6. Presumed incompetent: perceived lack of fit and gender bias in recruitment and selection

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Despite women's advancement in the workplace, their representation in male-dominated fields and occupations remains distressingly low. Women now comprise about half of the workforce, but very few end up at the top levels of business organizations. In 2013, women held only 16.9 per cent of corporate board seats in the USA, and only 4.6 per cent of executive directors were women (Catalyst, 2014). Percentages are similar in the UK: 15 per cent of board directors were women, and they comprised less than 7 per cent of the executive positions in British companies (Catalyst, 2012).

What accounts for the scarcity of women in traditionally male roles? It is not a consequence of differential experience, education or skills. The overall percentage of undergraduate and graduate degrees (both Master's and doctoral) obtained by women in the USA and the UK now exceeds that of men (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010; Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2012). Moreover, in terms of cognitive skills and abilities, women and men tend to be more similar than different (Biernat and Deaux, 2012). Rather, we posit that women's participation in the workplace is hindered by gender bias in evaluation, and that this bias has its origin in gender stereotypes.

This chapter will focus on how gender bias affects the recruitment and selection of women in traditionally male occupations. We will describe the process by which gender stereotypes produce gender bias in hiring decisions, and illustrate how, despite evidence to the contrary, women can be judged as undeserving of jobs typically held by men. The 'lack of fit' model (Heilman, 1983, 2001) will be used as a framework for understanding the causes and consequences of gender bias in the recruitment and selection of women in organizations. It also will serve as a model for suggested remedial action.

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GENDER STEREOTYPES

Stereotypes are a structured set of beliefs about the attributes of a group of people that are ascribed to individuals categorized as a member of that group. As one of the most salient human features, gender often serves as a cue for these types of generalizations (Blair and Banaji, 1996), and gender stereotypes commonly dominate inferences about the characteristics of men and women. These stereotypes, and the assumptions they carry about what men and women are like, are the basis of gender bias.

The Content of Gender Stereotypes

Research has demonstrated that stereotypes about women differ significantly from stereotypes about men. While men tend to be thought of as 'agentic', women tend to be thought of as 'communal' (for example, Diekman and Eagly, 2000). Agency comprises attributes such as achievement orientation (for example, able, successful), assertiveness (for example, dominant, forceful) and autonomy (for example, independent, self-reliant); while communality denotes consideration for others (for example, caring, helpful), affiliation with others (for example, sociable, likable) and emotional sensitivity (for example, tender, sensitive). Moreover, the content of gender stereotypes tends to be oppositional, such that women are seen not only as communal but also as lacking agency, and men are seen not only as agentic but also as lacking communality.

The Persistence of Gender Stereotypes

There is some indication that gender stereotypes have changed as women's roles in society have changed (for example, Duehr and Bono, 2006), but this finding is overshadowed by a large body of literature indicating that the characteristics ascribed to men and women have remained quite consistent over time (Auster and Ohm, 2000; Spence and Buckner, 2000). A recent survey of 529 men and women from different age groups and backgrounds found that men are still rated significantly more highly than women on assertiveness and capability, and women still are rated significantly more highly than men on communal traits (Hentschel et al., 2013).

Gender stereotypes are also pervasive. They have been shown to be consistent across cultures (Williams and Best, 1990), to exist in work as well as non-work settings (Heilman et al., 1989), and to be held by women as well as men (Parks-Stamm et al., 2008). In addition, there is evidence that gender stereotypes can be activated automatically without evaluators' awareness of their impact (Banaji and Hardin, 1996).

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In the following section we will illustrate the impact of gender stereotypes on recruitment and selection processes. Specifically, we will consider how women can be disadvantaged when applying for a position not because of their characteristics or experience, but because of the attributes associated with their gender.

THE LACK OF FIT MODEL

Gender stereotypes have important implications for perceptions of how well women fit with different workplace positions. This is particularly the case when these positions are perceived to be male gender-typed.

The Gender Typing of Workplace Roles and Positions

Male gender-typed occupations are thought to require characteristics that are associated with men, not with women. These requirements are assumed in roles and positions that are disproportionally dominated by men simply because of the skewed gender representation. Research has indeed demonstrated high correlations between sex ratios of job incumbents and the ascribed gender type (Cejka and Eagly, 1999).

However, some roles are male gender-typed because of culturally shared inferences about the nature of the job's responsibilities. For upper-level positions in organizations (for example, top management), agentic behaviours are thought to be necessary for success (Gaucher et al., 2011). In fact, research repeatedly supports the idea that the attributes thought to be prototypical of successful managers are those that coincide with stereotypic conceptions of men (for example, Powell et al., 2002; see also Powell, 2011 for an overview). Moreover, inferences about job responsibilities are determined by the context in which the job exists. Occupational sector (military vs education), professional subfield (corporate law vs family law), and functional area (finance vs human relations) can have implications for inferences about job responsibilities, and therefore play a role in determining whether and to what degree a job is viewed as male gender-typed.

Lack of Fit Perceptions

Lack of fit perceptions are triggered by the perceived mismatch between what women are thought to be like and what people believe it takes to succeed in male gender-typed occupations (Heilman, 1983, 2001, 2012). Because of gender stereotypes, women are thought to lack the

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agentic characteristics necessary for successful performance in these jobs (Heilman et al., 1989; Schein, 2001). This incongruity between conceptions of women and beliefs about job requirements creates a perceived 'lack of fit' that has important consequences for women's entry into organizations. Specifically, it creates the expectation that a female applicant is ill equipped to perform the job and will not be competent if selected. These negative performance expectations form the basis of gender bias in employment decision-making.

Negative Performance Expectations and Information Processing

Negative performance expectations arising from lack of fit perceptions have major consequences for selection decisions because they promote cognitive distortion in the way evaluators process information about job candidates. Performance expectations are tenacious and have a way of perpetuating themselves (Heilman and Haynes, 2008). If potentially disconfirming information can be discounted or dismissed, then the performance expectation can be maintained and possibly even reinforced, making revision unnecessary. There are several ways in which negative performance expectations can affect information processing:

- *Attention*. Research shows that information consistent with expectations is readily attended to, but inconsistent information may not even be noticed (for example, Plaks et al., 2001). For example, information about excellence in a reference letter may be overlooked if this information is inconsistent with expectations. But noticing potentially disconfirming information is not sufficient to challenge expectations; it also has to be attended to. This does not happen if the perceiver discounts the information as irrelevant. If, for example, a female candidate's successful performance is attributed not to her skills and talents but rather to a lucky break or an easy task, this information is likely to be ignored, leaving the original expectation unchallenged. These ideas are consistent with the finding that evaluators spend less time attending to the work behaviours of individuals about whom there are stereotype-based expectations than about individuals for whom there are no such expectations (Favero and Ilgen, 1989).
- *Information interpretation*. Even if expectation-inconsistent information is attended to, its interpretation can nullify its effect. Evidence shows that the meaning attached to an action can be influenced by expectations (Kunda et al., 1997), and gender-based expectations have been shown to result in very different interpretations of the

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same behaviour (Taylor et al., 1978). For example, being decisive and forceful may be viewed as an indication of leadership in a man, but of 'being bossy' in a woman (Sandberg, 2013). Consequently, rather than challenging negative performance expectations arising from lack of fit perceptions, the gendered interpretation of a potentially disconfirming behaviour can serve to reinforce them.

- *Recall of information*. Research has shown that people remember expectation-consistent information at a higher rate than expectation-inconsistent information (Fyock and Stangor, 1994; Pittinsky et al., 2000). For women undergoing screening and assessment as part of a selection process for male-typed jobs, this translates into lesser recall of stereotype-inconsistent information about past behaviours or accomplishments, even if such information is highly relevant to the position (Perry et al., 1994). Recall can even be distorted to the point that people 'remember' events that did not happen (for example, erroneously recalling an unpleasant interchange that did not actually occur), if these events are consistent with their beliefs (Higgins and Bargh, 1987; Lenton et al., 2001).

Thus, the negative performance expectations arising from lack of fit perceptions can lead to distortions in information processing that produce biased evaluations of women, no matter what their credentials are for the job. These biased evaluations then become the basis of selection decisions.

LACK OF FIT PERCEPTIONS AND SELECTION DECISIONS

The larger the perceived discrepancy between what women are thought to be like and what is thought to be required for job success in male-typed positions, the greater the perceived lack of fit and the more negative performance expectations will be. More negative performance expectations should, according to the lack of fit model, result in higher levels of gender bias in evaluations and selection decisions. Empirical evidence supports this proposition, suggesting that both components of the model – the activation of gender stereotypes when a woman is considered for a job and the gendered perception of the job itself – affect the occurrence of gender bias.

Gender Type of Position

Positions seen as male in gender type should produce more negative performance expectations of women than positions not seen as male

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gender-typed, leading to higher levels of gender bias and more negative selection outcomes. A meta-analysis of 49 studies in social and organizational psychology provides support for this idea (Davison and Burke, 2000). The results revealed a consistent bias against women in selection decisions when the position was male gender-typed, with women receiving lower selection ratings and lower compensation offers than men. Bias was not evident when the position was not male gender-typed, and in fact reversed when the position was female gender-typed. So, as lack of fit ideas would predict, whether a position is or is not male gender-typed has a profound effect on the incidence of gender bias.

There also are degrees of gender typing: a position is male gender-typed to the extent to which stereotypic male qualities are thought to be necessary for successful performance (Heilman, 2001; Eagly and Karau, 2002). This can vary as a function of the context. Thus, being a manager at a daycare centre may have different implications for gender typing than being a manager at a financial services firm. It also can vary as a function of the job itself – some jobs are inherently more male gender-typed because of the degree to which 'male' skills and abilities are thought to be required. Whatever its source, however, the result should be the same – the greater the degree of male gender-typing the more bias against women should be evident. This prediction has been tested repeatedly. For example, Lyness and Heilman (2006) demonstrated that women in a large financial services company received less favourable evaluations than men in line jobs (for example, business management, operations management, sales) but not in staff jobs (for example, human resources, administration, external affairs). Thus, even in the same company, negative evaluations were associated with the degree of male gender typing of the position.

Stereotype Activation

Lack of fit perceptions and subsequent negative performance expectations should be exacerbated when gender stereotypes are highly activated. This occurs when gender is salient. As we have mentioned, gender tends to be an inherently salient cue in our environment – readily seen and requiring little thought to discern. Nonetheless, there are conditions that can highlight a woman's gender that, according to the lack of fit model, should also heighten the activation of gender stereotypes and produce more negative evaluative outcomes for women applying to male-typed jobs.

Research bears this out. Investigations of the 'beauty is beastly' effect (Heilman and Stopeck, 1985a, 1985b; Johnson et al., 2010; Braun et al., 2012) demonstrated that physical attractiveness, which was shown to enhance femininity perceptions, led to more negative evaluations of

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women applying for and performing in male gender-typed positions. Research also has demonstrated that information about a woman being a mother, a societal role that unquestionably makes gender salient, aggravates gender bias in screening recommendations and selection decisions (Heilman and Okimoto, 2008).

Thus, personal attributes that make gender salient can fuel the occurrence of gender bias, but so can structural factors. In particular, there is evidence that token or near-token status, which no doubt makes gender stand out, leads to more stereotyped characterizations of women, and a lesser likelihood of being selected for a male gender-typed position (Heilman and Blader, 2001).

Even organizational practices such as affirmative action and diversity initiatives that are designed to foster gender equality in organizations can draw attention to gender and inadvertently activate stereotypes. Research has indeed shown how women who are thought to be beneficiaries of affirmative action or diversity initiatives are rated as less competent and recommended smaller salary increases than men and women who are not associated with these organizational practices (Heilman and Welle, 2006).

THE ROLE OF AMBIGUITY IN FACILITATING GENDER BIAS

While a perceived lack of fit leads to negative expectations about women's performance, ambiguity amplifies the impact of these expectations on selection decisions. High levels of ambiguity give decision-makers latitude, and performance expectations provide a convenient and efficient guide for making judgements in such situations (Heilman and Haynes, 2008). Ambiguity is high when the information about the job candidate is incomplete, inconsistent or not relevant, when the identification of criteria for consideration is lacking and the rules for comparing candidates are not fixed, and when there is lack of clarity about who is responsible for past accomplishments. It is in these situations that the greatest amount of gender bias would be anticipated.

The Amount and Type of Information Available

When evaluators are provided with incomplete information about applicants, they have to 'fill in the blanks'. Expectations provide a readily available framework for doing that. As a consequence, stereotype-based performance expectations have a stronger impact on subsequent evaluation and decision-making if evaluators receive limited information.

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Whilst it has been shown that evaluations of women as compared to men are less favourable when evaluators receive little information about the target (Swim et al., 1989), providing a substantial amount of information about an applicant does not necessarily ensure less gender-biased evaluations. Rather, the information must be job relevant (Heilman, 1984) and unequivocal in its implications for performance (Heilman and Haynes, 2005) in order to avert negative evaluations.

Consistency of the information also is a factor (Chaiken and Maheswaran, 1994; Hodson et al., 2002). Most often, there are both strengths and weaknesses in a person's work history and background, and this mixture requires decision-makers to weigh one type of information against another in making a judgement. This leaves much to the decision-maker's discretion; it is a situation that allows for expectations to dominate in determining what information is given most weight. In such situations, the resolution has been shown to be detrimental to women (Uhlmann and Cohen, 2005). The disparity in competence impressions of women and men whose performance has shown improvement or decline is a case in point (Manzi et al., 2012).

The Specification of Evaluative Criteria and their Standardization

The more poorly defined the judgement criteria, the more expectations can be expected to play a role in evaluative decisions. There are many ways in which judgement criteria can be poorly defined. The evaluative focus can be vague. Impressions of personal characteristics, such as whether a person will be a 'good team player' or a 'forward thinker' are subjective, and more vulnerable to distortion than impressions that have their origins in concrete information about accomplishments and work history. Indeed, there is evidence that evaluators rate communication competence and interpersonal competence less reliably than they rate work quality (Viswesvara et al., 1996).

In addition, the evaluative criteria can be unspecified. Research has shown that when selection benchmarks are left unstated, evaluators tend to define the criteria for job success to be consistent with their preferred job candidate. Evaluators have in fact found people to overstate or understate the importance of the same performance criterion depending on whether it was attributed to a man or a woman (Uhlmann and Cohen, 2005).

The absence of a standardized evaluative structure also can increase the impact of expectations in the evaluation process (Bragger et al., 2002; Biernat et al., 2010). Without such a structure, evaluators are not constrained to consider particular types of information about a job candidate, or to treat all the information in the same way regardless of who the

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candidate is. This means that different criteria can be used and that the same criteria can be weighted differently when judging different people. Non-uniform standards promote the use of expectations in the processing of information and, not surprisingly, it has been shown that a structured procedure integrating specific observed behaviours rather than an overall judgement reduces gender bias in evaluations (Bauer and Baltes, 2002).

Clarity About the Source of Performance

Ambiguity that arises from lack of information about who is responsible for a joint performance outcome – attributional ambiguity – can also enhance the power of expectations to affect evaluations (Heilman and Haynes, 2005). Attributional ambiguity leaves an opening for negative expectations to provide easy answers about who actually deserves credit for a joint success or blame for a joint failure. Not only is this an issue in the review of past performance, but it is also increasingly an issue in the selection process itself. With the rise of group interviews and assessment centres as selection procedures, team-based evaluations have become increasingly important in hiring decisions. The source of performance is more ambiguous in team settings than in individual task-based work and, therefore, if used for selection, it can be problematic for the evaluation and selection of women, especially in male gender-typed domains.

Studies have demonstrated that when women and men work together on a male gender-typed task, women are given less credit for a successful joint outcome, and are viewed as having made a smaller contribution to it (ibid.). Moreover, women are blamed more than men for joint failures (Caleo and Heilman, 2010). There is little reason in any of these studies not to give equal credit for these outcomes; only predetermined ideas based on expectations can account for the discrepancies. Thus, ambiguity about the source of performance appears to promote the use of stereotype-based expectations, impeding women from getting the credit they deserve.

GOOD PRACTICE RECOMMENDATIONS

Lack of fit perceptions have potentially devastating consequences for women's access to positions that have traditionally been held by men. This is especially problematic given that these positions tend to hold the highest prestige and status, as well as monetary and social rewards (Cejka and Eagly, 1999). But gender bias not only affects the women who are its victims; organizations also suffer by losing highly educated, skilled and competent human capital. One of the most relevant concerns of

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any organization is attracting and hiring the most qualified employees, people who can add to productivity and become an asset to the company. Advocating recruitment and selection procedures that secure gender-fair outcomes is not only socially correct, but is also necessary to ensure that half of the population is not ignored in the search for the best person for a vacant position. In the face of skilled labour shortage and demographic change (Forbes, 2013), organizations increasingly rely on the selection of well-trained women and men. Furthermore, recent studies provide support for the idea that having women on corporate boards increases organizations' sustainability. Companies with more women tend to be more effective in dealing with acquisitions and mergers, as well as less prone to risky transactions (Levi et al., 2014).

As we have seen, the disparity in the selection of men and women for certain occupations is not always driven by actual differences in abilities or competences, but by negative performance expectations that are triggered by lack of fit beliefs. We suggest that organizations can mitigate the occurrence of gender bias by instituting procedures that (1) counteract the negative expectations that result from lack of fit perceptions, (2) reduce the ambiguity in evaluation processes that encourage the use of these expectations, and (3) weaken the effects of these expectations by increasing evaluators' motivation for accurate assessment of candidates.

Preventing Negative Expectations

If gender stereotypes are not activated, then the processes leading to lack of fit perceptions and negative performance expectations can be derailed. Good hiring practices seek to eliminate stereotype activation by promoting gender-blind résumé screenings that reduce the salience of gender and the negative expectations about performance it provokes. But this is not always possible – certainly not after the initial phases of the selection process unfold and personal contact is necessary. Though organizations should enforce these practices when possible, they also can utilize other methods to avoid stereotype activation.

One such method lies in the composition of the applicant pool. As we mentioned in this chapter, gender is made salient by numerical scarcity, and there is evidence that increased proportional representation of women in the applicant pool reduces the activation of stereotypes and favourably affects women's career opportunities (Heilman, 1980). Thus, ensuring that women are represented in the pool when applicants are initially being considered can potentially downplay the salience of gender in the subsequent evaluation of these applicants. By designing job advertisements to attract women and men the number of women in the application pool

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can be increased (Gaucher et al., 2011). Also, by sharing job advertisements with large external and internal audiences rather than in selected, often male-dominated networks (Ibarra, 1997), organizations can attract more women to apply. By decreasing the chances of gender stereotypes being activated, lack of fit perceptions can be weakened and negative performance expectations averted.

Furthermore, broadening conceptions of traditionally male occupations can help to mitigate negative performance expectations. This is likely to occur naturally as women are gradually being placed in traditionally male roles. However, organizations also can actively aid in this process by redefining how they characterize traditionally male gender-typed positions. For example, this may be accomplished by including relevant female-typed traits in job descriptions (for example, interpersonal skills) and using gender-fair language when advertising typically male-typed jobs (Gaucher et al., 2011). These actions decrease the likelihood that a position is perceived to be male gender-typed. As we have seen earlier in this chapter, this can alleviate lack of fit perceptions and the negative expectations of women that they induce.

Reducing Ambiguity in the Selection Process

Reducing ambiguity in selection procedures can deter gender bias in selection decisions. We have argued that the more concrete, consistent, and comprehensive the information given to evaluators, the clearer the criteria for evaluations, and the more well defined the method for combining different information types, the less latitude evaluators have to make inferences grounded in the gender-based expectations they hold.

An effective way to create less biased decision-making processes is the use of standardized structured interviews and forms when evaluating applicants. But any attempt at creating a fixed structure for evaluation – one that cannot be used differently for different job candidates – will be an aid in keeping expectations in tow when critical decisions are made.

Furthermore, as team-based evaluations become more important in selection processes and input sources are less clear, it is important to reduce attributional ambiguity by also obtaining individual performance information whenever possible. Collecting past information about individual performance (for example, via job references, CVs [résumés]) can and should always be used to supplement information obtained in group settings and provide a check on stereotype-based expectations in determining judgements about women.

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Promoting Accuracy Goals

Another way to promote fair evaluations of women applying for male-typed jobs is to increase the motivation of evaluators to be accurate. Research has shown that when people have an accuracy goal, their automatic reliance on expectations as 'rules of thumb' is decreased. As social pressures for not being prejudiced or sexist have become the norm, evaluators are becoming more concerned with making fair and unbiased decisions. Encouraging this type of behaviour by highlighting potential biases in the decision-making process may in fact increase people's motivation to 'do the right thing'. Furthermore, advancing an explicit goal of fairness in candidate evaluations may promote more comprehensive and careful processing of relevant information, while actively encouraging the discarding of irrelevant factors.

However, stereotypes tend to be activated automatically, despite people's best intentions to be fair. Therefore, we also recommend that human resources departments make strides to hold evaluators accountable for their judgements. If evaluators are required to justify their decisions to fellow members of a selection team or to their superiors, they are likely to try to make a good impression. Accountability will thus encourage them to engage in a more impartial and reliable assessment of job candidates in the hope of appearing thorough and judicious (Mero et al., 2003).

Finally, in promoting accuracy goals it is important to create a sense of future interdependence between the evaluator and the potential employee. If the evaluator anticipates that an applicant's future performance may have implications for his or her own well-being in the organization, precision in identifying a candidate's strengths and weaknesses will be in the evaluator's best interest. Self-interest concerns are apt to promote a careful processing of information – one that avoids taking the easy route provided by performance expectations.

CONCLUSIONS

We have argued in this chapter that gender bias directed against women is a product of stereotype-based lack of fit perceptions and the negative performance expectations they promote. We also have outlined a set of remedial measures to minimize the effects of bias in selection decisions and ensure that the positions women attain will be commensurate with their education and skills. Understanding the processes that give rise to gender bias and the conditions that encourage its occurrence is necessary if we are to eliminate it from organizational decision-making. Only then,

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when every job candidate is considered solely on his or her own merits, will we realize the promise of equality for working women and the benefit of resource maximization for organizations.

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