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Why a woman's professional success is so often seen as luck

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Success is usually the result of a combination of luck and skills, but in general, observers tend to ignore the role of luck. That is, until they see a woman occupying a role that is cast as "masculine". Odessa S Hamilton writes that while men are seen as being instrumental in their own success, women are only seen as skilled in roles that are considered feminine. Otherwise, they are considered lucky.

Sex-role stereotypes are the rudiments of sex discrimination narratives, and are especially tenacious – that is, there exists a powerful tendency to maintain them (Heilman & Haynes, 2005). Historically, men have been thought to be more competent than women, which is a clear disadvantage to women seeking managerial, executive or male-dominated roles, despite information contradictory to stereotypes (Heilman & Guzzo, 1978). If a woman is successful, this unexpected outcome is explained by luck (Deaux & Emswiller, 1974) or other mutable, unstable causes.

In a [recent paper](#), Grace Lordan and I systematically reviewed 50 years of research and found evidence pointing to male success being largely attributed to skill, whereas female success was typically attributed to luck. Even when the role is sex-typed either masculine or feminine (such as an economist or a secretary), attributions of male success remain largely skill-based, and *men are seen as instrumental in their own success*. This is true also for females within feminine-cast roles, but sadly, it is not the case when women occupy a role that is sex-typed masculine. Then they are considered lucky!

The problem is that males become disproportionately rewarded for what is thought to be *skill*, without regard to the ease through which earlier successes may have been afforded. By contrast, women may be considered unworthy of their positions, or their success may be thought to be the exception and not the rule. This reduces the chances of equitable representation into roles that are male dominated. It can deter or limit access to females wanting to pursue these career paths and it can even prevent women from progressing into senior roles. It also doesn't help that a greater proportion of roles are actually type-casted masculine, leaving fewer options for women.

Overall, *observers* tend to ignore the existence of situational factors (factors whose cause is external to the person), with the belief that they are weighting exclusively on personal qualities. This reliance on dispositional attributions (qualities that are supposedly inherent to the person) for what may be, principally, situational effects creates a fallacy, since success is fundamentally a weighted by-product of both dispositional and situational factors. The evidence suggests that those with the power to admit, recruit and promote are prone to conflate luck with skill evaluations, and they, therefore, neglect the role of luck in appraisals of success, despite this identified underlying disparity. Ignoring the role of luck creates an atmosphere that systemically rewards privilege, while marginalising groups by their sociodemographic profile – even if this is not consciously invoked. It raises the question about whether those deemed the most talented in society are merely the luckiest.

The perception of success (and how it is attributed) is, therefore, a fundamental occupational concern and a crucial diversity and inclusion leverage point. There remains, nonetheless, a longstanding ambivalence and controversy around the extent by which sociodemographics affect judgements and decision-making ([Ruble et al., 1984](#); [Sohn, 1982](#); [Swim & Sanna, 1996](#)).

The locus of control paradigm

According to **Weiner's (1979)** Causal Attribution Model, the most salient determinants of success are ability, effort, task difficulty and luck, which can be analysed along three dimensions: stability, controllability and perceived *locus of control*.

The **perceived *locus of control* paradigm** is said to reflect the attribution of an event to oneself (internally) or the environment (externally; **Rotter, 1966; Spector, 1982**).

Ability and effort are conceptualised as internal, but task and luck as external.

Stability describes the temporal nature of a cause, whether enduring or fluctuating; ability and task are considered stable, whereas effort and luck are considered mutable. **Controllability** refers to the degree of volitional influence one has over a cause, where effort is perceived as controllable, in contrast to ability, task and luck.

Weiner's model offers a common-sense framework through which to quantitatively measure and report inter-individual differences in attributions. It also serves as a useful tool to make comparisons across studies that, otherwise, have vastly different designs.

Reward denied

The perception of the success of others and how it is attributed is a crucial leverage point for inclusion strategy and the diversification of human resources. Ignoring the role of luck creates an atmosphere that conceals and augments *privilege*, even if not deliberately or consciously invoked. Consequently, the narrativisation of luck contributes to the tenuous position that a sizable proportion of the workforce finds themselves in – being denied opportunities because they had a less auspicious situational path.

Controversy

Invariably, there is controversy around the subject, and it can develop a polarisation between genders that is not easy to unravel. The rhetoric of meritocracy and discounting the role of luck in success can be damaging to women specifically, or to those less successful, as it implies that they are inherently less talented, less intelligent or lack the necessary diligence and determination to succeed.

Conversely, no one wants to be told that they are not deserving of their success. Invoking luck in the case of male professional success verges on the implication that men, or the successful more broadly, have not earned their achievements, which can cultivate a sense of diminished agency and can conflict with self-interest.

So, it's not without its provocations, but we think we have to remember that it does not have to be a zero-sum game – balance or equity is possible. We can and should acknowledge a cumulative effect of both skill and luck.

False economy

How future performances between men and women ultimately regress to the mean is overlooked. Past performance may not be representative of what is yet to come, since new roles create novel situations. Therefore, banking exclusively on earlier success provides a false metric that can result in an unmerited gendered reward system.

Ignoring the role of luck creates an atmosphere that systemically rewards *privilege and* marginalises groups such as women – even if this is not consciously invoked. It raises the question about whether those deemed the most talented in society are merely the luckiest! The perception of success and, how it is attributed, is therefore a fundamental occupational concern, and a crucial diversity and inclusion leverage point.

The solution

While there is a general indication of change, we speculate in our paper that this may not be entirely a result of changed minds and reduced biases, but rather a concealment of practices that are no longer socially acceptable.

Remedies

1. Considerations of luck are not without provocations, but it does not have to be a zero-sum game; balance is possible by acknowledging a cumulative effect of luck and ability in success and failure.
2. A change in gender composition, with increasing shares of women in occupations that have historically been held by men, may develop into a decoupling of gender congruency, which could impact how success and failures are perceived.
3. The recruiting process should include multiple, demographically diverse decision-makers and each should be made accountable. These decision-makers should be called in reverse order of seniority to justify their selections, a tactic that helps avoid the dynamic where '*flowers follow the sun*'.
4. Instead of recruiting by historical success alone, decision-makers should judge by the potential to succeed in the role; setting role-based tasks in the recruitment

process and asking questions that invoke responses about what candidates would do, rather than what they have done.

5. Organisations should step toward consistent, achievable, and un-ambiguous performance criteria to safeguard their appraisal systems from the perpetuating marginalisation of women.
6. Building empathy between groups can moderate perceptual errors, so, decision-makers should be enlightened to the harmful implications of conflating luck with ability, with the systematic dissemination of evidence-based information on the unique burdens that women face in occupational settings that could bias evaluations.



Notes:

- This blog post is based on *Ability or luck: A systematic review of interpersonal attributions of success*, with Grace Lordan, in *Frontiers in Psychology* (2023).
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