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Letter from Susan T. Fiske to Ann Hopkins, August 4, 1988

Susan T. Fiske

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Dear Don:

Thanks for your letter and the Price-Waterhouse Reply Brief. I'm sorry to be a little slow in responding, but I've been on partial vacation while my stepson is visiting.

Regarding how to respond to the issues P-W raises: It seems to me they ignore three crucial arguments that form the core of my testimony and our brief. First, there were differing opinions about Hopkins' personality. Her clients and some of her closest associates thought she was wonderful, tough, direct, and competent, while some other people thought she was abrasive. There was by no means a consensus about her personality. Therefore, it is specious to talk about "objective" assessments of what she was "really" like or to expect me to form a privileged, professional opinion (especially because I'm not a clinician).

Second, the negative opinions fit a well-established pattern of stereotyping due to sex-role incongruent behavior. It was not merely a matter of analyzing certain words, but a whole pattern of indicators, as we noted in our brief. They have focused on a few words and tried to worry them to death, as if that were our only evidence. The sexist words and phrases are part of a pattern of response. (Analogously, if the court heard evidence from a clinical psychologist, saying that the client was "hearing things," one would not necessarily conclude the person was crazy, without examining the whole pattern of behavior.)

Third, there were numerous antecedents of stereotyping, not the least of which was rarity. P-W is going to have a hard time living down the NYT article showing them to be still the worst of the Big Eight accounting firms, in percentages of women partners. But it wasn't only rarity; it was also ambiguity of the criteria, the paucity of information, the sex-role incongruent job, and the lack of organizational incentives in the form of formal guidelines (age and health, but not race and sex are excluded as reasons for turning someone down) and informal norms (toleration of the guy who said women shouldn't ever be considered partnership material).

Regarding their supposed methodological attack on my testimony: They are throwing around a lot of big words that aren't relevant, like someone who picks up a medical text and cites things at random to sound scary and

authoritative. My testimony was not itself a survey, a quasi-experiment, or an experiment. It wasn't intended to be. It was an expert opinion. Consequently, their methodological critiques are irrelevant. My testimony and our brief, first, described the social psychological literature on stereotyping and gender stereotyping in particular. Note that they can't fault the methodology of that work. Second, I made an assessment of the fit between that literature and this setting. I did not do so lightly. I have turned down at least a dozen cases because the fit to the literature did not seem strong enough. In this case, all the antecedents and indicators were there.

If one did want to reply to the methodological critique they give in footnote 8, first, re the "fit" of the terms, I did indeed compare the terms used by her supporters and her detractors and found the former to be more stereotypic; I even have the list in my notes and could find the place in the transcript where I did that. No one challenged my methodology at the time, but I could have explained this procedure if they had thought of asking. Second, contrary to their claim, I did examine the records of other partnership candidates for comparison; I also have this in my notes. Their list of men with problems in interpersonal skills is impressive but irrelevant, as it was the stereotypic nature of the negative responses to Hopkins that mattered. Finally, I did cite research using as research subjects business students and on-the-job managers similar to the partners at P-W, but no one asked me about the match between the samples in the studies and the P-W partners. If they had, they would have been sorry they asked. At this point, it's a little late for them to be raising these issues.

Regarding more specific points they raise: It was not "simply because words were used...associated with sexism" (p. 7). There were other data concerning the antecedent conditions within the company and the pattern of indicators. Besides, sexist words in an employment decision are not trivial and inconsequential of themselves.

It was not a question of fit of an objective description of her personality (footnote 8), but rather of identifying a stereotypic slant in some rather decisive opinions on her personality and making a causal connection to a negative judgment.

It was not arguing that interpersonal skills are invalid bases for a personnel decision, or that abrasive men had not also been turned down (footnote 8), as we noted in the APA brief.

It was not arguing that no woman could be abrasive (p. 9, top). There's a difference between calling someone "domineering" and "unpleasant" or "macho" and "unfeminine." Moreover, it was the dimensions of complaint that also raised the suspicion of stereotyping. If someone called a black person "shiftless and lazy but full of natural rhythm," the possibility of stereotyping would be raised there too. It's not that no black person could be not hardworking but graceful, it's just that there are certain dimensions associated with that racial stereotype, and one becomes alert upon hearing them. It was the continual reference to sex-role specific terms and dimensions by some people that contributed to making sexism relevant.

It was not relying solely on the "smoking gun" of Beyer's remark about

femininity (p. 9, top); there was a pattern of evidence.

I hope some of these responses are helpful; I'll pass them on to Doug Huron and Jim Heller, as well as Sally Burns, in case they could use any of this.

I'm interested to hear about your change-of-letterhead. Perhaps we'll have time to catch up in Atlanta. I'll be there Thursday afternoon through Sunday afternoon. You're not by any chance free Thursday evening? Call me at home or at the office, or leave a message at the Marriot Marquis if that would be good. Otherwise, we'll play it by ear, as things subsequently get busy for me. Doubtless you are rather busy the whole time. Hope to see you.

Best regards,

Susan

Susan T. Fiske
Professor