

CHAPTER 2: UNDERSTANDING STEREOTYPES AND THEIR ENDURING IMPACT ON WOMEN LEADERS

In this study, we propose that what you don't see and hear about women's advancement in the workplace may be what really counts in the current business world where perception is reality and gender-based stereotyping is shorthand for fact. To understand just why gender stereotypes persist in business, let's review some basics on how stereotyping works.

STEREOTYPING 101

Generally speaking, social stereotypes, like those about gender, are generalizations we make to *differentiate* categories or groups of people. In the case of gender stereotypes, these consist of generalizations about how women and men differ.⁴ Since there *are* differences between women and men, we use stereotypes to anticipate and respond to these differences from the outset—rather than having to figure them out “from scratch” in each interaction. In other words, we rely on stereotypes because they help us save time and energy.

ARE STEREOTYPES BAD?

Despite the time-saving benefits that stereotypes may offer, many psychologists agree that they can also spell trouble.⁵ There are three important reasons for this view:

- 1. Unlike generalizations we make about things or even animals, our generalizations about people are much more likely to miss the mark.** People are extremely complex and their behavior is often highly variable from situation to situation.⁶ Therefore, when stereotypes are used to make judgments about people—especially about their traits and abilities—there is a high probability that those judgments will be wrong.
- 2. We often apply stereotypes automatically.** All of us who drive will undoubtedly be familiar with the experience of arriving at some destination without remembering the exact actions that got us there. We followed the traffic rules and operated the car successfully (or so we assume) even though we were not consciously monitoring or paying attention to our behaviors—we performed the task automatically. Stereotypes enable us to function in a similar way on social tasks or interactions. With the “help” of stereotypes, we can and do arrive at perceptions or judgments about individuals without having to tie up our attention. The trouble comes when we accept that these perceptions have a solid basis in fact because we are unaware of the role that stereotypes have played in creating them.

⁴ A discussion of how stereotypes develop is beyond the scope of this report.

⁵ David Dunning and David Sherman, “Stereotypes and Tacit Inference,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 3 (1997): 459-471; David Schneider, *The Psychology of Stereotyping* (New York: Guilford Press, 2005).

⁶ D. C. Funder and D. J. Ozer, “Behavior As a Function of Situations,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 4 (1983): 107-112.

3. We unintentionally respond to people in ways that elicit from them the very behaviors that confirm our stereotypes. For example, imagine a woman is being interviewed for a management position. If the interviewer believes that women are not “management material,” he/she may unintentionally ask tougher questions of the women candidates and be more critical of their responses. As a result, women interviewees may stumble in their answers, providing less satisfactory responses than the men interviewing for the job—not because they are any less competent than male interviewees, but because the interviewer directed more difficult questions to women. In effect, the interviewer has caused the women candidates to act in ways that fit his/her stereotype of their lower competence. Such consequences of stereotypes are serious for organizations. Few can afford to fail at correctly identifying and leveraging the true abilities of all their talent.

The Bottom Line on Stereotypes



- Stereotypes lead us to make inappropriate generalizations that miss the mark and misrepresent reality.
- Because most people are not aware of how their thinking and behavior are automatically influenced by stereotypes, they conclude their perceptions come from objective observations. This is why stereotyping is so difficult to address—all of us do it, but we often don’t realize or believe that we do.

WHY DON’T WE THINK WOMEN MEASURE UP AS LEADERS?

In businesses, gender-based stereotyping can be especially damaging. Stereotypes can limit women’s opportunities for advancement into top leadership positions. This is because stereotypes of women often portray them as lacking the very qualities commonly associated with effective leadership.

Consider for a moment individuals thought of as great business leaders of recent times. Bill Gates or Jack Welch come immediately to mind. But why don’t people think as readily of women leaders, such as Meg Whitman or Katherine Graham, who are on the same list of top influential business leaders?⁷ Some experts say it is because stereotypes paint men as a much more natural fit for top leadership positions than women.⁸

⁷ CNN, “Top 25: Influential Business Leaders,” <http://www.cnn.com/2005/US/02/28/cnn25.top.business>.

⁸ Alice H. Eagly and Steven J. Karau, “Role Congruity Theory of Prejudice Toward Female Leaders,” *Psychological Review*, 3 (1992): 573-598; Madeline E. Heilman, “Description and Prescription: How Gender Stereotypes Prevent Women’s Ascent Up the Organizational Ladder,” *Journal of Social Issues*, 4 (2001): 657-674.

Table 1 illustrates this point by listing qualities in the U.S. culture that are commonly associated with men and women.⁹ Jerry Scott and Jim Borgman humorously illustrate these cultural assignments in their Zits cartoon in Figure 1. Contrast each set of traits in the cartoon and in Table 1 with what typically comes to mind when we think about leaders. We often think of leaders as dominant and ambitious—as embodying qualities that closely match the stereotype of men.¹⁰

On the other hand, the traits that make up the feminine stereotype (e.g., friendliness and sensitivity) are seen as less vital to leadership. These stereotypes result in women being evaluated less positively than men for leadership positions.¹¹ From our earlier discussion of stereotyping, we know that even though such stereotype-based evaluations are likely to be off the mark, the people who hold them are likely to think they are correct—a potentially dangerous combination.

Previous research has shown that stereotypes create relatively negative perceptions of women’s overall leadership competence.¹² But because leadership is made of a number of skills and competencies, questions remain as to whether there are *specific* aspects of women’s leadership performance that may be especially susceptible to stereotypic bias. Prior research also leaves open the question of whether stereotypic views of women’s and men’s leadership exist among top corporate leaders. We address these questions in the following chapters.

Women’s Traits	Men’s Traits
Affectionate	Dominant
Appreciative	Achievement-oriented
Emotional	Active
Friendly	Ambitious
Sympathetic	Coarse
Mild	Forceful
Pleasant	Aggressive
Sensitive	Self-confident
Sentimental	Rational
Warm	Tough
Whiny	Unemotional

⁹ David Schneider, *The Psychology of Stereotyping* (New York: Guilford Press, 2005).

¹⁰ Virginia E. Schein, “A Global Look at Psychological Barriers to Women’s Progress in Management,” *Journal of Social Issues*, 4 (2001): 675-688; Heilman.

¹¹ Eagly et al., 3.

¹² Schein; Heilman.

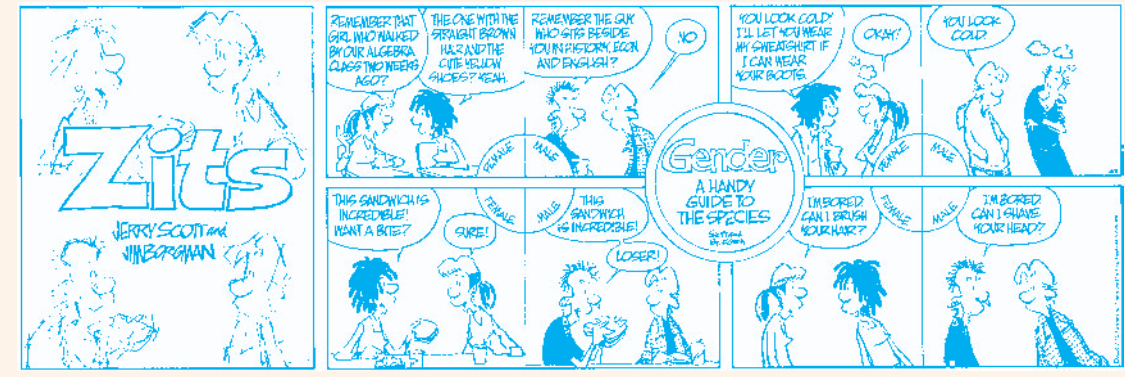
¹³ David Schneider, *The Psychology of Stereotyping* (New York: Guilford Press, 2005).

The Bottom Line on Old Stereotypes and General Impressions of Women and Men Leaders



- ▶ When we think of CEOs, we naturally think of men. Men are seen as dominant and ambitious; women as friendly and sensitive.

Figure 1



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