

Description and Prescription: How Gender Stereotypes Prevent Women's Ascent Up the Organizational Ladder

Madeline E. Heilman*

New York University

This review article posits that the scarcity of women at the upper levels of organizations is a consequence of gender bias in evaluations. It is proposed that gender stereotypes and the expectations they produce about both what women are like (descriptive) and how they should behave (prescriptive) can result in devaluation of their performance, denial of credit to them for their successes, or their penalization for being competent. The processes giving rise to these outcomes are explored, and the procedures that are likely to encourage them are identified. Because of gender bias and the way in which it influences evaluations in work settings, it is argued that being competent does not ensure that a woman will advance to the same organizational level as an equivalently performing man.

Why are women so scarce at the top level of organizations? It is proposed here that gender bias in evaluation is a primary cause. The “glass ceiling,” which presents an impenetrable barrier at some point in a woman’s career (Morrison, White, & Van Velsor, 1987), is viewed as a natural consequence of gender stereotypes and the expectations they produce about what women are like and how they should behave. Because of gender bias and the way in which it influences evaluation in work settings, being competent provides no assurance that a woman will advance to the same organizational levels as an equivalently performing man.

*Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Madeline E. Heilman, Department of Psychology, New York University, 6 Washington Place, Room 576, New York, NY 10003 [e-mail: mh@psych.nyu.edu].

The claim that gender stereotypes are responsible for biased evaluations in organizations is not new. Gender stereotypes have frequently been used to explain why women are not hired into positions leading to organizational power and prestige. I, however, am positing that the effects of gender stereotypes continue to dog women as they climb the organizational ladder. These ideas contrast sharply with other explanations of why there are so few women at the top organizational levels, such as “pipeline” theories that lay the blame on time and supply (e.g., Forbes, Piercy, & Hayes, 1988), and “deficit” theories that presume women to be deficient in the characteristics necessary to fulfill traditionally male roles (e.g., Feuer, 1988). They also expand our thinking about the ways in which gender stereotypes contribute to the discriminatory treatment of women in work settings.

Key to the assertion that gender stereotypes and the biased evaluations they produce inhibit women from progressing upward to the top of organizations are the stereotyped conceptions of what women are like and how they should behave. A consideration of these two aspects of gender stereotypes follows.

Gender Stereotypes

Gender-Stereotypic Attributes

Stereotyped beliefs about the attributes of men and women are pervasive and widely shared. Moreover, these stereotyped beliefs have proved very resistant to change (see Dodge, Gilroy & Fenzel, 1995; Leuptow, Garovich, & Leuptow, 1995). To summarize briefly, men and women are thought to differ both in terms of achievement-oriented traits, often labeled as “agentic,” and in terms of social- and service-oriented traits, often labeled as “communal” (Bakan, 1966). Thus, men are characterized as aggressive, forceful, independent, and decisive, whereas women are characterized as kind, helpful, sympathetic, and concerned about others. Not only are the conceptions of women and men different, but they also often are oppositional, with members of one sex seen as lacking what is thought to be most prevalent in members of the other sex.

There is evidence that traditional stereotypes of women and men predominate in work settings as well as nonwork settings. Research has demonstrated, for example, that even when they are depicted as managers, women are characterized as less agentic than men (Heilman, Block, & Martell, 1995). Although in Heilman, Block, and Martell’s study, working managers from a range of industries described women managers as more competent, active, and potent than women in general, they described women managers as decidedly more deficient in these same attributes than men managers. It was only when the women managers were depicted as highly successful that this gender difference in trait characterizations was found to abate. Thus, the increased presence of women in the workplace and their assumption of new roles do not appear to preclude gender-stereotypic perceptions.

Implications for Prescription as Well as Description

Not only are gender stereotypes descriptive, they also are prescriptive. That is, they denote not only differences in how women and men actually are, but also norms about behaviors that are suitable for each—about how women and men *should* be (Burgess & Borgida, 1999; Eagly, 1987; Terborg, 1977).

There is a great deal of overlap between the content of the prescriptive and descriptive elements of gender stereotypes, with the behavior that is prescribed directly related to the attributes that are positively valued for each sex. Thus, the communal traits for which women are so positively valued (Eagly, Mladinic, & Otto, 1991) are a central part of their “shoulds.” But gender stereotype-based norms also include “should nots.” Typically, these include behaviors associated with the opposite sex that are seen as incompatible with the behavior deemed desirable for one’s own. Thus, in many cases the agentic tendencies for which men are so positively valued are prohibited for women. This, too, is part of their normative prescription.

The following sections discuss the way in which the descriptive and the prescriptive aspects of gender stereotypes can produce consequences that thwart the aspirations of women to reach the upper echelons of organizations. But first is a consideration of how each of these elements of gender stereotypes can give rise to gender bias in work settings.

How Gender-Stereotypic Descriptions and Prescriptions Produce Biased Evaluations

Essential to understanding how the female gender stereotype can obstruct women from advancing up the organizational hierarchy is the realization that top management and executive level jobs are almost always considered to be “male” in sex-type. They are thought to require an achievement-oriented aggressiveness and an emotional toughness that is distinctly male in character and antithetical to both the stereotyped view of what women are like and the stereotype-based norms specifying how they should behave. There no doubt is variability in the degree to which a particular job is defined as male in sex-type, based on factors such as the work sector or domain, work product, or specific functional area of management. But with few exceptions, upper level managerial positions appear to be characterized in masculine terms.

Empirical evidence supports this assertion. Consistent findings indicate that a good manager is described predominantly by masculine attributes (Heilman, Block, Martell, & Simon, 1989; Powell & Butterfield, 1989; Schein, this issue) and that stereotypically male qualities are thought necessary to being a successful executive (Martell, Parker, Emrich, & Crawford, 1998). It thus seems that not only are most upper level managers men, but good management is also thought to be a

manly business. This view, together with stereotypic conceptions about what women are and should be like, is at the heart of gender bias in evaluations.

Description-Based Bias

Stereotyped views of what women are like and the male sex typing of managerial roles and positions combine to elicit gender bias from evaluators. Together they produce the perceived *lack of fit* responsible for many types of biased judgments about women in work settings.

The Lack of Fit model (Heilman, 1983, 1995) is based on the idea that expectations about how successful or unsuccessful a person will be in working at a particular job are a driving force underlying personnel decisions. It further specifies that the perceived fit between the individual's attributes and the job's requirements in terms of skills and abilities determines these performance expectations. If the perceived fit is good, then success will be expected; if the perceived fit is poor, then failure will be expected. These fit-derived performance expectations, whether positive or negative, profoundly affect evaluation processes.

It is clear from our discussion that the skills and attributes presumed to be required to handle male sex-typed roles effectively do not correspond to the attributes believed to characterize women as a group. The perceived lack of fit between the requirements of traditionally male jobs and the stereotypic attributes ascribed to women is therefore likely to produce expectations of failure. Moreover, the greater the degree of stereotyping or the more masculine in sex-type the job, the worse the perceived fit and the more negative the expectations are apt to be. These expectations of failure give rise to a clear bias toward viewing women as ill equipped to perform the job competently.

The effects of these negative performance expectations have been demonstrated when women seek entry into organizations. Indeed, research has repeatedly demonstrated sex bias in employee selection processes (see Davison & Burke, 2000; Dipboye, 1987; and Olian, Schwab, & Haberfeld, 1988, for reviews), with male applicants generally recommended for hire and seen as more likely to succeed than female applicants with the identical credentials when jobs are male in sex-type. But negative performance expectations that arise from the discrepancy in how women are depicted in gender stereotypes and the qualities thought to be essential in an upper level manager are apt to have effects far beyond selection decisions. They create a predisposition toward negativity that colors perceptions and judgments. How these expectations prevent the recognition of women's competence will be considered in subsequent sections.

Prescription-Based Bias

When women are acknowledged to have successfully performed male sex-typed jobs, they are, by definition, perceived to have the attributes that are

necessary to effectively execute the tasks and responsibilities required. These women are seen as having what it takes to succeed at “man’s work,” eradicating any perceived lack of fit deriving from the descriptive aspect of gender stereotypes. But now there is a different problem. Their success is a violation of the prescriptive norms associated with gender stereotypes. Although there is a good fit between what a woman is perceived to be like and what the job is perceived to entail, there is a bad fit between what the woman is perceived to be like and conceptions of what she *should* be like. This perceived violation of the stereotypic prescription is likely to induce disapproval—disapproval that can result in penalties for the violator. This formulation is consistent with the more general proposition that counternormative behavior arouses disapproval (Cialdini & Trost, 1998).

Evidence of disapproval for violations of gender-stereotypic prescriptions comes from many sources. Women who do not display “womanly” attributes and men who do not display “manly” attributes are judged less psychologically healthy and are evaluated less favorably than those who do (Costrich, Feinstein, Kidder, Marecek, & Pascale, 1975). Similarly, descriptions of nontraditional woman are evaluated less favorably than descriptions of more traditional women (Haddock & Zanna, 1994). Negative reactions also have been found when women exhibit styles of behavior typically reserved for men. Thus, women who present themselves in a self-promoting manner are not as well received as those who do not (Rudman, 1998). Because advancement in organizations depends not only on competence assessments but also on social acceptance and approval, the negativity that is a likely reaction to women who prove themselves to be competent in areas that traditionally are off limits to them can be lethal when they strive to get ahead.

The following section examines the consequences of both the descriptive and prescriptive elements of gender stereotypes and a consideration of how these two sources of gender bias play themselves out in work settings, affecting the evaluation of women who are on their way up the organizational ladder. The focus is on three specific outcomes of gender stereotyping that beleaguer women as they attempt to advance their careers: devaluation of their performance, denying of credit to them for their successes, and penalization for their proven competence. The first two of these derive from the descriptive aspect of the female gender stereotype, and the third derives from its normative prescription.

Consequences of Gender-Stereotypic Descriptions in Work Settings

Devaluation of Performance

If women are to advance to the upper levels of organizations, then they must be seen as producing excellent work. But stereotypes about women suggest that they will not be successful when they engage in activities traditionally reserved for men.

These expectations have a tendency to perpetuate themselves and therefore are likely to affect how performance information is attended to and interpreted. The acceptance of disconfirming information necessitates a restructuring of beliefs, and the easiest response is to reject it. Thus, very often, the performance expectations act to create self-fulfilling prophecies, and evaluators engage in cognitive distortion that enables them to see precisely what they expect to see. It is this tendency for self-perpetuation that creates problematic consequences.

Research has shown that despite producing the identical work product as a man, a woman's work is often regarded as inferior. In fact, there have been many investigations in organizational psychology that attest to the fact that unless the quality of the work product is incontrovertible, women's accomplishments are undervalued as compared to those of men (see Heilman, 1983, 1995; and Nieva & Gutek, 1980). Moreover, it appears that the more women are viewed in stereotypic terms, the more likely this is to occur (Heilman & Stopeck, 1985a).

Also contributing to the devaluation of women's performance is the tendency to interpret the same behavior differently depending upon who the actor is. It has been demonstrated that when actors are of different sexes, the implications drawn from their behavior is quite different (Taylor, Fiske, Etcoff, & Ruderman, 1978). Thus, in work settings a behavior such as frequent phone conversation is a good deal more likely to be seen as slacking off for a woman but productive for a man. Similarly, waiting to make a decision rather than acting immediately may seem passive coming from a woman but prudent coming from a man. Consequently, disconfirming performance information, rather than prompting a revision of the negative expectations held for women, can serve to maintain or even reinforce them.

Thus there are several ways in which the descriptive aspect of the female gender stereotype and the negative expectations to which it gives rise prevent a woman's accomplishments from being evaluated in an unbiased manner. As long as there is a lack of clarity about the quality of performance, it is possible to ignore or dismiss the information that performance provides about women and maintain the expectation that they are not competent to execute a male sex-typed job or task. This is suggestive of the type of organizational conditions that would facilitate the devaluing of women's performance.

Organizational Conditions That Facilitate the Devaluation of Women's Performance

Ambiguity in evaluation criteria. Given that cognitive distortion is key to the biased devaluation of women's work at male sex-typed tasks, one factor that is likely to play a role in regulating when it occurs is the ambiguity of the evaluative criteria. This idea not only is supported by reviews of the organizational psychology literature in this area (e.g., Nieva & Gutek, 1980; Tosi & Einbender, 1985), but also is supported by work in social cognition, in which it is generally accepted that

the more vague the judgment criteria, the more easily information can be distorted to fit preconceived ideas (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). In the case of gender bias, the preconceived ideas are expectations about the lesser capability of women to perform competently. Thus, it is more difficult to distort concrete, objective outcomes, such as test performance or dollar earnings, than to distort vague and subjective outcomes, such as being a team player or being an inspiring boss. It also is more difficult to distort judgments of a person's explicit accomplishments than to distort judgments of his or her character or personality. As Nieva and Gutek (1980) have pointed out, the more inference is required to draw implications from performance information, the more likely bias will enter into evaluative judgments. In the absence of concrete criteria, expectations based on stereotypes about women tend to dominate in the structuring of judgments, allowing for an orderly, if not necessarily accurate, judgment process.

Unfortunately, the criteria for judging the performance of most upper level positions in organizations are vague and nonspecific. There seem to be few quantifiable or objective measures of success for such jobs, and judgments more often than not rest on personality descriptors, such as "charismatic," "individualistic," "courageous," and "resilient." Moreover, performance standards typically are subjective rather than objective, because the character of the outcome or work product is qualitative rather than quantitative. This is likely to be even more of a problem at the top of the organizational hierarchy where, because of the complexity inherent in these positions, the criteria for effective performance tend to be particularly subjective and vague (Stumpf & London, 1981). This ambiguity in performance criteria provides ample opportunity for the cognitive distortion that acts to maintain stereotypes, casting women as unsuccessful in their accomplishments regardless of their actual performance quality.

Lack of structure in evaluation processes. There is no question that if evaluation processes are unstructured, they leave more room for cognitive distortion to occur. The lack of structure does not force the consideration of multiple sources of information nor a predetermined set of criteria. Different elements of performance may be central in the evaluation of different individuals, similar elements of performance may be given different weightings in the final judgments, and the standards for judging performance need not necessarily be uniform in their application. In short, lack of structure in decision making eases the way for the reliance on stereotype-based expectations in making inferences about performance excellence.

Because there is not a great deal of consensus about what makes a senior manager successful, evaluation of managers in organizations is often less structured than would be optimal. In fact, there often is a concerted effort not to be rigid but to remain open to unique indicators of managerial talent. No doubt there is great complexity and variability in the responsibilities a senior manager has to handle.

Nonetheless, even minimal structuring of the evaluation and promotion decision process at the senior management level would unquestionably go a long way toward leveling the playing field for women vying for these positions. The absence of a structured process in which designated criteria are considered in a systematic fashion encourages the use of expectations as a filter for reality. This situation escalates the potential for gender bias in decision making, culminating in the judgment that women are not competent in fulfilling traditionally male work roles.

The Denying of Credit to Women for Their Successes

Despite the many obstacles blocking the acknowledgment of a woman's successful performance in traditionally male work domains, there are times when her success is undeniable. But even then, a woman may not be viewed as competent. Rather, the expectation that she will fail is maintained by treating the success as not being due to the woman herself. Attributing responsibility in this way designates the woman's success as an exception, unlikely to have happened without special circumstances. This can have detrimental effects on her future prospects. If the rosy glow of success is to extend to how she is evaluated and rewarded, then the success must be attributed to her ability and skill and therefore be seen as predictive of future performance (Greenhaus & Parasuraman, 1993; Heilman & Guzzo, 1978).

It has been more than 25 years since Deaux and Emswiller (1974) subtitled their article "What Is Skill for the Male Is Luck for the Female." In that and other studies Deaux and her colleagues demonstrated that even when equally successful at a male sex-typed task, a woman is viewed as less skilled than a man (see Deaux, 1976). A woman's successful performance at male work also can be attributed to others in the work setting or to idiosyncrasies of a particular task or position. In each case, the successful performance is treated as not very informative about the woman's competence, because it has been explained away by factors that have little to do with the woman's enduring capacity to repeat and/or sustain such success.

As long as there is a question about who or what is truly responsible for her apparent success, a woman's role in bringing it about can be denied, and a view of her that is consistent with the expectation that she is not competent can be maintained. If this happens, her skills and ability are neither recognized nor appreciated. Conditions that foster these attributional processes in organizations are considered below.

Organizational Conditions That Facilitate the Denial of Credit for Success

Ambiguity about the source of successful performance. Conditions in organizations that blur the contribution of individuals to a final product are particularly conducive to attributions that place responsibility for success elsewhere than on the woman. They provide a readily available explanation for the success that does not

necessitate seeing the woman as competent. The current emphasis on teams is a case in point. Since teamwork, by its nature, obscures the visibility of individual contributions, it is likely to encourage, or at the very least make possible, the use of attributional rationalizations to contend with the challenge to stereotyped expectations that a woman's success presents. A recent set of studies supports this idea (Heilman, Haynes, & Goodman, 2001) indicating that women, but not men, are judged to be less competent when group rather than individual level feedback is provided.

If working in groups encourages attributional explanations that limit the degree to which women are seen as responsible for their successes, then the same consequence might also result from other structural arrangements in organizations that obscure who is responsible for a work outcome. Mentoring programs, for example, although often set up to mitigate against sex bias in organizations, may inadvertently promote it by providing onlookers with a plausible explanation for a woman's success that does not involve her competence. In the event of success, the mentor might well be credited with being the "brains" behind the performance, and the woman, despite her success, may well be the loser. A similar process might also occur when the woman has been the beneficiary of "executive coaching" or other programs that imply that the woman has received assistance in her work role. Whether this in fact occurs remains to be explored.

Ambiguity about the reason for successful upward mobility. In today's organizations there is plenty of reason to question why a woman has enjoyed success and attained a high-level position. There is much talk of affirmative action for women and minorities, and women often are assumed to have been beneficiaries of affirmative action, even if this is not the case (Heilman & Blader, 2001). But in the minds of many, affirmative action has become strongly associated with preferential treatment (Kravitz & Platania, 1993), which suggests lowered quality standards. Research indeed indicates that individuals associated with affirmative action are tainted with a stigma of incompetence and are not seen as worthy of the positions that they occupy (Heilman, Block, & Lucas, 1992; Heilman, Block, & Stathatos, 1997). Presuming a connection between women and affirmative action therefore provides an attributional "out" for explaining away the existence of women at high levels. It suggests that it is not because of their accomplishments that they have been successful in advancing their careers but because of their membership in a privileged group.

Affirmative action is only one organizational program that triggers the perception of preferential treatment of women in organizations. Outreach programs, diversity programs, and other programs that target women all are likely to have the same consequences. In fact, recent research has demonstrated a decidedly negative effect of association with diversity initiatives on reactions to female group members (Heilman & Welle, 2001). When a work group was said to have been

composed so as to maximize diversity, women in the group were viewed as more incompetent than when either merit or a random factor such as work schedules was said to have been the rationale for composition.

Programs and efforts that have put a premium on the recruiting and training of women for positions that have traditionally been off limits to them are often heavily publicized in the general press. This makes them particularly salient attributional explanations for a woman's success. But regardless, there are some organizations that are more conducive to such attributions than others. The key difference is the degree to which the organization holds itself out to its employees as a meritocracy. It is when organization members are convinced that merit does not play the primary role when personnel decisions about women are made and that qualifications are not of great importance when women are considered for placement and promotion that the potential for attributional rationalizations abounds.

Lastly, remedial efforts to bring women into the workplace are not the only source of beliefs that women have benefited from preferential treatment. Women often are burdened with the assumption on the part of others that they have gotten to where they have in the organizational hierarchy because of special relationships with those in power. This is particularly problematic for attractive women (Heilman & Stopeck, 1985b). Such assumptions can have detrimental effects on the way in which a woman's success in an organizational setting is interpreted. Whether she is seen as the recipient of "cushy" positions, lots of help, or access to information and/or resources that others do not have, her success at attaining important positions in the organization is not likely to be attributed to her work competence. The conditions that encourage this view of a woman's work success may be quite idiosyncratic, but certainly situations in which a woman has special access to important and powerful senior level managers are ripe for such attributional rationalization.

Consequences of Gender-Stereotypic Prescriptions in Work Settings

Penalizing Women for Being Competent

Despite the proclivity to devalue women's accomplishments and to deny them credit for their successes, sometimes a woman's work accomplishments are undeniably excellent and there is no opportunity to attribute responsibility for the success elsewhere. In these cases, women are accepted as competent. In fact, there is some evidence that in such circumstances, women are actually rated as more competent than are men. As Feldman (1981) and Weber and Crocker (1983) have pointed out, when behavior contrasts so sharply with a stereotypically derived expectation that it exceeds a critical threshold, the break with the stereotype can cause a boomerang effect. In fact, overvaluation of women has been found in a number of instances when performance success on a male sex-typed task is both undeniable and clearly due to the woman's skill (Heilman, Martell, & Simon,

1988; Kryger & Shikiar, 1978). But even with this acknowledgment of their competence, women still are in jeopardy. The violation of the prescriptions inherent in gender stereotypes is likely to bias how they are evaluated and how their careers progress.

Gender stereotypes dictate that women should behave differently than men—that women should be nurturing and service-oriented (communal), but not tough and achievement-oriented (agentic). Deviations from these prescribed behaviors in work settings spark disapproval and negative reactions. For example, female managers exhibiting a masculine rather than a feminine leadership style have long been found to elicit less enthusiasm and to produce expectations of less satisfaction among employees (e.g., Bartol & Butterfield, 1976; Jago & Vroom, 1982). These findings suggest that negative sanctions are brought to bear when women merely exhibit behavioral tendencies that do not adhere to normative prescriptions. Imagine what happens when their “deviant” behaviors actually prove to be effective! The negative consequences are apt to be even more severe as well as more certain to occur.

If this is so, then the violation of gender-stereotypic prescriptions is highly likely to have consequences for women in traditionally male work settings who are recognized to be competent. Women, quite simply, are not supposed to excel at jobs and tasks that are designated as male in our culture. Although these women may move with ease through an organization’s lower ranks and appear poised to pierce the glass ceiling to the upper strata of the organization, their success may be hindered by the disapproval their competence evokes because it violates prescriptive norms. As a result they may be disadvantaged relative to men who are at their level when career-defining decisions about promotion are made. A recent 3-year study conducted by Lyness and Judiesch (1999) that tracked the advancement of 30,000 managers showed that as women ascended the corporate hierarchy, their likelihood of being promoted was much poorer than that of their male counterparts. Our ideas suggest that although allowed to achieve some degree of success, competent women may pay a price for their competence. They may be penalized for treading where women are not supposed to go and may ultimately be blocked from achieving the level of success that would be afforded to comparable men.

The disapproval aroused by the violation of normative prescriptions has been found to prompt two separate but related reactions to women who have deviated from how they are supposed to behave by proving themselves to be competent at “man’s work.” They are personally derogated, and they are disliked.

Personal derogation. Research has demonstrated that the same competence applauded in men is regarded as unattractive in women (Horner, 1972). Moreover, the competent woman as compared to the competent man is regarded as cold (Porter & Geis, 1981) and undesirable as a group member (Hagan & Kahn, 1975) and elicits visible cues of negative affect (Butler & Geis, 1990). The significance of

these findings in chronicling how competent women can be penalized for their competence is bolstered by the everyday use of terms for successful women, such as "bitch," "ice queen," and "battle axe," that are so derogatory in terms of personal attributes.

Research also has been conducted that directly explores how working people view women who have been successful in organizational life. One study, in which a large and heterogeneous group of male managers were asked to describe a successful manager who was said to be a male, a female, or of unknown gender, vividly demonstrated the plight of upwardly aspiring women (Heilman et al., 1989). Ratings of the successful managers were made on a lengthy list of adjectives first used by Schein (1973). Although female managers who were depicted as successful were described as highly competent and endowed with the agentic qualities necessary to ensure success in corporate life, they also were described as interpersonally wanting. Descriptors such as "bitter," "quarrelsome," and "selfish" were rated as highly characteristic of the women, but not the men, who were depicted as successful managers.

These results were subsequently supported by research in which successful women managers were found to be described as decidedly more interpersonally hostile (i.e., devious, vulgar, quarrelsome, selfish, bitter, and deceitful) than their male counterparts, although there were no differences on measures of competence, activity/potency, emotional stability, and independence (Heilman et al., 1995). Importantly, these same differences were not apparent when the stimulus person was depicted simply as a man or woman manager, without indication of success. Apparently, when a woman is clearly competent at handling a male role, the traditionally favorable interpersonal image of women no longer holds sway.

The interpersonal derogation directed at competent women seems to be of a very particular sort. The negativity is along the communal dimension. Unlike competent men, who tend to be seen merely as noncommunal, competent women are seen as countercommunal. So rather than being seen as warm, they are seen as cold. And rather than being seen as selfless, they are seen as selfish. And rather than being seen as sweet and conciliatory, they are seen as bitter and quarrelsome. The enforcing of gender-stereotypic prescriptions appears to relegate these women to a subtype characterized by attributes that not only are unfeminine but also are interpersonally abhorrent.

Dislike. There also is evidence that when considered to be competent at male sex-typed work, women are disliked more than men are. In the first of a recent series of three studies (Heilman, Wallen, Fuchs, & Tamkins, 2001), it was demonstrated that when it was unclear whether a woman had been successful, because her performance had not yet been reviewed, she was seen as less competent than an identically presented male manager, but she was thought to be more likeable. When, however, it was clear that she had been highly successful and designated as

a top performer, she was seen as equally competent as her male counterpart but was thought to be far less likable. The tendency for women managers who are clearly successful to be disliked was shown in a second, subsequent study to be limited to situations in which the managerial job was male sex-typed and therefore the woman's success was a violation of stereotype prescribed behavior. In the third study, likeability was shown to affect decisions regarding organizational rewards. This latter study, because it took likeability ratings as the independent variable and systematically varied them, lends strong support to our argument that in addition to the negative reactions directed at women who have proven themselves to be competent, there are unfavorable consequences for their career prospects.

Thus it appears that there are indeed social sanctions brought to bear against women who have violated the prescriptions of gender stereotypes by being competent. There seem to be two forms of personally directed negativity, neither one necessarily separable from the other. First, women who are successful at male sex-typed roles are personally derogated and viewed as countercommunal. Second, they are disliked. It is not clear if the disapproval aroused by norm violation alone produces the dislike or if the deviant women are disliked because the constellation of traits ascribed to them is so intensely distasteful. Further research designed to disentangle this causal sequence is currently underway.

Organizational Conditions That Facilitate Penalizing Women for Being Competent

Unlike sex bias resulting from descriptive aspects of gender stereotypes, sex bias resulting from prescriptive aspects of stereotypes arises from values that specify ideal states. This suggests that prescription-based bias is less amenable to contextual influence. Even conditions that affect the motivation to be accurate in evaluation (e.g., forced accountability or anticipated interdependence) are likely to have little consequence on these types of biased judgments. The issue is not the constraining of more careful information processing, but rather the undercutting of reactions that derive from disapproval for norm violation.

This is not to say that there are not critical moderators. Certainly, situational elements that influence the degree of incompatibility perceived between the gender prescription and the behavior of the successful woman should affect the amount of bias evidenced. For example, the masculine ethos of certain work domains (e.g., the military) or positions (e.g., bond trader) increases the extent to which the job is perceived to require stereotypically masculine agentic attributes for success and therefore is likely to exaggerate the perceived violation of female gender role prescriptions. And what is known about a particular woman other than her competence also is likely to have an effect. Physical attractiveness, for example, may heighten negative reactions, because the violation of normative prescription may be seen as more egregious when enacted by a woman considered to be very feminine. Alternatively, aspects of the individual that provide direct information about

communality, such as having traditionally feminine interests, may soften the interpersonal negativity associated with stereotype-based norm violation (Rudman & Glick, this issue). But in any particular situation or setting, these factors most often are fixed and not under the control of the organization. The problem of combating negative reactions to a woman's success therefore seems more impervious to organizational change efforts than the problem of preventing the cognitive distortion that fosters images that women are not competent.

These findings suggest that, paradoxically, women in nontraditional roles may be penalized if they do their jobs well and are applauded as competent and successful. Moreover, they suggest that violation of the prescriptive component of gender stereotypes influences evaluations of an interpersonal nature and is likely to take the form of negative characterizations and social rejection. Such reactions to successful women can no doubt affect career-determining decisions. People do not want to work with or be associated with those who are deemed to be socially wanting. Upper management is sometimes referred to colloquially as a "club." Members of such clubs are apt to blackball the entry of those who seem inappropriate or distasteful. Simply put, if a woman is perceived as equally competent to a male colleague but seen as less interpersonally appealing and suitable as a member of the upper management team, there are likely to be unfavorable consequences for her in terms of rewards and advancement.

Summary and Conclusions

In this article I have identified two different aspects of gender stereotypes—the descriptive and the prescriptive—and examined how they each contribute to gender bias in evaluations. I furthermore have explored the consequences of these two aspects of gender stereotypes in organizational settings and considered how they can potentially thwart women's career progress, preventing them from rising to the upper levels of work organizations.

I have proposed that the descriptive aspect of gender stereotypes promotes gender bias because the discrepancy between the stereotyped conception of what women as a group are like and of what upper level managerial jobs entail leads to expectations that women will be unable to perform such jobs effectively. These expectations create a predisposition toward negativity that precludes the recognition of a woman's competence, either through the devaluing of her work accomplishments or through attributing responsibility for her successful performance to something other than her skill and ability. I furthermore identified organizational conditions that, because they promote ambiguity about either the nature of the performance outcomes or the source of performance success, open the door to the cognitive distortion that fuels this type of gender bias.

I also have proposed that the prescriptive aspect of gender stereotypes promotes gender bias, but of a very different sort. The prescriptive aspect of gender

stereotypes dictates not what women as a group are like, but rather what women as a group *should* be like. Women who prove to be competent and to have succeeded at “male” work violate this normative prescription and therefore arouse disapproval and are penalized; they are regarded very differently than men who engage in the precisely the same behavior. The penalties come in the form of negative social sanctions and include both personal derogation and dislike, each of which can give rise to judgments and decisions that halt the upward advancement of competent women. Moreover, because the evaluations underlying these judgments and decisions derive from values that designate what is ideal, I have argued that they are not particularly responsive to contextual influence or organizational control.

The thesis guiding this article is that gender stereotypes are the foundation of gender bias in work settings and the root cause of the discriminatory treatment of women in organizations, which limits their upward mobility. By understanding the psychological processes that regulate how others in the work setting react to women and by identifying some key organizational practices and procedures that encourage biased evaluation, it may be possible to make the workplace a more hospitable place for aspiring career-oriented women. And even when change seems beyond the reach of organizations, cognizance of the processes that produce gender bias may serve to temper some of its ill effects.

It is clear that despite their great gains in attaining managerial positions in recent years, women in such positions are not yet out of the woods. If there is any ambiguity about their competence, they are likely to be viewed as incompetent, and if their competence is unquestionable, they are apt to be socially rejected. Neither of these reactions bodes well for women’s advancement to the highest echelons of organizations. Gender stereotypes, it appears, can derail even the most competent woman’s ascent to the top.

References

- Bakan, D. (1966). *The duality of human existence: An essay on psychology and religion*. Chicago: Rand McNally.
- Bartol, K. M., & Butterfield, D. A. (1976). Sex effects in evaluating leaders. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 61, 446–454.
- Burgess, D., & Borgida, E. (1999). Who women are, who women should be: Descriptive and prescriptive gender stereotyping in sex discrimination. *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law*, 5, 665–692.
- Butler, D., & Geis, F. L. (1990). Nonverbal affect responses to male and female leaders: Implications for leadership evaluations. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 58, 48–59.
- Cialdini, R. B., & Trost, M. R. (1998). Social influence: Social norms, conformity, and compliance. In D. T. Gilbert, S. T. Fiske, and G. Lindzey (Eds.), *The handbook of social psychology* (4th ed., Vol. 2, pp. 151–192). Boston: McGraw-Hill.
- Costrich, N., Feinstein, J., Kidder, L., Marecek, J., & Pascale, L. (1975). When stereotypes hurt: Three studies of penalties for sex-role reversals. *Journal of Experimental and Social Psychology*, 11, 520–530.
- Davison, H. K., & Burke, M. J. (2000). Sex discrimination in simulated employment contexts: A meta-analytic investigation. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 56, 225–248.

- Deaux, K. (1976). Sex: A perspective on the attribution process. In J. Harvey, W. J. Ickes, and R. F. Kidd (Eds.), *New directions in attribution research* (Vol. 1, pp. 335–353). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Deaux, K., & Emswiller, T. (1974). Explanations of successful performance on sex-linked tasks: What is skill for the male is luck for the female. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 29, 80–85.
- Dipboye, R. L. (1987). Problems and progress of women in management. In K. S. Koziara, M. H. Moskow, and L. D. Tanner (Eds.), *Working women: Past, present, future* (pp. 118–153). Washington, DC: Bureau of National Affairs.
- Dodge, K. A., Gilroy, F. D., & Fenzel, L. M. (1995). Requisite management characteristics revisited: Two decades later. *Journal of Social Behavior and Personality*, 10(6), 253–264.
- Eagly, A. H. (1987). *Sex differences in social behavior: A social-role interpretation*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Eagly, A. H., Mladinic, A., & Otto, S. (1991). Are women evaluated more favorably than men? An analysis of attitudes, beliefs, and emotions. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 15, 203–216.
- Feldman, J. M. (1981). Beyond attribution theory: Cognitive processes in performance appraisal. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 66, 127–148.
- Feuer, D. (1988). How women manage. *Training*, 25(August), 23–31.
- Fiske, S. T., & Taylor, S. E. (1991). *Social cognition*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Forbes, J. B., Piercy, J. E., & Hayes, T. L. (1988, November–December). Women executives: Breaking down the barriers? *Business Horizons*, pp. 6–9.
- Greenhaus, J. H., & Parasuraman, S. (1993). Job performance attributions and career advancement prospects: An examination of gender and race effects. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 55(2), 273–297.
- Haddock, G., & Zanna, M. P. (1994). Preferring “housewives” to “feminists”: Categorization and the favorability of attitudes toward women. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 18, 25–52.
- Hagan, R. L., & Kahn, A. (1975). Discrimination against competent women. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 5, 362–376.
- Heilman, M. E. (1983). Sex bias in work settings: The lack of fit model. In B. Staw and L. Cummings (Eds.), *Research in organizational behavior* (Vol. 5). Greenwich, CT: JAI.
- Heilman, M. E. (1995). Sex stereotypes and their effects in the workplace: What we know and what we don’t know. *Journal of Social Behavior and Personality*, 10(6), 3–26.
- Heilman, M. E., & Blader, S. (2001). Assuming preferential selection when the selection policy is unknown: The effects of gender rarity. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 86, 188–193.
- Heilman, M. E., Block, C. J., & Lucas, J. A. (1992). Presumed incompetent? Stigmatization and affirmative action efforts. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 77, 536–544.
- Heilman, M. E., Block, C. J., & Martell, R. (1995). Sex stereotypes: Do they influence perceptions of managers? *Journal of Social Behavior and Personality*, 10(6), 237–252.
- Heilman, M. E., Block, C., Martell, R., & Simon, M. (1989). Has anything changed? Current characterizations of males, females and managers. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 74, 935–942.
- Heilman, M. E., Block, C., & Stathatos, P. (1997). The affirmative action stigma of incompetence: Effects of performance information. *Academy of Management Journal*, 40, 603–625. [Abstracted and reprinted in the *Academy of Management Executive*, 12 (1999), 82–84.]
- Heilman, M. E., & Guzzo, R. A. (1978). The perceived cause of work success as a mediator of sex discrimination in organizations. *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance*, 21, 346–357.
- Heilman, M. E., Haynes, M., & Goodman, A. D. (2001). *Denying women credit for their successes: Gender stereotyping as a function of group vs. individual level performance information*. Manuscript in preparation.
- Heilman, M. E., Martell, R., & Simon, M. (1988). The vagaries of bias: Conditions regulating the undervaluation, equivalence and overvaluation of female job applicants. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 41, 98–110.
- Heilman, M. E., & Stopeck, M. H. (1985a). Being attractive, advantage or disadvantage? Performance based evaluations and recommended personnel actions as a function of appearance, sex and job type. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 35, 174–186.
- Heilman, M. E., & Stopeck, M. H. (1985b). Attractiveness and corporate success: Different causal attributions for males and females. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 70, 379–388.

- Heilman, M. E., Wallen, A. S., Fuchs, D., & Tamkins, M. (2001). *Penalties for competence? Reactions to women's violation of prescriptive gender stereotypes*. Manuscript in preparation.
- Heilman, M. E., & Welle, B. (2001). *Assembling groups to achieve demographic diversity: Exacerbating stereotypes?* Manuscript in preparation.
- Horner, M. S. (1972). Toward an understanding of achievement related to conflicts in women. *Journal of Social Issues*, 28, 157–175.
- Jago, A. G., & Vroom, V. H. (1982). Sex differences in the incidence and evaluation of participative leader behavior. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 67, 776–783.
- Kravitz, D., & Platania, J. (1993). *Attitudes and beliefs about affirmative action: Effects of target and of respondent sex and ethnicity*. Manuscript submitted for publication.
- Kryger, B. R., & Shikar, R. (1978). Sexual discrimination in the use of letters of recommendation: A case of reverse discrimination. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 63, 309–314.
- Leuptow, L. B., Garovich, L., & Leuptow, M. B. (1995). The persistence of gender stereotypes in the face of changing sex roles: Evidence contrary to the sociocultural model. *Ethology and Sociobiology*, 16, 509–530.
- Lyness, K. S., & Judiesch, M. K. (1999). Are women more likely to be hired or promoted into management positions? *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 54, 158–173.
- Martell, R. F., Parker, C., Emrich, C. G., & Crawford, M. S. (1998). Sex stereotyping in the executive suite: “Much ado about something.” *Journal of Social Behavior and Personality*, 13, 127–138.
- Morrison, A. M., White, R. P., & Van Velsor, E. (1987). *Breaking the glass ceiling*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Nieva, V. F., & Gutek, B. A. (1980). Sex effects on evaluation. *Academy of Management Review*, 5, 267–276.
- Olian, J. D., Schwab, D. P., & Haberfeld, Y. (1988). The impact of applicant gender compared to qualifications on hiring recommendations: A meta-analysis of experimental studies. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 41, 180–195.
- Porter, N., & Geis, F. L. (1981). Women and nonverbal leadership cues: When seeing is not believing. In C. Mayo and N. Henley (Eds.), *Gender and nonverbal behavior* (pp. 39–61). New York: Springer Verlag.
- Powell, G. N., & Butterfield, D. A. (1989). The “good manager”: Does androgyny fare better in the 1980's? *Group and Organizational Studies*, 14, 216–233.
- Rudman, L. A. (1998). Self-promotion as a risk factor for women: The costs and benefits of counter-stereotypical impression management. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 74, 629–645.
- Schein, V. E. (1973). The relationship between sex-role stereotypes and requisite management characteristics. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 57, 95–100.
- Stumpf, S. A., & London, M. (1981). Management promotions: Individual and organizational factors influencing the decision process. *Academy of Management Review*, 6, 539–549.
- Taylor, S. E., Fiske, S. T., Etcoff, N. L., & Ruderman, A. J. (1978). Categorical bases of person memory and stereotyping. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 36, 778–793.
- Terborg, J. R. (1977). Women in management: A research review. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 62, 647–664.
- Tosi, H. L., & Einbinder, S. W. (1985). The effects of the type and amount of information in sex discrimination research: A meta-analysis. *Academy of Management Journal*, 28, 712–723.
- Weber, R., & Crocker, J. (1983). Cognitive processes in the revision of stereotypic beliefs. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 45, 961–977.

MADELINE E. HEILMAN is Professor of Psychology at New York University, where she is the coordinator of the industrial/organizational psychology program. After receiving her PhD in social psychology from Columbia University in 1972, she spent 8 years as a member of the faculty at Yale University's School of Organization and Management. Her areas of specialty are social and organizational psychology, and she has been on the editorial boards of *Journal of Applied*

Psychology, Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes, and *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*. Her research has focused on sex bias in work settings, the dynamics of stereotyping, and the unintended consequences of preferential selection processes.