differentiation. For example, excellent performance by a service provider who does not fit the stereotype of an individual employed in that

occupation would not enhance beliefs about the firm when the firm is compared with other firms in the same category.

On the other hand, it seems more likely that information about a counterstereotypical individual is not dismissed for the purposes of brand differentiation. Treating a disconfirming counterstereotypical person as an exception to the rule allows the perceiver to maintain out-group stereotypes. However, membership in a subgroup need not be denied. For example, information about excellent service from a counterstereotypical individual might not change a consumer's stereotypes about an occupation, but that does not preclude the information's influencing impressions of the firm. Moreover, the categorization literature suggests that updating of one's beliefs about groups generally occurs by weighing observations about a theory-incongruent category member at least as heavily as, and often more heavily than, those about a theory-congruent category member (Heit 1994, 1998). The greater weight placed on incongruent information arises because of more elaborative processing of that information. Heit (1998) hypothesized that incongruence leads to more elaborative processing because of the perceiver's greater efforts to generate an explanation for the incongruent individual's behavior.

Whereas Heit's findings—that an incongruent category member influences group impressions more than a congruent category member—seem to be at odds with Rothbart and Lewis's (1988) findings—that a stereotypical group member influences impressions of other group members more than a counterstereotypical group member—perhaps they can be resolved. The latter seems to refer to comparisons between the individual and other subgroup members. When a perceiver is asked to infer qualities of a subgroup (e.g., one firm's financial advisors) as contrasted with the subgroup's counterstereotypical member (e.g., a female financial advisor at the same firm), the rest of the subgroup may be assumed to be more stereotypical.

In contrast, Heit's (1994, 1998) findings may refer to perceptions of the subgroup as a whole. When a perceiver is asked to infer qualities of the subgroup (e.g., financial advisors from one firm) as compared with others in the superordinate group (e.g., other firms employing financial advisors), the perceiver is likely to take into account all subgroup members, including the counterstereotypical person. Greater elaboration to explain the counterstereotypical person's unexpected performance leads the individual to weigh that person at least as heavily, if not more heavily, when forming an impression. Further, stereotypes about the occupation can be maintained by differentiating the subgroup from the larger group (e.g., by assuming that only that one firm's service has counterstereotypical attributes, not that all firms have them).

Because effects of counterstereotypical individuals on comparisons across subgroups have not been explored and we lack evidence to the contrary, it is reasonable to assume that the processes we describe are general judgmental phenomena that apply to services. Integrating information about a counterstereotypical person should be more likely for firms

than for many other social groups. A counterstereotypical service provider's employment at a firm makes it particularly difficult to psychologically locate the employee outside the firm when comparing across firms. Employment connotes strong dependency and commitment. A firm is likely to be perceived as a cohesive, unified entity because it provides a social identity to its members, its members share similar goals, and members are interdependent (cf. Lickel et al. 2000). When a group is perceived as a cohesive entity, inferences about a single group member are particularly likely to be generalized at the group level (Crawford, Sherman, and Hamilton 2002). Hence, all employees must be taken into account in assessing the whole firm, even atypical ones.

Taking into account the counterstereotypical service provider who performs better than expected should enhance the perception of the firm. The more favorable evaluations of the counterstereotypical individual resulting from expectancy violation suggest that the overall evaluation of the firm should be more favorable compared with the effect of the expectancy-confirming individual's evaluations. For example, a female in a male-dominated profession who delivers excellent service would be evaluated more positively than a male and would suggest a more superior firm than would the male. Hence, employing counterstereotypical individuals might influence brand differentiation because the counterstereotypical individual's excellent service is perceived as better than the typical individual who delivers the same service. In contrast, the counterstereotypical individual who does not violate expectancies would not enhance brand differentiation compared with the stereotypical employee who performs at the same level.

**H3:** Excellent service from a counterstereotypical provider enhances comparisons of the firm with other firms more than does the same, excellent service from a stereotypical provider. Mediocre service from a counterstereotypical provider should not enhance comparisons of the firm more than does the same, mediocre service from a stereotypical provider.

We conducted three experiments to investigate inferences about a service provider, inferences about the firm's other service providers, and inferences about the firm relative to other firms when occupations were perceived as dominated by one gender or the other. Experiment 1 examined the effect of information about a service provider whose gender was counterstereotypical for the occupation and whose service varied from mediocre to excellent. Experiment 2 provided insight into the process underlying those judgments by investigating respondents' explanations for a service provider's performance. Experiment 3 related effects of gender stereotypes on perceptions of the individual to perceptions of brand differences.

**TABLE 1**  
MEAN RATINGS GIVEN INFORMATION ABOUT A STEREOTYPICAL OR A COUNTERSTEREOTYPICAL EMPLOYEE'S PERFORMANCE IN STUDY 1

Dependent measure*	Mediocre performance		Excellent performance	
	Stereotypical service provider	Counterstereotypical service provider	Stereotypical service provider	Counterstereotypical service provider
Individual's competence	5.50 <sup>a</sup>	5.44 <sup>a</sup>	7.00 <sup>b</sup>	7.91 <sup>c</sup>
Others' competence	5.95 <sup>a</sup>	6.27 <sup>a</sup>	6.78 <sup>b</sup>	7.00 <sup>b</sup>
Across-brand similarity	5.53 <sup>a</sup>	5.32 <sup>a</sup>	6.30 <sup>b</sup>	4.47 <sup>c</sup>
Across-brand superiority	5.10 <sup>a</sup>	5.39 <sup>a</sup>	7.03 <sup>b</sup>	7.94 <sup>c</sup>
N	30	31	30	32

NOTE.—Means across the rows for a given dependent variable with different superscripts a, b, and c are different at  $p < .05$ .

\*Higher means indicate greater competence, that the firm is more similar to other firms, and that the firm's service is superior to other firms.

## STUDY 1

### Method

Study 1 used a  $2 \times 2 \times 2$  design, manipulating the individual's performance (mediocre vs. excellent), the provider's gender (stereotypical for the service vs. counterstereotypical for the service), and the gender perceived as predominant for the service (female-dominated vs. male-dominated). Study 1 had 123 psychology undergraduate (84 females, 39 males) respondents.

A pretest with 62 undergraduates examined gender-linked expectancies for financial advisors and wedding planners. They were asked about expectations for a man's (woman's) performance as a financial advisor (wedding planner). On a nine-point Likert-type scale (anchored at 1 = extremely bad and 9 = extremely good), respondents indicated higher performance expectations from men as financial advisors when compared with women in the same occupation ( $M = 6.47$  vs. 3.68, respectively,  $t(61) = -11.72$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and higher performance expectations from women as wedding planners when compared with male wedding planners ( $M = 6.77$  vs. 3.55, respectively,  $t(61) = 14.07$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The means suggest that students expected positive performance for service providers who are stereotypical for the occupation and negative performance for service providers who are counterstereotypical for the occupation.

Respondents in the main study read a description of a financial analyst or a wedding planner who wrote a column for an Internet-based firm. Respondents were told that registered users of that Web site ask questions about personal investing (or wedding arrangements) to the various advisors employed by the firm. Service provider gender was manipulated by describing the stimulus person as Bill or Barbara. Level of service varied by changing the number of individual questions from customers directed at the stimulus person from five per day in the mediocre condition to 22 in the excellent condition, and by providing a more knowledgeable response from the excellent provider to a query from a fictitious customer.

The performance manipulation check asked respondents to rate the overall quality of the service provider's

response to the customer's query (1 = extremely bad, 9 = extremely good). Respondents were then asked to make inferences about the employee's competence, knowledge, reliability, and trustworthiness on nine-point scales, which were combined into a competence scale ( $\alpha = .92$ ). Respondents also rated other service providers working for that same firm on the same four items ( $\alpha = .92$ ). Measures of across-brand differentiation asked how similar or different the firm was from other firms providing the same service (1 = completely different, 9 = exactly the same), and whether this firm provided better or worse service than other firms of the same type (1 = much worse, 9 = much better). The gender stereotypicality manipulation check asked respondents to estimate the percentage of males (females) in the occupation.

### Results and Discussion

Our analyses showed no occupation effects, so most of the data were analyzed using a  $2 \times 2$  ANOVA. As intended, the manipulation checks indicate that the excellent service was perceived as significantly better than the mediocre service ( $M = 7.60$  vs. 5.71,  $F(1, 122) = 102.74$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Also as intended, 70.87% of the financial advisors were estimated to be male, and 78.75% of the wedding planners were estimated to be female.

*Evaluation of the Individual Service Provider.* Consistent with hypothesis 1, a  $2 \times 2$  ANOVA showed main effects for service provider's performance and gender stereotypicality of the service provider, and an interaction on evaluations of the individual service provider's competence ( $F(1, 122) = 129.75$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $F(1, 122) = 5.83$ ,  $p < .05$ , and  $F(1, 122) = 7.76$ ,  $p < .005$ , respectively). Table 1 shows that excellent service from a counterstereotypical individual implied that the individual was more competent than did excellent service from the stereotypical individual (e.g., a female financial advisor was more competent than a male when both performed excellently). Those results are consistent with expectancy-violation theory. Mediocre service implied similarly inferior competence regardless of occupational stereotypicality.

*Within-Brand Similarity.* Hypothesis 2 was tested using a  $2 \times 2 \times 2$  ANOVA, comparing each respondent's inferences about the individual service provider's competence with the same respondent's inferences about the competence of others from the same firm. Hence, the target of the ratings (individual vs. other employees) was a within-subjects variable. There were significant main effects for stereotypicality and for performance, as well as an interaction of service performance by target of ratings and a three-way interaction ( $F(1, 122) = 87.87, p < .001$ ,  $F(1, 122) = 79.44, p < .001$ ,  $F(1, 122) = 5.49, p < .05$ , and  $F(1, 122) = 15.88, p < .001$ , respectively). Comparisons across conditions were used to test the hypotheses.

Consistent with hypothesis 2, inferences about the competence of the individual service provider were significantly different from inferences about the competence of others employed by the same firm only when the service provider was counterstereotypical for the occupation (table 1). When the counterstereotypical individual delivered excellent service, others in the same firm were seen as less competent ( $M = 7.91$  vs.  $7.00, t(31) = 8.93, p < .001$ ). For example, the excellent female financial advisor was judged more competent than other financial advisors in her firm. When the counterstereotypical individual delivered mediocre service, others in the same firm were seen as more competent ( $M = 5.44$  vs.  $6.27$ , respectively,  $t(31) = -6.56, p < .001$ ). For example, the mediocre female financial advisor was less competent than others in her firm.

*Across-Brand Differentiation.* The results suggest that information about the counterstereotypical employee who performed better than expected increased brand differentiation, consistent with hypothesis 3. A  $2 \times 2$  ANOVA for the across-brand similarity ratings revealed a main effect for stereotypicality and a performance by stereotypicality interaction ( $F(1, 122) = 27.13, p < .001$ ,  $F(1, 122) = 17.09, p < .001$ , respectively). Table 1 shows that the brand (service firm) was seen as most dissimilar from other firms when the service provider was counterstereotypical and provided excellent service, and was most similar to other firms when the individual service provider was stereotypical and provided excellent service.

The perceived superiority of the brand compared with other brands also suggests that expectancy-disconfirming service from the counterstereotypical service provider increased brand differentiation. There was a significant stereotypicality main effect, a performance main effect, and a two-way interaction ( $F(1, 122) = 13.67, p < .001$ ,  $F(1, 122) = 193.67, p < .001$ , and  $F(1, 122) = 3.67, p < .06$ , respectively). The firm was seen as providing better service than other firms when excellent service was given by a counterstereotypical individual compared with when the same excellent service was given by a stereotypical individual. Firms who employed those providing mediocre service received lower ratings regardless of employee stereotypicality.

In sum, information about a service provider with a counterstereotypical characteristic for that occupation influenced consumers' inferences about within-brand similarity and

across-brand differentiation differently than information about a stereotypical service provider for that occupation, supporting hypotheses 1–3. Consumers inferred that a counterstereotypical individual was competent to a different degree compared with others in the same firm. Contrary to the widely accepted notion of perceptual isolation, the counterstereotypical person did not seem to be dismissed or ignored when making inferences about others in the firm. Others in the firm were evaluated more positively when the counterstereotypical person provided excellent service than when the counterstereotypical person provided mediocre service, as was true when the individual was stereotypical (cf. Folkes and Patrick 2003).

Further, no evidence of dismissal of the counterstereotypical individual is found in across-brand inferences. Respondents took the information about the counterstereotypical employee's performance into account when comparing the firm with competitors to a similar extent (if not more) as compared with the stereotypical employee's performance. This conclusion is based partly on the different firm perceptions for the excellent performers as compared with the mediocre performers, a difference observed regardless of provider stereotypicality. Although it is clear that information about the counterstereotypical person was not dismissed when evaluating the firm as a whole, study 1 lacks evidence of the more elaborate processing required to explain the counterstereotypical individual's performance that Heit (1998) suggested leads to integrating information about the individual into group perceptions. Study 2 was conducted to confirm that causal inferences are lengthier and different for the counterstereotypical service provider who violates expectancies (the excellent performer) than for the stereotypical service provider.

## STUDY 2

Study 2 examined consumers' explanations for the service provider's excellent performance to shed light on the processes underlying study 1's findings. Both elaboration about causes as well as the content of those attributions should differ. Heit's (1998) research suggests that consumers should elaborate more when making causal inferences for the performance of the counterstereotypical individual who violated expectancies by delivering excellent service than for the performance of the stereotypical individual. More elaboration could involve lengthier explanations that draw on more diverse material than when the stereotypical individual's excellent performance is explained. Consumers' stereotypes about occupations should suggest the kinds of behaviors contributing to excellent performance. Hence, explanations for a provider's excellent service are likely to include similar mentions of competence and knowledge regardless of stereotypicality. However, explanations for the counterstereotypical provider's excellent performance may include additional inferences that draw on gender stereotypes.

Whereas a consumer's theory or stereotype about an occupation can suggest reasons for success in an occupation,

**TABLE 2**  
ELABORATION, INDIVIDUAL'S CHARACTERISTICS, AND FIRM'S CHARACTERISTICS IN STUDY 2

Dependent measure	Stereotypical service provider	Counterstereotypical service provider	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Elaboration on performance <sup>a</sup>	36.98	69.10	52.85	.001
Individual's characteristics: <sup>b</sup>				
Competence	63.41	57.50	.29	NS
Communal disposition	9.76	62.50	34.27	.001
Both of the above	7.32	40.00	13.80	.001
Firm characteristics: <sup>b</sup>				
Dissimilar to other firms	9.76	35.00	8.02	.01
Similar to other firms	63.42	40.00	4.59	.05
Superior to other firms	29.27	67.50	13.54	.001
Inferior to other firms	31.71	17.50	2.20	.15
<i>N</i>	41	40		

<sup>a</sup>Values for this dependent measure are the mean number of words used by respondents in elaboration of the individual service provider's performance.

<sup>b</sup>Values for these dependent measures are the percentage of respondents mentioning the relevant characteristics.

encountering an individual who is counterstereotypical for that occupation can make other theories, such as gender stereotypes, salient and so suggest different reasons for success. Gender stereotypes include negative and positive attributes (for a review, see Eagly and Karau 2002). For example, although women's stereotypical mathematical ineptitude may create lower expectancies for success as a financial planner, women's stereotypical communal qualities might facilitate success as a financial planner (e.g., being helpful and warm might contribute to success). Such gender stereotypes are likely to be salient explanations for success when the individual's gender is counterstereotypical for the occupation. Specifically, consumers may explain the female financial advisor's success as resulting from communal qualities more than the male financial advisor's success because her counterstereotypicality makes gender stereotypes that can cause success a salient and plausible explanation.

**H4:** Explanations for the counterstereotypical person's excellent service are lengthier, reflecting greater elaboration, as compared with the explanations for the stereotypical person who provides excellent service.

**H5:** When an occupation is stereotypically male, the counterstereotypical female's excellent service elicits more explanations for performance that describe the female's communal dispositions than does the male's excellent service.

## Method

Study 2 had 81 undergraduate (41 females and 40 males) respondents. The stimulus materials were the same as in study 1's excellent service conditions for the financial analyst occupation, which indicated superior knowledge about financial matters without conveying information about the individual's communal traits. Participants wrote responses to an open-ended question asking about their explanations

for the level of service that the service provider delivered to his/her customers. A second open-ended question asked the respondents whether this firm was similar to other firms providing similar service and whether it was superior to other firms. Finally, respondents estimated the percentage of financial analysts likely to be male (female).

Before giving the responses to judges for coding, references to the stimulus person's gender were removed. Two judges, one male and one female, coded the open-ended responses to the two questions (they agreed on 96% of responses). The largest category of items suggested competence or knowledge on the job. A second category described stereotypically female or communal dispositions (helpful, warm, and caring toward customers). Responses to the question about the firm were coded into four categories shown in table 2.

## Results and Discussion

Respondents' gender did not influence any of the dependent variables. Hence, most of the data were analyzed using a simple one-way ANOVA, with gender stereotypicality of the individual service provider (stereotypical for the service vs. counterstereotypical) as the between-subjects factor. As with study 1, the manipulation check indicated respondents held gender stereotypes for this occupation. Participants estimated that males were prevalent as financial advisors ( $M = 73.60\%$  of financial analysts were estimated to be male).

Gender stereotypicality of the service provider influenced the number of words used by respondents to explain the service provider's performance (table 2). Consistent with hypothesis 4, those who explained the counterstereotypical service provider's performance (the female financial analyst) used more words compared with those who were asked to explain the stereotypical service provider's performance (the male financial analyst). This finding supports Heit's (1998) suggestion that an incongruent group member elicits more elaborate attributions.

Table 2 also shows the content of attributions for performance. The percentage of respondents who mentioned that the male financial analyst was competent was not different from the percentage of respondents who mentioned that the female financial analyst was competent (table 2). Note that this result is not necessarily inconsistent with study 1 results showing higher competence ratings for counterstereotypical than for stereotypical excellent performers. Judges coded respondents' comments by whether competence was mentioned, not by the degree of competence. Rating scales are more sensitive to differences in degree of competence.

Stereotypicality did influence the percentage of respondents who mentioned that the service provider had communal dispositions. In support of hypothesis 5, respondents were more likely to explain the counterstereotypical female's excellent performance by referring to the possession of communal dispositions (e.g., she is warm; table 2). Respondents were also more likely to explain the counterstereotypical female's performance by referring to both competence and communal dispositions as compared with the explanations for the male's excellent performance (table 2). Hence, stereotypicality influenced the content, as well as the length, of explanation.

Responses to the open-ended question about the firm are consistent with study 1 results and with hypothesis 3 regarding across-brand differentiation (table 2). When the counterstereotypical female financial analyst provided excellent service, a greater portion of respondents thought that the firm was dissimilar and more superior to other firms providing the same service than when the stereotypical male financial analyst provided the same level of service. Conversely, respondents were more likely to mention that the firm was similar to other firms when the individual service provider was stereotypical (male) than when the individual service provider was counterstereotypical (female). There was no difference between the two conditions for mentions of the firm being inferior to other firms. Hence across-brand differentiation was higher for the counterstereotypical provider.

In sum, consistent with hypotheses 4 and 5, the counterstereotypical individual who provided excellent service elicited different responses compared with the stereotypical provider who delivered excellent service. Nevertheless, studies 1 and 2 do not provide evidence that consumers will go beyond general beliefs about similarity and superiority to infer ways in which the firm is superior to others. If consumers incorporate information about the individual into their across-brand comparisons, those inferences should also influence perceptions of specific attributes on which the firm's service is different and superior. Study 3 explores this possibility.

### STUDY 3

Study 3 attempted to provide stronger evidence for the effect of counterstereotypicality on firm differentiation than studies 1 and 2. Studies 1 and 2 indicate that information

about the counterstereotypical individual influences across-brand differentiation. Information that a counterstereotypical individual delivers excellent service suggests that the firm is different from and superior to other firms. However, those measures did not indicate specific attributes on which the firm differed. If inferences about the individual service provider are indeed incorporated into perceptions of the firm when comparing across firms, as we maintain, then those traits on which the individual is superior should also be attributes on which the firm is superior to other firms. For example, in study 2, respondents described the female in a male-dominated occupation as more communal than the male. If inferences about the individual influence across-brand differentiation, then consumers should also believe that the female's firm delivers service that is superior on communal attributes.

Whereas study 2 examined only a male-dominated occupation and found differences for communal traits, the same pattern should be detected for female-dominated occupations and stereotypically male traits. Although women are expected to be more communal than men, men are expected to be more agentic (e.g., more independent, more competitive; Eagly and Karau 2002). Hence, agentic traits are likely to be salient and provide a plausible explanation for a male's excellent service when in a female-dominated occupation. In short, the following modification to hypothesis 5 reflects its generality across occupations.

**H5a:** When an occupation is stereotypically male, the counterstereotypical female's excellent service elicits more positive evaluations of the female's communal dispositions than does the stereotypical male's excellent service. When an occupation is stereotypically female, the counterstereotypical male's excellent service elicits more positive evaluations of the male's agentic dispositions than does the stereotypical female's excellent service.

The following modification to hypothesis 3 identifies how specific gender stereotypes influence inferences about the firm's attributes.

**H3a:** When an occupation is stereotypically male, the counterstereotypical female's excellent service leads to enhanced judgments of across-brand superiority on communal attributes more than does the stereotypical male's excellent service. When an occupation is stereotypically female, the counterstereotypical male's excellent service leads to enhanced judgments of across-brand superiority on agentic attributes more than does the stereotypical female's excellent service.

### Method

The experiment used a 2 × 2 design, manipulating the gender stereotypicality of the individual service provider

(stereotypical vs. counterstereotypical) and the gender perceived as predominant for the service (male vs. female). Study 3 had 109 business and psychology undergraduate (56 females and 53 males) respondents. A different occupation was described from studies 1 and 2 to increase confidence in the generality of our findings. The occupation, children's camp leader, varied in stereotypicality because of the type of camp (a sports camp or a crafts camp).

A pretest with 48 undergraduates indicated that they expected better performance from men than women as sports camp leaders ( $M = 6.98$  vs.  $4.88$ , respectively,  $1 =$  extremely bad and  $9 =$  extremely good,  $t(47) = -8.62$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and better performance from women as crafts camp leaders than men ( $M = 6.50$  vs.  $4.81$ , respectively,  $t(47) = 5.21$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Camp leaders were thought to be mostly males for sports and females for crafts ( $M = 72.50\%$  and  $68.25\%$ ).

Respondents in the main study read information about a sports (crafts) camp leader (Carol or Carl) working for an organization that ran several camps for school children, both boys and girls. Although the performance indicators described service competence, the scenarios were not explicit about superiority on agentic or communal traits. Hence, the individual's performance described in the scenarios did not violate expectancies about agentic and communal traits. Respondents were told that others were also leaders for such sports-crafts day camps for that organization and that enrollments in Carol's (Carl's) day camp averaged 35 children per camp session (as compared with a range of 15–40). Ratings of the camp by children and parents indicated it was enjoyable, provided a good learning environment, and was well-organized.

Respondents rated the target individual and other leaders employed by the same firm on nine-point rating scales measuring competence, stereotypically male or agentic traits (leadership ability, independence, and competitiveness,  $\alpha = .81$  and  $.79$  for ratings of the individual and others, respectively), and stereotypically female or communal traits (nurturing, cooperative, and sensitive,  $\alpha = .88$  and  $.81$  for ratings of the individual and others, respectively). Two items measured firm similarity (how similar or different the firm was compared with other firms providing similar service, and whether the firm was very much like other organizations providing similar service,  $r = .91$ ). Two items measured firm superiority (whether this firm provided better or worse service than other firms of the same type, and whether this firm was superior to other firms,  $r = .83$ ). Respondents also rated whether the firm's service differed on agentic attributes from other firms (provides better leadership and encourages competition among children,  $r = .77$ ), and whether the firm's service differed on communal attributes from other firms (is more nurturing toward children and encourages cooperation among children,  $r = .80$ ). Gender stereotypicality manipulation checks asked respondents to indicate whether males or females were better to run a sports (crafts) camp. Respondents indicated familiarity with the occupa-

tions ( $M = 6.97$  and  $5.12$  for sports and crafts camps, respectively,  $1 =$  not familiar and  $9 =$  extremely familiar).

## Results and Discussion

Respondents' gender did not influence the results. Hence, the two between-subjects factors in our analyses were the service provider's stereotypicality (gender is stereotypical vs. gender is counterstereotypical) and occupation (male-dominated vs. female-dominated). Results showed that males were selected as better sports camp leaders than females, and females were selected as better crafts camp leaders than males ( $M = 71.45\%$  and  $67.75\%$ , respectively).

*Within-Brand Similarity Replication.* Means in table 3 and  $F$ 's in table 4 support hypotheses 1 and 2. Similar to study 1, the counterstereotypical individual provider who disconfirmed expectancies by supplying excellent service was considered more competent than the stereotypical individual who provided the same service (hypothesis 1). Supporting hypothesis 2, the counterstereotypical individual was perceived as more competent than the firm's other employees (see bold print means in table 3 columns), but the stereotypical person was similar in competence to the firm's other employees. Those results replicate study 1's within-brand similarity findings. One minor difference across studies is that the firm's other employees were perceived as more competent when the firm employed a stereotypical individual than when employing a counterstereotypical one. In study 1, others' competence ratings did not differ across conditions.

*Across-Brand Differentiation Replication.* Consistent with study 1, ratings of firm similarity and superiority suggest that firms employing an excellent counterstereotypical provider increased brand differentiation compared with those employing a stereotypical provider. A  $2 \times 2$  ANOVA of the across-brand similarity ratings revealed only a main effect for service provider stereotypicality (table 4). The brand (service firm) was seen as more dissimilar from other firms when the individual service provider's gender was counterstereotypical than when they were stereotypical ( $M = 5.03$  vs.  $6.44$ , respectively; see table 3). Supporting hypothesis 3, a  $2 \times 2$  ANOVA of the perceived firm superiority ratings revealed only a main effect for service provider stereotypicality. The firm was seen as providing better service than other firms when excellent service was given by a counterstereotypical individual compared with when the same excellent service was given by a stereotypical individual ( $M = 8.19$  vs.  $6.69$ , respectively).

*Differences in Communalty and Agency.* The pattern of results supports hypotheses 2, 3a, and 5a. Table 4 shows a  $2 \times 2 \times 2$  ANOVA comparing the individual and other employees' agentic and communal traits, revealing significant main effects, two-way interactions, and a three-way interaction. Means in bold print in table 3 identify the conditions in which the ratings of the individual are different from those of others in the firm, supporting hypothesis 2.



**TABLE 3**  
MEANS FOR WITHIN-BRAND SIMILARITY AND ACROSS-BRAND DIFFERENTIATION IN STUDY 3

Dependent measure	Male-dominated occupation		Female-dominated occupation	
	Stereotypical service provider	Counterstereotypical service provider	Stereotypical service provider	Counterstereotypical service provider
Within-brand similarity:				
Individual's competence	7.02 <sup>a</sup>	<b>8.15<sup>b</sup></b>	7.13 <sup>a</sup>	<b>8.09<sup>b</sup></b>
Others' competence	6.86 <sup>a</sup>	<b>6.02<sup>b</sup></b>	7.21 <sup>a</sup>	<b>6.19<sup>b</sup></b>
Individual's agentic traits*	8.25 <sup>a</sup>	<b>8.19<sup>a</sup></b>	6.15 <sup>b</sup>	6.87 <sup>c</sup>
Others' agentic traits*	7.93 <sup>a</sup>	<b>6.41<sup>b</sup></b>	6.03 <sup>b</sup>	6.91 <sup>c</sup>
Individual's communal traits <sup>†</sup>	5.87 <sup>a</sup>	6.93 <sup>b</sup>	7.69 <sup>c</sup>	<b>7.78<sup>c</sup></b>
Others' communal traits <sup>†</sup>	5.69 <sup>a</sup>	6.78 <sup>b</sup>	7.42 <sup>c</sup>	<b>6.56<sup>b</sup></b>
Across-brand differentiation:				
Firm similarity	6.28 <sup>a</sup>	4.87 <sup>b</sup>	6.59 <sup>a</sup>	5.19 <sup>b</sup>
Firm superiority	6.65 <sup>a</sup>	8.16 <sup>b</sup>	6.72 <sup>a</sup>	8.21 <sup>b</sup>
Firm's agentic superiority	7.97 <sup>a</sup>	8.05 <sup>a</sup>	6.02 <sup>b</sup>	6.95 <sup>c</sup>
Firm's communal superiority	5.92 <sup>a</sup>	6.95 <sup>b</sup>	7.62 <sup>c</sup>	7.57 <sup>c</sup>
<i>N</i>	26	28	28	27

NOTE.—Means across the rows for a given dependent variable with different superscripts a, b, and c are different at  $p < .05$ . Pairs of means in bold print within a column highlight significant differences in within-brand similarity for that trait.

\*Agentic traits referred to leadership, independence, and competitiveness.

<sup>†</sup>Communal traits referred to nurturance, cooperation, and sensitivity.

In the male-dominated occupation conditions, ratings of the individual's agentic traits were higher than those of others in the firm when the provider was female, or counterstereotypical ( $M = 8.19$  vs.  $6.41$ , respectively,  $t(27) = 9.75$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In the female-dominated occupation, ratings of the individual's communal traits were higher than those of others in the firm when the crafts camp leader was male, or counterstereotypical ( $M = 7.78$  vs.  $6.56$ , respectively,  $t(26) = 4.96$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

Ratings of the individual service provider's agentic and communal traits support hypothesis 5a (table 3). Consistent with study 2 results, the counterstereotypical female sports camp leader had more communal traits than the stereotypical male sports camp leader ( $M = 6.93$  vs.  $5.87$ , respectively,  $F(1, 108) = 11.07$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Conversely, respondents believed that the counterstereotypical male crafts

camp leader had more agentic traits than the stereotypical female crafts camp leader ( $M = 6.87$  vs.  $6.15$ , respectively,  $F(1, 108) = 7.03$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Most interesting is the finding that others in the firm are perceived as similar to the counterstereotypical individual on the traits that are consistent with that person's gender ( $M = 6.93$  vs.  $6.78$  on communal traits and  $M = 6.87$  vs.  $6.91$  on agentic traits).

Perhaps the act of explaining the individual's performance using a trait consistent with the person's gender made service incorporating that trait seem a goal of the firm. For example, explaining a female sports camp leader's success by her nurturance may have suggested that the organization selected employees for that trait. Hence, elaboration may have decreased the more automatic tendency to contrast the counterstereotypical individual with other employees. Note that the individual and the firm's other employees did differ

**TABLE 4**

SIGNIFICANT *F*-VALUES OF EFFECTS OF OCCUPATION, STEREOTYPICALITY, AND TARGET OF RATINGS ON RATINGS OF THE INDIVIDUAL, OTHER EMPLOYEES, AND THE FIRM IN STUDY 3

Independent variable	Replication results			Individual's traits		Firm superiority	
	Individual competence	Firm similarity	Firm superiority	Agentic traits	Communal traits	Firm's agentic superiority	Firm's communal superiority
Occupation	NS	NS	NS	64.76	36.25	11.34	12.68
Stereotypicality	NS	16.96	51.97	NS	NS	66.81	39.92
Target of ratings	48.89	NA	NA	39.09	16.51	NA	NA
Occupation × stereotypicality	NS	NS	NS	28.57	16.77	8.22	15.47
Occupation × target of ratings	NS	NA	NA	32.68	7.17	NA	NA
Stereotypicality × target of ratings	45.54	NA	NA	14.05	3.54	NA	NA
Occupation × stereotypicality × target of ratings	NS	NA	NA	22.16	3.91	NA	NA

NOTE.—NA indicates that the dependent variable was analyzed using a  $2 \times 2$  ANOVA of occupation and stereotypicality. Target of ratings is not relevant as a variable to these dependent measures. *F*-values are significant at  $p < .05$ , except the effect of stereotypicality × target of ratings on communal traits (3.54), which is significant at  $p < .06$ .

on communal and agentic traits when those traits were consistent with the occupation but inconsistent with the person's gender. Perhaps those traits were considered normative for success in the occupation so the counterstereotypical person's possession of such a trait was contrasted with other employees.

The ratings of firm superiority follow the same pattern as ratings of the individual. An ANOVA of ratings of the firm's superiority on agentic and communal attributes revealed main effects for gender stereotypes and occupation, and an interaction for each measure (table 4). Consistent with hypothesis 3a, respondents in the counterstereotypical female sports camp leader condition believed that the firm's service was superior in communal attributes compared with those in the stereotypical male sports camp leader condition ( $M = 6.95$  vs.  $5.92$ , respectively,  $F(1, 108) = 27.82$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Similarly, respondents in the counterstereotypical male crafts camp leader condition believed that the firm's service was more superior in agentic attributes than those in the stereotypical female crafts camp leader condition ( $M = 6.95$  vs.  $6.02$ , respectively,  $F(1, 108) = 19.60$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Less interesting for our purposes were occupation stereotype effects. A firm delivering a type of service that is dominated by females is superior on stereotypically female (communal) attributes compared with a firm delivering a type of service that is dominated by males. The reverse is true for stereotypically male (agentic) attributes (table 3).

In sum, the service provider's stereotypicality influenced inferences about the ways in which the firm was dissimilar and superior to other firms. For each occupation, the firm employing a counterstereotypical individual was rated either superior to or as good as the firm employing a stereotypical individual on agentic and communal service attributes. These novel findings are consistent with inferences about the individual's agentic and communal traits. Nevertheless, the pattern can suggest only a contributing mechanism rather than identifying the underlying process that accounts for perceptions of the firm's superiority.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

Our research provides evidence that apparently conflicting findings about stereotypes can both be found in the same study, at least in regard to gender and occupational stereotypes. The counterstereotypical individual is taken into account when forming perceptions of the firm as a whole, as suggested by Heit's (1998) work. Yet, counterstereotypical individuals also are perceived as less similar to other employees than are stereotypical individuals on occupationally stereotypical traits (i.e., less within-brand similarity; cf. Rothbart and Lewis 1988). Whereas conventional wisdom explains the latter finding in terms of perceptual isolation, our studies suggest that counterstereotypical group members are not dismissed. They are perceived as different from other employees but are taken into account both for judgments of within-firm similarity and for across-brand differentiation. This integration may result from the greater elaboration in response to the counterstereotypical individual's expectancy

violating behavior. That elaboration also indicates other ways that the firm might differ.

Nevertheless, some issues require additional clarification. It would be helpful to compare the nature of elaboration about a counterstereotypical provider's mediocre service with that of a stereotypical provider (study 2 examined only excellent service) in future research. Future research should also examine whether excellent service from a counterstereotypical individual suggests extraordinary actions on the part of the firm (e.g., rigorous training). Finally, it is unclear how information about a counterstereotypical provider influences perceptions of others in the same occupation who are counterstereotypical in the same way.

In sum, stereotypes can have both positive and negative effects on consumers' perceptions of service providers, as well as of within-brand similarity and across-brand differentiation. The pretests showed that consumers expect counterstereotypical providers to deliver worse service than stereotypical providers. Yet, those negative expectations can benefit the firm when the counterstereotypical individuals deliver excellent service. Even a mediocre performance seems to have no worse effects on consumers' evaluations of firms than does a stereotypical provider's mediocre performance (table 1). Hence, the potential benefits from consumers' evaluations offer an incentive for services to increase diversity in their workforces.

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