

The Prevalence of Gender Stereotyping and Bias: An overview

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Stereotyping: a prevalent phenomenon

Categorizing information based on simple and easily accessible categories¹ is a typical cognitive shortcut used by human beings to make quick decisions. The simple act of separating people in groups is enough to trigger inter-group discrimination². We categorize others on the basis of obvious attributes such as race, gender, or age, and we do so often without realizing it -- whether we associate these characteristics with positive traits (such as “women are better at multitasking,” “Asians are hardworking”) or negative ones (“women are emotional”, “accountants are not creative”). Further, we often stereotype members of our own group (women can stereotype against women). What makes stereotyping so pervasive and difficult to change is that not only do we stereotype, we also tend to reject information that dissonates with our attitudes and we selectively recall information that confirms our way of thinking.³

Gender Stereotyping in the Workplace

- Stereotyping is more likely to occur in multi-tasking situations, where people revert to “cognitive shortcuts”¹, and is more likely to occur under conditions of threat to our self image and self esteem⁴, situations that can frequently arise in the context of receiving negative feedback in the work setting.
- Stereotyping is most likely to occur when there is a clear “out-group” member, such as a single woman in a male technical team, where the sole woman will be the subject of more stereotyping than the male members will.⁵
- Tokenism has been identified as the kind of stereotyping that occurs when someone clearly belongs to a minority group, such as the sole technical woman in a group of men.⁶ Tokenism leads to the majority group member to treat the single woman in the group as representing all the stereotypical characteristics of the gender. The solo technical woman thus sees her work subjected to much more

¹ Macrae, C.N., A.B. Milne, and G.V. Bodenhausen, *Stereotypes as energy-saving devices: a peek inside the cognitive toolbox*. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 1994. **66**(1): p. 37-47.

² Tajfel, H., et al., *Social categorization and intergroup behavior*. European Journal of Psychology, 1971. **1**: p. 149-177.

³ Asch, S.E., *Social Psychology*. 1952, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

⁴ Spencer, S.J., et al., *Automatic activation of stereotypes: The role of self-image threat*. Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 1994. **24**: p. 1138-1152.

⁵ Mannix, E.A. and M.A. Neale, *What Difference Makes a Difference?* Psychological Science in the Public Interest, 2005. **6**(2): p. 31-32.

⁶ Kanter, R.M., *Men and Women of the Corporation*. 1993: New York: Basic Books.

scrutiny than her male peers, and her gender becomes a lens through which her work is evaluated. This leads to the work actions, communication, and performance of the woman to be judged through a stereotypical gender lens. In this context, attitudes that reward men who act assertively as leaders punish women who achieve the same successes and exhibit similar behaviors.⁷ This represents a significant barrier to women at the upper echelons of the organization, and their performance evaluations are likely to suffer.

The ways in which stereotyping affect technical women

- Even with equal qualifications and achievements to those of their male counterparts, women are perceived less favorably in terms of their ability and accomplishments – this stereotyping tends to be reflected in evaluations and promotions and places women at a disadvantage for advancement.⁸
- Women who are in minority status are also more likely to be pushed toward tasks that are stereotypically feminine, such as support work.⁹
- Given equivalent positions, men are perceived as more influential than women. Men are also more likely to resist influence from women. Women need to show exceptional competence to be taken seriously as influencers – double standard of competence, a phenomenon that, because of stereotyping, is especially true in masculine domains.¹⁰
- Research shows that women are not afforded as much of a repertoire of behaviors when it comes to assertiveness. That is, technical women are either viewed as “not assertive enough” or “too assertive”. Women benefit from self-monitoring in order to match the style of participants in the situation, thus “modulating” their level of assertiveness based on the context.¹¹
- Women are more likely to be stereotyped as “family focused” and “unwilling to travel” and therefore tend to be passed up for promotions.¹² This is labeled “The

⁷ Ridgeway, C., *Gender, Status, and Leadership*. Journal of Social Issues, 2001. 57(4): p. 637-655.

⁸ Eagly, A. and Carau, S.J. Role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders. *Psychological Review* 109, 3 (2002), 573-598.

⁹ Boldrey, J.G., W.L. Wood, and D.A. Kashy, *Gender stereotypes and the evaluation of men and women in military training*. Journal of Social Issues, 2001. 57: p. 689-705;

Yoder, J.D., *Looking beyond numbers: The effects of gender status, job prestige, and occupational gender-typing on tokenism processes*. Social Psychology Quarterly, 1997. 57: p. 150-159.

¹⁰ Eagly, A.H., & Carli, L.L. *Through the Labyrinth: The Truth on How Women Become Leaders*. Harvard Business School Press. 2007.

¹¹ Flynn, F.J. and D.R. Ames, *What's Good for the Goose may not be Good for the Gander: The Benefits of Self-Monitoring for Men and Women*. Journal of Applied Psychology, 2006.

¹² Blum, L. and V. Smith, *Women's Mobility in the Corporation: A Critique of the Politics*



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Motherhood Assumption” by interviewees in our recent study (www.anitaborg.org/research).

- Given equivalent qualifications, because of bias and stereotyping, women are less likely to be hired and promoted,¹³ especially for roles that are traditionally stereotypically masculine, such as engineering. In one study, researchers found more bias against candidates applying for technical leadership jobs than other job categories.¹⁴ There is no conclusive evidence on whether technical women are more or less likely to be laid off in an economic downturn.
- When they do get promoted, research suggests that women are more likely to be given leadership positions where success is unlikely – for example, a poorly funded project or a team already in disarray, putting them at enhanced risk for failure. This phenomenon has been dubbed the “Glass Cliff.”¹⁵
 - Increasing awareness of the prevalence of gender bias is a significant way to mitigate its harmful effects.
 - Project Implicit at Harvard University, University of Virginia, and University of Washington, offers self assessment testing on a variety of stereotypical assumptions, of which gender and math engineering professions. <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/>

of Optimism. *Signs*, 1988. **13**(3): p. 528-545.

¹³ Valian, V. *Why So Slow? The Advancement of Women*. MIT Press, 1999.

¹⁴ Procter Gerdes, E. and Garber, D.M. Sex bias in hiring: effects of job demands and applicant competence. *Sex Roles*, **9**: 307-319. 1983.

¹⁵ Ryan, M.K. and S.A. Haslam, *The Glass Cliff: Evidence that Women are Over-Represented in Precarious Leadership Positions*. *British Journal of Management*, 2005.

16: p. 81-90; Ryan, M.K. and S.A. Haslam, *The glass cliff: Implicit theories of leadership and gender and the precariousness of women's leadership positions.*, in *Implicit leadership theories: Essays and explorations* B. Schyns and J.R. Meindl, Editors. 2005, Information Age Publishing: Greenwich, CT.