

Women at Work: Pathways from Gender Stereotypes to Gender Bias and Discrimination

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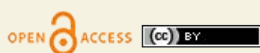
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Keywords

gender bias, gender stereotypes, gender norms, lack of fit model, workplace
discrimination

Abstract

Despite important advances, gender-based discrimination continues to hinder women's career progress. This review examines the role that gender stereotypes play in promoting gender bias and discrimination. After reviewing what is known about the content of gender stereotypes and examining both their descriptive and prescriptive aspects, we discuss two pathways through which stereotypes result in discrepant work outcomes for women and men. First, we consider how the characterization of women as communal but not agentic conflicts with the perceived demands of many male gender-typed jobs and fields, thus promoting perceptions of women's lack of competence in those areas. Second, we consider how norms about how women should and should not behave cause women to incur penalties when they exhibit counter-stereotypical attributes and behaviors at work. Our review further focuses on the conditions that foster or undercut gender bias and discrimination and uses this knowledge as a foundation for proposing strategies to promote more egalitarian organizational processes.

INTRODUCTION

Much has changed in the past 50 years regarding both the state of psychological research on gender bias and the state of women in the workplace. Five decades ago, research dedicated to uncovering the mechanisms underlying gender bias was only beginning to emerge, and women at the time made up only a small percentage of managerial positions. Since then, the research literature on gender discrimination has grown rapidly, with theoretical and empirical work in both organizational psychology and organizational behavior enhancing our understanding of the processes and conditions that promote gender bias in the workplace. Moreover, women have achieved success in roles and positions that earlier had been unattainable for them. They now lead major companies, such as CVS, Citigroup, UPS, Fidelity Investments, and General Motors; have become presidents of leading academic institutions such as Harvard, Columbia, Cornell, Oxford, Cambridge, and McGill; and are heads of state or government in 31 countries (UN Women 2023). However, despite these important advances, gender-based discrimination in the workplace persists and continues to hinder women's work opportunities and career progress. Women remain less likely than similarly qualified men to obtain jobs with higher social and monetary rewards (Galos & Coppock 2023) and to gain access to positions of power (Joshi et al. 2022). They also earn less than men for equivalent work (England et al. 2020), even after adjusting for education and preferences for full-time employment (Goldin 2014).

Despite its stubborn persistence, discrimination against women in the workplace is not ubiquitous nor is it inescapable. Decades of research show that a person's gender does not inevitably lead to discrimination, with research efforts pointing to the moderating conditions that both facilitate and mitigate disparate outcomes for equivalently performing men and women (Paustian-Underdahl et al. 2014). The scholarly progress made in the past five decades, alongside the persistent prevalence of gender discrimination in work settings, underscores a need to reflect on and organize our understanding of when gender discrimination is most (and least) likely to occur and why.

The goal of this review is twofold. First, we seek to shed light on how gender stereotypes give rise to gender bias, providing a theoretical context to better understand why gender discrimination occurs. Research suggests that gender stereotypes exert a powerful influence on the way that individuals process and react to information about men and women and are therefore fundamental to the gender bias process. Our review builds upon this idea, describing what gender stereotypes are and the different ways in which they can promote biased decision making. Although gender stereotypes can negatively affect men as well as women, our primary focus is on women and the obstacles they encounter when being evaluated in the workplace. Second, we seek to identify the conditions that foster or curb the occurrence of gender discrimination, dispelling the idea that women are discriminated against in all employment settings and that being a woman is always an impediment to career progress. By enhancing our understanding of the dynamics of gender bias and specifying the conditions that encourage or discourage it, we hope to provide practical help to organizations and policy makers in their efforts to prevent gender-based discrimination and promote more egalitarian organizational processes.

GENDER STEREOTYPES

Research on the effects of gender in employment settings has demonstrated pervasive bias against women striving to progress in their careers. This work has repeatedly illustrated the greater challenges experienced by women compared to men at all stages of career progression, including when they seek job-relevant training (Milkman et al. 2012), when they apply for organizational positions (Galos & Coppock 2023), and when their performance is evaluated for promotion

(Beckman & Phillips 2005), compensation (Joshi et al. 2015), or other organizational rewards (Klein et al. 2021). Gender bias in evaluations at each of these key points in career progression has been found to result in discriminatory actions that hinder women's advancement, with women being given less access, poorer performance evaluations, and fewer organizational rewards compared to equivalently qualified men.

Efforts to explain the biases that influence evaluation processes and unfairly create impediments to women's career progress have given rise to theories that identify gender stereotypes as playing a major role (Eagly & Karau 2002; Heilman 2001, 2012; Rudman 1998). Gender stereotypes are the widely shared conceptions about the attributes of men and women, and they include personality, cognitive, and physical attributes as well as attributes related to interests and abilities (Diekmann & Eagly 2000). They are thought to originate from the social roles that women and men have traditionally played in society—women as caregivers and men as breadwinners (Koenig & Eagly 2014). Importantly, gender stereotypes are both descriptive and prescriptive (Heilman 2001, 2012), meaning that they not only depict what women and men are like (descriptive) but also entail prescriptions about what women and men should be like (prescriptive). Both the descriptive and prescriptive aspects of gender stereotypes are central to the psychological processes that form the basis of gender bias and consequent gender discrimination, perpetuating the disparities in opportunity, pay, and status that continue to exist between women and men in the workplace.

The Content of Gender Stereotypes

Unpacking the content of gender stereotypes is key to understanding their effects. Much of the research in this area is built on the idea that gender stereotype content falls into two categories: agency and communion (Bakan 1966, Broverman et al. 1972). Agency, a set of attributes that is most strongly associated with men, encompasses task orientation and goal achievement. Communion, a set of attributes that is most strongly associated with women, encompasses kindness and concern for others. In short, men are thought to take charge and get things done, whereas women are thought to build relationships and be concerned about others. Accordingly, stereotypes about men depict them as bold, dominant, assertive, independent, self-confident, competitive, and ambitious (agentic), and stereotypes about women depict them as sociable, relationship oriented, helpful, sensitive, nurturing, affectionate, and sympathetic (communal). Gender stereotypes also depict men as lacking in communality and women as lacking in agency. This two-dimensional model of agency and communality as representative of masculine and feminine attributes has been widely used and validated, with indication that it generalizes well across cultures (Abele et al. 2008). Consequently, it continues to ground most examinations of gender stereotypes and their consequences.

Facets of agency and communality. In recent years, researchers have started to move toward a more nuanced understanding of agency and communality, dividing each of them into multiple components to sharpen our understanding of which attributes are associated more with one gender than with the other. For example, agency has been separated into competence and assertiveness (Abele et al. 2016), and competence has been further broken down into an ability-related component (e.g., capable, smart, accomplished) and an instrumental component involving the actual conduct of work (e.g., effective, productive, reliable) (Hentschel et al. 2019). The focus on brilliance as a feature of men more than women (Storage et al. 2020) also is relevant to the separating out of competence from other agentic attributes. The agency construct has additionally been subdivided into self-reliance and dominance (Schaumberg & Flynn 2017), and, more recently, Ma et al. (2022) proposed an even more granular schema of agency, creating a six-factor measure consisting of competent, ambitious, dominant, diligent, independent, and self-assured agency.

There has also been variation in how the communality construct has been operationalized. Abele et al. (2016) divided communality into two separate facets, adding morality attributes to more traditional warmth attributes, with traits such as moral, honest, ethical, and loyal forming this additional facet of communality. Additionally, Hentschel et al. (2019) found evidence for separating communality into the subdimensions of concern for others, sociability, and emotional sensitivity.

Breaking down the facets of agency and communality has shown promise in determining the consequences of gender stereotypes and in chronicling their stickiness over time. However, the precise typology of agency and communality components is still evolving, and most current gender research continues to treat agency and communality as the key defining features of gender stereotypes.

Beyond agency and communality. Although often used as proxies for masculinity and femininity, agency and communality do not cover the totality of gender stereotype content. Whether taken as a whole or broken down into components, agency and communion both tend to be positively valenced and socially desirable. However, gender stereotypes also encompass negative traits such as being arrogant, aggressive, egotistical, and controlling for men and being passive, insecure, compliant, and impressionable for women (Prentice & Carranza 2002, Spence et al. 1979); this is a fact that is often overlooked and can have important implications for understanding gender bias and discrimination in work settings. We return to this issue when we explore bias originating from the prescriptive dimension of gender stereotypes.

Have Gender Stereotypes Changed?

If gender stereotypes stem from the skewed distribution of women and men into social roles, then advances toward gender equality in workforce participation and the easing of the rigid representation of women and men in long-established gender roles should be accompanied by a change in stereotypic beliefs. Yet, gender stereotypic beliefs have changed less than societal changes would suggest. Perhaps this is because movement toward gender equality in workforce participation and the easing of the representation of men and women into traditional social roles are far from complete.

On the one hand, there are more women participating in the workforce than ever before: Women now comprise 40% of the paid workforce worldwide (World Bank 2022). Moreover, women have increasingly pursued traditionally male careers, and there are greater numbers of women in roles of power and authority than in the past. For example, women today hold 40% of management positions in the United States (US Bur. Labor Stat. 2022). In addition, the average number of hours fathers spend on childcare per week has increased from 2.5 to 8 hours in the last 40 years, and a majority of present-day fathers perceive parenting as extremely important to their identity (Pew Res. Cent. 2019). Thus, societal roles for both men and women have clearly become less rigid.

On the other hand, however, job segregation persists. Women are still concentrated in occupations considered to be female in gender type, with elementary and middle school teacher, registered nurse, and secretary and administrative assistant accounting for the three most common occupations for women in the United States (US Dep. Labor 2021). Moreover, although men's home and family responsibilities have increased, women continue to perform a disproportionate amount of domestic work and have greater childcare responsibilities, even within couples where both spouses earn roughly the same amount of money (Pew Res. Cent. 2023). Furthermore, women remain dramatically underrepresented in positions of power. Despite marked increases in the proportion of female middle managers, high-level leadership continues to be male dominated,

with women occupying less than a third of corporate boards and 10% of CEO positions in the S&P 500 (Catalyst 2022, 2023).

Thus, although there is reason to expect traditional gender stereotypes to have dissipated over time, there is also reason to expect them to have persisted. Research findings do not provide a definitive resolution of this issue. While some studies have found that managers perceive women less stereotypically than in the past (Duehr & Bono 2006), other investigations have found gender stereotypes to have changed little over time (Hentschel et al. 2019). Two recent studies, each using different methodologies, are particularly instructive. A study replicating work done more than 30 years ago by Deaux & Lewis (1983) found minimal change in the content of gender stereotypes, with men and women still being described very differently from one another and in line with traditional gender stereotypic conceptions (Haines et al. 2016). In another study using public opinion polls in the United States from 1946 to 2018, Eagly et al. (2020) found an increase in the degree to which communion is ascribed to women relative to men, and, although differential competence ascriptions have dissipated, they found little change in the degree to which agency is ascribed to men relative to women.

There are many possible explanations for these conflicting research results, including different participant populations, contexts, research strategies, and measurement techniques; but there is little question that despite dramatic societal changes, men and women continue to be viewed differently. The United Nations' most recent human development report on gender equality makes this point clearly: Nearly half of the world's men and women think that men make better political leaders, and more than 40% believe that men make better business executives (UNDP 2020). In short, stereotypical perceptions of men and women—how they are and how they should be—continue to differ.

FROM STEREOTYPES TO BIAS AND DISCRIMINATION

Gender stereotypes have both descriptive and prescriptive properties. Although drawn from the same content, descriptive and prescriptive gender stereotypes bring about bias and discrimination in distinctive ways—descriptive gender stereotypes by promoting negative expectations about women's performance, and prescriptive gender stereotypes by eliciting penalties for norm violation. In the following sections, we consider how these two forms of gender stereotypes give rise to bias and discrimination in the workplace, undermining women's career prospects through distinct pathways (see **Figure 1**). We also present the conditions that heighten or reduce the likelihood of gender bias in each case, and we end by providing evidence-based recommendations for the prevention of gender discrimination.

BIAS AND DISCRIMINATION ORIGINATING FROM DESCRIPTIVE GENDER STEREOTYPES

Several theoretical frameworks, including the lack of fit model (Heilman 1983) and role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau 2002), suggest that gender bias emerges from a perceived mismatch between stereotypes about women and the requirements of jobs and fields considered to be male in gender type. In short, the communal characteristics typically ascribed to women are incongruent with the ways in which traditionally masculine jobs and fields are defined and the agentic attributes and behaviors that are deemed necessary to succeed in them. As a result, people believe that women are ill-equipped for success in those areas, thus fueling negative expectations about their performance.

Once in place, stereotype-based performance expectations are tenacious and likely to persist, biasing perceptions through distorted information processing. Specifically, research suggests that

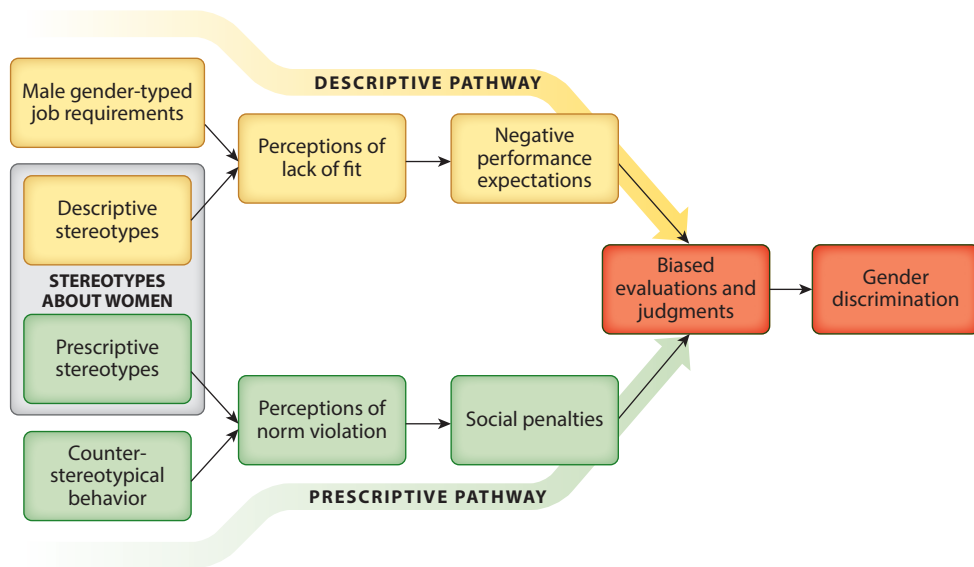


Figure 1

Pathways from stereotypes about women to gender bias and discrimination.

stereotype-based expectations influence the kinds of information that evaluators attend to (Favero & Ilgen 1989) and remember (Bailey et al. 2022) as well as how they interpret that information (Kunda et al. 1997). Because information processing is central to a range of organizational practices, the biases that emerge have far-reaching implications. Specifically, these biases translate to assumptions of incompetence that promote discrepant evaluations of men and women in recruitment (Gaucher et al. 2011), selection (Madera et al. 2009), and performance appraisal (Heilman et al. 2019) and that differentially affect decisions about promotion (Lyness & Heilman 2006) and compensation (Moss-Racusin et al. 2012). In each of these instances, the persistent inclination to confirm stereotype-based expectations based on perceptions of women's fit with work demands is the driving force behind biased evaluations and discriminatory behavior (see the descriptive pathway in **Figure 1**).

However, descriptive stereotypes do not always lead to gender bias and discrimination. In discussing the conditions that regulate when descriptive stereotypes do and do not have negative consequences for women, we rely on the lack of fit model. We begin by reviewing the two factors that, in combination, contribute to the formation of lack of fit perceptions and negative performance expectations about a woman's likely success. Specifically, we focus on conditions that influence the use of stereotypes in the characterization of women and on conditions that influence whether a particular job is believed to be male in gender type. We then consider the role of ambiguity in regulating the impact of stereotype-based negative performance expectations in evaluative situations. In doing so, we review research showing the consequences of variations in each of these factors on gender bias and discriminatory behavior.

Conditions That Influence the Use of Gender Stereotypes

As discussed, descriptive gender stereotypes promote negative expectations about women's competence in male gender-typed work because they imbue women with attributes that are deemed antithetical to success. It is when women are perceived as feminine and therefore lacking "the right

stuff” that they are expected to be ill-equipped to succeed in male gender-typed work contexts. Accordingly, research suggests that conditions that increase reliance on gender stereotypes also increase gender bias and discrimination.

Personal qualities. Several personal qualities have been found to heighten the extent to which women are viewed as stereotypically feminine. Because they are associated with ideal notions of femininity, motherhood status and physical attractiveness are two qualities that amplify perceptions of women as more feminine and less masculine. These perceptions ultimately give way to incompetence perceptions that provide the bridge to biased evaluation and discriminatory behavior. Heilman & Okimoto (2008), for example, found female job applicants who were parents to be viewed as less agentic than female job applicants who were not parents—an impression that went on to mediate perceptions of their competence. Similar results have been found with variations in physical attractiveness. In documenting the “beauty is beastly” effect (Heilman & Stopeck 1985), researchers have found that physically attractive women tend to be seen as less qualified for traditionally male positions and are viewed as less competent than not only their male counterparts but also their less attractive female counterparts (Paustian-Underdahl & Walker 2016).

Numerical scarcity. Structural characteristics can also raise the salience of a woman’s femininity. In contexts where the presence of women is rare and unusual, they are more likely to stand out as distinctive than in more heterogeneous gender environments, thus amplifying their female identity and promoting the use of stereotypes. In addition, marked underrepresentation does not expose others to the natural variation in women that, when evident, undercuts the view of women as a uniform group with a fixed set of attributes. Accordingly, it has been found that solo status (e.g., being a “token”) results in more stereotypical characterizations of women and, as a result, a reduced likelihood of selection (Heilman & Blader 2001) and promotion (Sackett et al. 1991).

Informational quality. People are limited in their capacity to deal with the rich and complex social environment that confronts them and therefore take shortcuts in assessing people rather than adopting strategies that are slower but more likely to promote accuracy (Fiske & Taylor 1991). Using stereotypes is one such shortcut, and because gender is so readily observable, gender stereotypes provide a quick and easy way to simplify the person perception process, often without the awareness of the perceiver. Scholars of gender bias have identified informational quality as an important factor that facilitates the use of gender stereotypes in forming impressions of women (Heilman & Haynes 2008). For instance, respondents tend to evaluate women less favorably than men when information about the target of evaluation is lacking (Koch et al. 2015). This effect has been found in various organizational contexts, such as during early stages of the evaluation process when information may be more limited in scope (Botelho & Abraham 2017) or when stakeholders lack proximity, or access to individualized information, about top female leaders (Joshi et al. 2022). Relevance of information is important, too; gender-discrepant outcomes have been shown to emerge when evaluation information lacks job relevance or is not diagnostic of success (Koch et al. 2015). Evidently, the necessity to fill in the blanks created by a dearth of information promotes the stereotype-driven bias that is key to gender discrimination.

Conditions That Determine Whether the Job or Field Is Gendered

The second factor in the lack of fit formulation concerns the degree to which a given job or field is thought to be male in gender type. Because stereotypes about women are incongruent with contexts that are thought to necessitate masculine qualities, it is in male gender-typed fields, rather

than in gender-neutral or female gender-typed fields, that women are evaluated more negatively than men. Indeed, negative evaluations of women emerge in a range of male gender-typed contexts, such as upper-level management (Lyness & Heilman 2006); the military (Pazy & Oron 2001); science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM; Moss-Racusin et al. 2012); and entrepreneurship (Kanze et al. 2020). This disparity in evaluation is particularly problematic because so many prestigious and well-remunerated work positions are deemed to be masculine.

The gendering of work contexts can occur because of the nature of perceived work demands and because of the skewed numerical representation of men relative to women within jobs and fields.

Perceived work demands. Certain work domains have been traditionally associated with stereotypically masculine behaviors and continue to be thought to require masculine attributes for success even when it may no longer be warranted. For example, despite changes in conceptions of effective leadership, leadership roles are still characterized in masculine and agentic terms, albeit less so than in the past (Koenig et al. 2011). Indeed, there is evidence that the overlap between perceptions of managers and stereotypically masculine characteristics—what is known as the think manager–think male effect (Schein 1973)—has persisted for over 50 years (Heilman & Manzi 2022). Similarly, Carli et al. (2016) demonstrated a continued overlap between perceptions of scientists and stereotypes about men. Consistent with the lack of fit model, women are seen as a poorer fit in those jobs that are characterized as more masculine, and this is where discrepancies in the evaluation of men and women are most pronounced (Gorman 2005).

Conceptions of a job's masculinity not only are the product of a shared cultural understanding but also become reinforced in the ways that jobs are described and the criteria on which individuals in those jobs are evaluated. Because job descriptions influence perceptions of a job's demands, they are likely to directly affect assessments of person–job fit and ensuing performance expectations, all to the detriment of women in male gender-typed jobs. Consistent with this idea, research has demonstrated that women are viewed as less suited than men for jobs with advertisements containing highly masculine wording (Gaucher et al. 2011), and that organizations with a higher degree of stereotypically masculine selection criteria tend to have a lower proportion of women as new hires (Gorman 2005).

The overall gendering of an industry or field is often the key factor in determining whether a particular job is gender-typed. For example, leadership positions in the educational field are viewed as less masculine than similar positions in the justice field (Koenig et al. 2011). However, in some instances the job itself is the determining factor. Even when an industry is strongly male in gender type, the characterization of a specific job may not be highly masculine if it has a clearly communal focus (e.g., HR in an engineering company, pediatrics in the medical profession) or is thought to primarily entail stereotypically feminine activities (e.g., public relations, communications).

Numerical representation of women versus men. There are jobs and fields in which women have been historically underrepresented and which, independently from the perceived task requirements associated with them, are seen as masculine. Positions in these fields have come to be associated with men because of who is known to populate them. This has consequences for women seeking career paths in male-dominated fields: Occupations that are numerically dominated by men are those in which women are evaluated more negatively (Koch et al. 2015).

Although numerical gender representation is conceptually distinct from perceptions of job demands in a field or occupation, the two are often intertwined. Occupations in which men are numerically overrepresented have typically been found to be described in more agentic terms than occupations in which women are numerically overrepresented (Cejka & Eagly 1999). This is also the case within STEM: Those fields in which women are the most numerically

underrepresented (e.g., computer science, engineering) tend to be more strongly associated with masculine attributes than those in which women and men are more evenly represented (e.g., biological sciences, chemistry; Cheryan et al. 2017).

Ambiguity as a Determinant of the Impact of Lack of Fit Perceptions

Once lack of fit perceptions and consequent performance expectations are formed, ambiguity in the evaluative context can affect the extent to which they are used. Because ambiguity provides ample room for interpretation, it affects the likelihood that stereotype-based expectations will dominate when evaluations are made. This issue is particularly relevant when evaluative criteria are unspecific and subjective or when there is a lack of clarity about how to interpret information either because of its vagueness or because of attributional uncertainty.

Ambiguity in performance criteria. Research has demonstrated that subjective criteria, such as interpersonal and communication competence, are less reliable than objective criteria, such as productivity and work quality (Viswesvaran et al. 1996). Evaluative criteria that are subjective, abstract, and vague allow decision makers to rely on their biases. Consistent with this idea, women are more underrepresented in jobs that rely on subjective rather than objective performance measures (Jirjahn & Stephan 2004). Unfortunately, the criteria used in decisions affecting upper-level organizational positions, where women are particularly underrepresented, are often vague and nonspecific. Because there are few quantifiable measures of success for such positions, judgments frequently rest on ambiguous personality characteristics such as being “charismatic,” “courageous,” “forward-thinking,” and “resilient.” This ambiguity provides opportunity for the cognitive distortion that is emblematic of bias to translate negative expectations into gender discriminatory outcomes, with women seen as less qualified for such positions and less successful in their accomplishments even when their credentials and their achievements are of equal quality to those of men (Heilman & Haynes 2008).

Ambiguity in how to weight and integrate information. Ambiguity also can present itself when evaluators are faced with multiple pieces of performance information about the individuals they evaluate. In some cases, a lack of clarity exists regarding which information to use and how much weight to apply to each piece of information, leaving room to adjust evaluations and decisions in line with stereotype-based expectations. Such ambiguity is especially apparent in situations where conflicting pieces of performance information exist about a given individual. Several studies demonstrate that people are prone to adjust the weights that they apply to different criteria in order to justify the biased evaluation decisions they make about women and men (Uhlmann & Cohen 2005), with some even showing that people base their decisions about women, but not men, on those dimensions on which they are rated as relatively weak (Moscatelli et al. 2020). Similarly, Heilman et al. (2019) found that changes in performance over time presented an opportunity for individuals to update their impressions of men and women in line with stereotype-based expectations. In a male gender-typed context, respondents were more likely to downwardly revise their impressions of women than of men whose performance had declined and less likely to upwardly revise their impressions of women than of men whose performance had improved. In short, a lack of clarity in performance evaluation guidelines allows flexibility in how criteria are selected, weighted, and integrated, thereby enabling the evaluator to direct their ratings in line with their preconceptions.

Source ambiguity. When individuals collaborate, there may be a lack of clarity about which team member is most responsible for a team’s successes or failures—a type of ambiguity that allows stereotype-based expectations to influence attributions of responsibility. Heilman &

Haynes (2005) found that when a team was successful, female team members were not given as much credit for the success as male team members and were viewed as less competent. Other work has replicated this effect, finding that women in economics, relative to men, receive less credit for coauthored papers but not solo-authored papers (Sarsons 2017), and that women in research teams across scientific fields and at all career stages are significantly less likely than men to be recognized for their scientific contributions or credited with the authorship of research articles (Ross et al. 2022). Evidence also suggests that women receive more blame for team failures than male team members (Haynes & Lawrence 2012).

Implications for Practice: Strategies for Deterring the Negative Effects of Descriptive Gender Stereotypes

As we have claimed above, discriminatory behavior toward women is neither ubiquitous nor inescapable. Several factors influence not only the development of negative stereotype-based expectations about women but also whether these expectations go on to distort evaluations and decisions about women. The research we reviewed in the previous section can be used to inform strategies to curb the occurrence of gender bias and the incidence of gender discrimination that result from descriptive gender stereotypes (Heilman & Caleo 2018). **Figure 2** presents a summary of recommendations for organizations.

Reducing the use of stereotypes. Research has long made clear that having individual women siloed within male-dominated work settings can have negative consequences for how they are evaluated by others (Kanter 1977). This research has implications for how to deploy women who are hired within an organization. The tendency to spread them throughout the company so they are represented more broadly may not be the best strategy for alleviating stereotype-based bias and discrimination. Grouping them may be far more effective, for it is when confronted with multiple women, all different from one another, that the notion of them all belonging to a single “female”

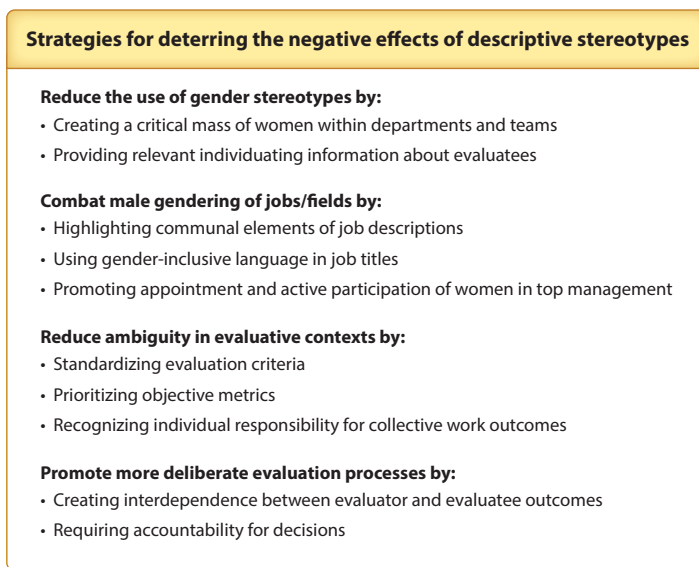


Figure 2

Implications for practice: strategies for deterring the negative effects of descriptive stereotypes.

category does not hold up. Under those conditions, gender stereotypes no longer provide a quick fix for impression formation (Heilman & Blader 2001).

Combating the male gendering of jobs and fields. Below we describe how perceptions of jobs and fields as male gender-typed can be attenuated by altering the descriptions of those jobs and increasing the number of women in them.

Altering job descriptions. Research suggests that job advertisements and descriptions often are gendered, with evidence pointing to the presence of predominantly masculine and agentic language in advertisements of male gender-typed occupations (Gaucher et al. 2011). With this in mind, several studies suggest that gender bias can be tempered by altering the language that appears in job descriptions. For instance, highlighting communal behaviors (e.g., collaboration, teamwork) can boost the perceived ability of women in a male gender-typed occupation (Danbold & Bendersky 2020). Because most jobs have components that embody both communal and agentic elements, configuring job descriptions and advertisements to balance these features provides a way to undercut the masculine gendering of jobs that promotes bias and discrimination against women.

These implications apply to job titles as well. Research on masculine generics points to the use of masculine nouns and pronouns to generically define a job—a practice that is more prevalent in, but not restricted to, languages that rely on grammatical gender forms (Sczesny et al. 2016). It has been found that the use of generic masculine forms amplifies perceptions of women’s lack of fit in managerial positions, and that introducing gender-fair forms can reduce gender bias (Horvath & Sczesny 2016). Similarly, in the United States, Bailey et al. (2022) found that replacing a male-centered job title (“master”) with a more gender-inclusive one (“head”) resulted in the mitigation of biases that favored men in the role. Evidence supports the notion that gendered job titles convey information about who is best suited for these jobs, and the removal of such gendered cues seems a minor adjustment than can have a decisive effect on bias and discriminatory behavior.

Altering numerical representation. A more balanced representation of women and men in work settings will go a long way toward altering the perception that a job is male gender-typed and women are ill-equipped for it. For example, appointing more women to top management positions is associated with shifts in organizational language regarding women and agency (Lawson et al. 2022). However, a word of caution is warranted. Simply having women in positions of power does not guarantee that stereotypes will be eliminated; in fact, people may be more likely to attribute a failure on the part of a female leader to women as a whole (Manzi & Heilman 2021). Furthermore, research suggests that it is not only the presence of women in these jobs but also the perception of how they got there that affect views of the work setting (e.g., Nater et al. 2023). If there is a perception that women have been hired or advanced because of their gender rather than their qualifications, their presence is not taken to be particularly informative about what the setting is like. To challenge male gender-typing, it is necessary for women to be seen as full contributors to the work enterprise, not just obligatory position holders.

Reducing ambiguity in the evaluation context. By reducing the degree to which ambiguity occurs in evaluative contexts, organizations can discourage evaluators from relying on lack of fit perceptions and the negative expectations they produce. For example, increasing objectivity by creating specific standards and, when possible, using concrete measures of effectiveness will impede expectation-based bias in decision making. It is more difficult to distort concrete objective information, such as sales made or dollar earnings, than to distort vague and subjective outcomes, such as being an inspiring boss or a good team player. Similarly, it is more difficult to distort information about people’s past work experience than to distort judgments of their personality.

Furthermore, to hold stereotype-based expectations at bay, it is critical to keep evaluation criteria uniform by creating a predetermined set of criteria that is applied for everyone. These criteria should be specific and clear, enabling comparisons across applicants for selection decisions and performance assessments. Their weighting also should be specified. A structured evaluation process ensures that the same features are assessed for everyone and that these features are given equal weight in the evaluation process no matter who the target is. Finally, to undercut the source ambiguity that allows gender stereotypes to determine views of women working jointly with others, it is necessary to develop mechanisms for distinguishing individual performance in a group setting. This can be accomplished through work allocation strategies and/or evaluation processes that individuate group members' contributions (Heilman & Haynes 2005).

Promoting a more deliberative evaluation process. Even when stereotype-based negative performance expectations are strong, evaluators will rely on them less when they are motivated to make accurate judgments. Rather than going on automatic and expending as little of their cognitive resources as possible, people will be more systematic in their information processing when they are motivated to be accurate. There are several factors that can boost the motivation to be accurate.

Creating interdependence. When a decision maker's outcomes are tied to the performance of the person being evaluated, the decision maker is apt to be highly motivated to be accurate (Clark & Wegener 2008). In these instances, evaluators are eager to learn about the target's strengths and weaknesses and to assess the target's potential to succeed. Because selecting the best person or advancing the right job candidate has direct implications for their well-being, they are more likely to make a careful assessment of individual qualities and skills. Thus, creating situations in which evaluators have a stake in the outcomes of their decisions is a good way to cut through the lazy reliance on stereotype-based expectations.

Requiring accountability. Another condition under which evaluators are motivated to be accurate is when they are held accountable for the decisions they make. If decision makers are asked to justify their decisions to supervisors or colleagues, they are likely to want to appear competent (Scholten et al. 2007). Having to justify one's decisions requires deeper and more complex processing (Tetlock 1983) than simple reliance on stereotype-based expectations. There is evidence that accountability leads to greater attentiveness when observing performance and more extensive note-taking when gathering information, ultimately resulting in more accurate judgments (Mero et al. 2003). It is therefore not surprising that introducing accountability into organizations has been found to reduce the presence of pay inequities between women and men (Castilla 2015).

BIAS AND DISCRIMINATION ORIGINATING FROM PRESCRIPTIVE GENDER STEREOTYPES

Gender stereotypes designate not only what women and men are like but also which traits and behaviors are suitable for each. Functioning as injunctive social norms, prescriptive gender stereotypes delineate the ways in which women and men should and should not behave (Eagly & Karau 2002, Heilman 2001, Prentice & Carranza 2002, Rudman & Glick 2001). Specifically, those traits and behaviors that are considered to be characteristic of each gender also tend to be prescribed, with women expected to exhibit stereotypically feminine behaviors ("shoulds") and to refrain from stereotypically masculine behaviors ("should nots"). Conversely, men are expected to exhibit stereotypically masculine behaviors and to refrain from stereotypically feminine behaviors.

Although the content of prescriptive gender stereotypes largely overlaps with the content of descriptive gender stereotypes, their path to gender bias and discrimination differs. Like other

injunctive social norms, prescriptive gender stereotypes tend to result in social disapproval and sanctions when violated (Cialdini & Trost 1998, Eagly & Karau 2002). Negative reactions to the “should not” tend to be greatest when people engage in behaviors or exhibit attributes that embody the negatively valenced aspect of the stereotype describing the opposite gender. That is, women who engage in behaviors that represent the negative aspects of the masculine stereotype (e.g., being aggressive, arrogant, or egotistical) and men who engage in behaviors that represent the negative aspects of the feminine stereotype (e.g., being passive, compliant, or insecure) are most likely to be detrimentally affected by their normative violation (Prentice & Carranza 2002). Similarly, penalties for failing to enact the “shoulds” tend to be harshest for attributes that embody the most positively valenced aspect of the stereotype of one’s own gender (e.g., women failing to be kind and men failing to be assertive). However, it is not only these extreme normative violations that induce negativity; any behavior that is counter-stereotypical can provoke disapproval and incur negative reactions.

Research focused on women in the workplace has repeatedly shown that women encounter backlash and are penalized when they violate prescriptive stereotypes (Heilman et al. 2004, Rudman & Glick 2001). Specifically, women are disliked and personally derogated both when they enact their “should not” by engaging in stereotypically masculine behaviors and when they fail to enact their “shoulds” by not engaging in stereotypically feminine behaviors. These social penalties for women’s counter-stereotypical behavior in turn result in deleterious outcomes for women in the workplace, including lower chances of recruitment (Quadlin 2018), less favorable negotiation outcomes (Amanatullah & Morris 2010), diminished influence (Carli 2001), lesser access to social networks (Casciaro & Lobo 2005), and worse salary recommendations (Heilman et al. 2004; see the prescriptive pathway in **Figure 1**). Below, we summarize research demonstrating the occurrence of negative outcomes for women who behave counter-stereotypically in the workplace either by engaging in the “should not” or by failing to engage in the “shoulds.” In addition, we describe how women are penalized simply for being successful in gender-incongruent domains.

Engaging in “Should Not”

Research has identified many stereotypically masculine behaviors that are thought to be off-limits for women. Among these are dominance, insensitivity, ambition, assertiveness, and emotional displays of anger and pride.

Dominance. Displaying behaviors that signal dominance can be detrimental for women, even when they hold positions of power. In fact, there is evidence that it is the dominance component of agency that is most responsible for penalties against agentic women (Ma et al. 2022). Despite being perceived as competent, women who overtly seek to influence others through direct demands or by arguing for a particular point of view are disliked and, as a result, deemed less hireable and promotable than similarly behaving men (Ma et al. 2022, Williams & Tiedens 2016). These penalties are also apparent in performance reviews, with women more likely than men to be described as too aggressive and less likely than men to be rewarded for taking charge (Correll et al. 2020). Female leaders are also evaluated more negatively than male leaders when they adopt more autocratic, directive, or top-down leadership styles (Eagly et al. 1992). Indeed, dominance proscriptions for women are so powerful that displaying dominant behavior can lead to strong emotional reactions such as contempt and disdain, which, in turn, decrease support for female leaders (Brescoll et al. 2018).

Insensitivity. Research has found that women are penalized to a greater degree than men for being impolite or disrespecting others. Although women face higher levels of incivility than men in the workplace (Cortina 2008), they are punished more harshly for displaying incivility (Chen-Xia

et al. 2022). While being disrespectful, impolite, or inconsiderate toward subordinates is viewed negatively for both female and male leaders, the same insensitive behaviors are viewed as more unacceptable and lead to more negative performance ratings for women than for men (Caleo 2016). This also is true for more extreme negative workplace behaviors. For example, abusive supervision (i.e., hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors directed at subordinates) is associated with lower effectiveness evaluations for women than for men (Kim et al. 2022). Similarly, women who signal clear disregard for the feelings of others by cheating or stealing receive more severe punishment than men (Mai et al. 2020). Interestingly, making amends for insensitive behavior may also be more difficult for women than for men; although apologies for being insensitive in the workplace are expected more from women than from men, women's apologies are less effective (Walfisch et al. 2013).

Ambition. Although crucial for career advancement, signaling ambition by actively seeking out a promotion or vying for a leadership position often leads to penalties for women. Whether real or perceived, power-seeking intentions have been shown to negatively affect evaluations of women but not of men (Okimoto & Brescoll 2010, Toneva et al. 2020). For example, in research tracking voter attitudes toward presidential candidates, women who decided to run for office were seen as less warm and likeable than their male counterparts and, as a result, were less likely to receive voters' support (Bauer et al. 2022). Women also face penalties when initiating negotiations to improve their salaries. Specifically, evaluators express less interest in working with women (versus men) who negotiate for higher pay and are less likely to hire them (Bowles et al. 2007).

Assertiveness. Assertive behavior can also lead to social penalties for women, especially when it is construed as aggressive, arrogant, or overly confident. For example, women who assert their opinion (Brescoll 2011) or use a direct style of communication (Carli et al. 1995) are more disliked and rated more negatively than women who withhold their opinions or use a more tentative communication style. Moreover, despite its importance for career advancement, self-promotion does not always bring positive outcomes for women. Although highlighting accomplishments enhances perceptions of competence for both women and men, only women are penalized for engaging in this behavior; they are seen as socially unappealing and less hireable than self-promoting men (Rudman 1998). Being seen as overly confident in one's abilities can be especially detrimental for women: Female leaders who rate themselves more positively than their subordinates or peers receive more negative performance evaluations and are seen as more likely to derail their careers (Braddy et al. 2020). These penalties for assertiveness confirm that what is an effective impression management strategy for men can be disadvantageous for women.

Anger and pride. How emotion is expressed can be important in the workplace, and some emotions, such as anger and pride, are more associated with status and corporate success than others (Ragins & Winkel 2011). Although women are often thought to be more emotional than men (Eagly et al. 2020), status-relevant emotions are associated more with men than with women (Plant et al. 2000), and when women exhibit them, they elicit negative reactions (Ragins & Winkel 2011). For example, displaying anger after an emotion-provoking workplace event (e.g., being passed over for a promotion) is deemed less appropriate for women than for men (Hutson-Comeaux & Kelly 2002). Women who express anger are also conferred less status than men, and their anger is more likely to be seen as a stable personality characteristic rather than a situational reaction (Brescoll & Uhlmann 2008). Expressing pride can also elicit unfavorable reactions toward women. Although pride leads to similar perceptions of agency for women and men, proud women are seen as more pushy, egotistic, self-serving, and aggressive (Brosi et al. 2016).

Not Engaging in “Shoulds”

Not only has research documented penalties for women who actively engage in stereotypically masculine behaviors (“should not”), but it also has highlighted penalties for women who fail to engage in stereotypically feminine behaviors (“shoulds”).

Care and altruism. Women are supposed to be people oriented and interested in taking care of others and are often penalized when they are not compassionate, sympathetic, or helpful. For example, research shows that not coming to the aid of a struggling coworker is more detrimental to women’s than to men’s job outcomes, resulting in less favorable performance evaluations and reward recommendations. Interestingly, when they do engage in altruistic behaviors in the workplace, women are not rewarded, whereas men are (Heilman & Chen 2005), and organizational citizenship behaviors have been found to generally benefit the salaries and promotions of women less than those of men (Allen 2006). It appears that going over and above job requirements to fulfill stereotype-based expectations accrues few benefits for women, but failing to meet these caring norms can decidedly hurt their career prospects.

Agreeableness. Although agreeable individuals are generally well-liked, being accommodating, collaborative, and attuned to others’ needs is strongly prescribed for women but not for men. This implies that women will be penalized more than men for failing to behave in an agreeable manner. Indeed, female employees who are rated low in agreeableness receive more negative performance evaluations from their supervisors than equally rated men (Nandkeolyar et al. 2022). Agreeableness expectations also affect women in leadership positions. Whereas female leaders need to be strong and sensitive to others’ needs to be deemed effective, male leaders only need to be strong (Johnson et al. 2008). Moreover, female supervisors who do not use a relational communication style when disciplining employees are evaluated more negatively than their male counterparts (Brett et al. 2005), and women who signal a lack of agreeableness by failing to be team players or collaborative in their work endeavors also incur social penalties that result in discrimination (Chen 2008).

Success and Assumptions of Prescriptive Stereotype Violation

So far, we have reviewed behaviors that produce negative consequences for women because they are a direct violation of prescriptive gender stereotypes. However, women can also be penalized for outcomes that simply imply that gender norms have been violated. That is, they can be punished for simply achieving success in traditionally male gender-typed fields and jobs. Such is the power of prescriptive gender stereotypes: Even when a woman’s competence has been unequivocally established by her success, inferences about the counter-stereotypical nature of the behaviors that led to her success can produce negative judgments. Women who make it in traditionally male roles and occupations incur the same sort of penalties incurred by women who directly violate gender norms (Heilman et al. 2004, Rudman & Glick 2001).

This idea is central to the “double bind” that women face in traditionally masculine work: If a woman’s accomplishments are irrefutable, her competence cannot be denied. In fact, in such situations women can be anointed as extraordinary and rated as even more competent than equivalently performing men (Rosette & Tost 2010). However, the acceptance of their competence puts women in jeopardy of yet another obstacle: The inferred violation of gender prescriptions can taint their evaluations and hinder their further career progress. For women in traditionally male jobs and occupations, the old proverb “damned if you do, damned if you don’t” still holds true.

The inferences made about women who succeed in traditionally male domains include assumptions not only that these women engaged in the masculine behaviors necessary to achieve success in male gender-typed positions but also that they are deficient in the communal attributes that

they are supposed to possess. Terms such as “dragon lady,” “iron maiden,” and “ice queen” exemplify these reactions. The landmark Ann Hopkins case [*Price Waterhouse v. Hopkins* (1989)], which was argued before the US Supreme Court, makes the consequences of these reactions to successful women clear: Hopkins’s bid for partnership at a major accounting firm was turned down even though she had garnered more billable hours than anyone else applying for partnership and had brought in business worth \$25 million. Instead of being made a partner, Hopkins was told she was “too macho” and that she “needed a course at charm school” (Fiske et al. 1991).

Penalties for success can be found throughout women’s careers. In an audit study, high-achieving women were called back less often for a STEM job than high-achieving men, and findings suggest that this was due to decision makers’ skepticism toward the personality of the high-achieving women (Quadlin 2018). These penalties appear to be strongest for women who succeed in positions of high status and power. In a study examining the evaluations of university professors, students rated high-status female professors less favorably than both low-status female professors and high-status male professors (Fisher et al. 2019). Moreover, when described as successful, female but not male leaders were described as bitter, quarrelsome, and selfish (Heilman et al. 1995). Penalties for success can ensue even when praise for women’s achievements comes from a third party. For example, although leadership endorsements of a newly appointed CEO should increase support and enthusiasm among stakeholders, endorsements that emphasize the competence of an incoming CEO are associated with more negative judgments and shorter post-appointment tenure when the CEO is a woman than when the CEO is a man (Dwivedi et al. 2021).

In sum, whereas men are celebrated and rewarded for their successes in male gender-typed contexts, women often are punished for them. Indeed, research has demonstrated that promotion becomes increasingly difficult for women as they achieve success and move up the organizational ladder (Lyness & Heilman 2006, Lyness & Judiesch 1999). Given these findings, it is hardly surprising that women often hide or downplay their success on masculine tasks, even when their perceptions of competence are at risk (Rudman & Fairchild 2004). Evidently, for women in male gender-typed occupations, success does not necessarily ensure further success.

Conditions That Regulate Penalties for Gender Norm Violation

Compared to the moderators identified for gender bias elicited by descriptive gender stereotypes, fewer moderators have been identified that regulate prescriptive stereotype-based gender bias. Moreover, unlike research on descriptive stereotypes, research on prescriptive stereotypes has focused on conditions that alleviate bias rather than exacerbate it. Research suggests two conditions that can dampen the negative effects of prescriptive stereotypes: replenishing the communality deficit attributed to women who behave in a counter-stereotypical manner, and thwarting internal attributions for the counter-stereotypical behavior.

Adding communality as a softener. Research suggests that women can avoid penalties for agentic behavior when their communal characteristics are highlighted. For example, when successful women signal their communality by leading in a democratic style, by being caring and sensitive toward others, or even by being or becoming mothers, they receive more positive evaluations and are deemed more likeable than successful female leaders for whom communal information is lacking (Heilman & Okimoto 2007, Rudman & Glick 2001). This research suggests that providing information about a woman’s communality can act as a deterrent to the hostile impressions often elicited by women who violate gender norms.

Curbing internal attributions. Engaging in counter-stereotypical behavior leads to penalties for women because the behavior is thought to be diagnostic of their general disposition and

preferences (Brescoll & Uhlmann 2008). In other words, people tend to make internal attributions for women's counter-stereotypical behavior. For example, if a woman strongly asserts her opinion, she is likely seen as an aggressive or excessively forceful person. Similarly, when a woman gains access to a leadership position, people often infer that she has been scheming and is overly ambitious. However, information that deters internal attributions can help to circumvent penalties arising from norm violation.

Research suggests that internal attributions can be averted in different ways. One way is by attributing counter-stereotypical behavior to circumstance. For example, women who succeed in traditionally masculine domains are less likely to be penalized if they arrived at their success unintentionally or by accident rather than through ambition and personal choice (Toneva et al. 2020). Another example is the mitigation of negative reactions to women who negotiate for salary when they place responsibility not on themselves, but rather on someone else's suggestion, for their decision to negotiate (Bowles & Babcock 2012). In each case, it is not the woman herself but some external factor that accounts for her counter-stereotypical behavior.

Internal attributions also are prevented when women provide a communal justification for the counter-stereotypical behavior. Indeed, research shows that penalties are averted when women negotiate on behalf of others rather than themselves (Amanatullah & Morris 2010) and when they engage in ethical violations to help a vulnerable other (Mai et al. 2020). This research suggests that when there is a gender-appropriate motive for counter-stereotypical behavior, women can avoid internal attributions for their violation of prescriptive stereotypes and undercut the penalties typically produced by norm violations.

Implications for Practice: Strategies for Deterring the Negative Effects of Prescriptive Gender Stereotypes

What, if anything, can be done to avert the negative effects of prescriptive gender stereotypes in the workplace? Although altering social norms would be an obvious solution, decades of research on stereotype change demonstrate that modifying gender-based norms is slow and complex (Eagly et al. 2020). It is therefore unsurprising that efforts aimed at advancing women in traditionally masculine roles and occupations have often focused on changing individual women's behavior, rather than broader social norms, to decrease the likelihood of gender bias derived from social penalties.

As mentioned above, research suggests that agentic women may benefit from emphasizing their communality by, for example, presenting themselves as caring partners and mothers (e.g., having family photos at work), finding ways to justify their success (e.g., stressing that it is just the result of good luck), or presenting themselves as selflessly advocating for others (e.g., explaining that the request is for the team, not for herself). However, it is not desirable or practical for the burden of change to be on individual women. In fact, short-term impression management techniques such as these may thwart more impactful long-term efforts to change gender norms by inadvertently reinforcing descriptive and prescriptive stereotypes.

Interestingly, despite evidence that prescriptive gender stereotypes may be particularly resistant to efforts aimed at increasing gender equality in the workplace (Gill 2004), many mainstream initiatives appear to ignore the potential penalties for violating gender prescriptions altogether. Popular books such as *Lean In* (Sandberg 2013) and workshops designed to empower women through leadership training or effective negotiation techniques not only place the onus for change on women but also disregard the consequences that women face when they engage in the behaviors that these books and workshops encourage (e.g., assertiveness, self-promotion, decisiveness, dominance).

So, what can organizations do to alleviate the bias and discrimination that originate in prescriptive gender stereotypes? Even if societal gender norms remain unchanged, evidence suggests

Strategies for deterring the negative effects of prescriptive stereotypes

Reduce perceptions of gender norm violation by:

- Promoting numerical and symbolic representation of women in the physical work environment
- Discouraging cues in the physical work environment that explicitly or implicitly exclude women
- Increasing use of communal language in official documents
- Dismantling masculinity contest cultures by prioritizing collective well-being and rewarding teamwork

Limit internal attributions for gender norm violations by:

- Establishing official policies and guidelines that normalize behaviors for which women (but not men) are penalized
- Ensuring that these policies and guidelines are clearly communicated and enforced

Figure 3

Implications for practice: strategies for deterring the negative effects of prescriptive stereotypes.

that changes at the organizational level can help to reduce the negative effects of prescriptive gender stereotypes. As shown in **Figure 3**, organizational practices can help to avert penalties by (a) reducing perceptions of norm violation by modifying organizational norms and (b) limiting the degree to which the norm violation is attributed to women's internal characteristics.

Targeting organizational norms. Although also resistant to change, organizational norms are more amenable to modification than societal norms. Organizations can help to prevent penalties arising from prescriptive gender stereotypes by implementing measures that reduce the salience of masculine and agentic norms, increase the salience of communality norms, and/or foster gender-neutral norms.

Reshaping the organizational context. Contextual cues communicate norms. What a workspace looks like and who is represented in that space signal what is appropriate and what is not. For example, offices displaying sci-fi posters and workplaces with videogame breakrooms are more likely to highlight traditionally masculine than feminine or gender-neutral norms (Cheryan et al. 2009). Similarly, the existence of breastfeeding facilities signals that an organization approves of motherhood for their employees and supports actions that enable them to fulfill their maternal roles. Thus, modifying the physical environment can be a powerful tool to reshape normative beliefs about what is acceptable and desirable in the workplace. Gender representation can be equally influential. Research shows that the simple presence of female employees in traditionally masculine positions not only affects perceptions about what is required to succeed in these positions but also shifts beliefs about whether women belong in these roles. For example, increasing the number of women in an organization's leadership roles has been shown to reduce prescriptive beliefs about behavior that is off-limits for women (Lawson et al. 2022).

Reshaping the organizational language. The language used in official texts such as websites, mission statements, and newsletters can also convey organizational norms. As previously discussed, job descriptions that use more agentic than communal words communicate that the job is male in gender type. However, they also communicate that the behaviors that are valued are behaviors that are normatively proscribed for women, signaling that the organization is a place where women do not belong (Gaucher et al. 2011). Reforming these descriptions can therefore reshape

organizational gender norms. However, most organizations may not even be aware that the language they use is unbalanced. Thus, a first step toward ensuring that official documents use less gender-stereotypical language is to audit and monitor these documents to detect language that unintentionally reinforces prescriptive gender stereotypes. Language audits can be performed by internal (or external) diversity officers or, if resources are available, by taking advantage of new technologies created for analyzing linguistic data.

Reshaping the organizational culture. Many organizations value and reward agentic behaviors such as independence, self-promotion, and competitiveness at the expense of communal behaviors (Cheryan & Markus 2020). However, disproportionately promoting traditionally masculine norms can be highly dysfunctional for organizations as a whole. Research on masculinity contest cultures (e.g., organizational cultures that overemphasize competition and punish displays of weakness) illustrates this point by showing that these cultures are associated with higher rates of workplace bullying, incivility, and toxic leadership and lower employee well-being (Berdahl et al. 2018). Although both women and men should benefit from organizational efforts to move away from masculinity contest cultures, these efforts are especially likely to improve outcomes for those who experience incivility, harassment, and bullying the most—norm-violating women (Gabriel et al. 2018). Fully dismantling stereotypically masculine cultures can be difficult, but organizations can begin to drive this change by advancing a vision that prioritizes collective well-being and teamwork over individual attainment and by explicitly rewarding behaviors that align with these new goals (Ely & Kimmel 2018).

Harnessing organizational guidelines. We have made the point that behavior that is counter to gender norms induces penalties when it is seen as diagnostic of who a person is. Organizations can therefore discourage penalties for women who engage in counter-stereotypical behaviors or fail to engage in stereotype-consistent behaviors by deterring the perception that the behavior resulted from personal preference or deliberate choice. This can be accomplished through official guidelines, rules, and policies that designate what employees are expected or required to do for different workplace processes. When guidelines regarding workplace behavior are clear and known, the impetus for engaging in this behavior, whether counter-stereotypical or not, is evident: It is the organization. Consequently, formally sanctioned agentic behavior should be seen as acceptable for both women and men, thereby reducing the likelihood of penalties for women who engage in this behavior.

Examples might include organizational guidelines dictating that self-nominations are a prerequisite for promotion and rewards, or that feedback for subordinates should always include areas to improve upon. With such guidelines in place, women who self-promote are less likely to be deemed pushy and overly confident, and female supervisors who provide relatively negative feedback are less likely to be seen as insensitive or not sufficiently caring. Instead, their actions would be seen as constrained by organizational directives and not indicative of their motivation or personal inclination. For these practices to reach their intended effect, however, organizations must ensure that these guidelines, rules, and policies are unambiguous and publicly communicated and, above all, that women are not ultimately punished for engaging in the behaviors that these policies explicitly endorse (Chang & Milkman 2020).

ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

Throughout this article, we have discussed the role of gender stereotypes in eliciting and maintaining gender bias against women in the workplace. We furthermore have delineated the different stereotype-based pathways to gender discrimination as well as the specific conditions that

facilitate or hinder whether gender discrimination occurs. However, there are important considerations that we have not addressed. Below, we briefly indicate several characteristics of the evaluator, the target, and the national culture that are likely to impact the processes we have described.

Evaluator Gender

Several meta-analyses demonstrate that the size of gender discrimination effects is slightly smaller for female than male raters. Specifically, male respondents exhibit a greater degree of bias against women in male-dominated fields relative to female respondents (Eagly et al. 1992, Koch et al. 2015). Nevertheless, women evaluators are not exempt from gender bias and discriminatory behavior: Both women and men tend to view women as communal and not agentic, to evaluate women less favorably than men in male gender-typed contexts, and to derogate them for engaging in counter-stereotypical behavior. Although being in the same boat as other women would be expected to weaken adherence to gender stereotypes, evidently this is not the case. In fact, the prevalence of women's bias and discriminatory behavior toward other women provides support for gender stereotype persistence and universality.

Evaluator Beliefs

Evidence suggests that the degree to which individual evaluators endorse gender stereotypes as well as their beliefs about gender equality will affect women's evaluations and outcomes in the workplace. For example, evaluators who hold stronger stereotypical beliefs about women (and men) are more likely to perceive a lack of fit between feminine stereotypes and the requirements believed to lead to success in traditionally masculine fields and jobs. Regardless of the gender of the evaluator, endorsement of feminine stereotypes is associated with support for hiring women in feminine positions (e.g., HR), but not masculine positions (e.g., finance) (Hideg & Ferris 2016). Similarly, holding stronger implicit gender stereotypes (e.g., stronger automatic associations between women and communality or men and agency) has been associated with an increased tendency to penalize agentic women (e.g., Rudman & Glick 2001). In addition to individual differences in the endorsement of gender stereotypes, people's tendency to downplay and/or justify ongoing gender inequality also has implications for gender discrimination. Evaluators who believe gender discrimination is a thing of the past are more prone to lack of fit perceptions and, as a result, are more likely to discriminate against women in traditionally male jobs (Moss-Racusin et al. 2012). Moreover, those who are motivated to justify the status quo exhibit more backlash against women who defy the gender hierarchy by behaving in counter-stereotypical ways (Clabaugh et al. 2023).

Intersectionality

Although we have discussed gender as a single demographic category, individuals inhabit other social identities (e.g., race, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, religion) that can intersect to affect the degree to which they experience gender discrimination (Hall et al. 2019). For example, research has demonstrated that the content of gender stereotypes differs as a function of race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation (Blashill & Powlishta 2009, Ghavami & Peplau 2013), and such variations in stereotype content are likely to generate differing levels of incongruence with the perceived demands of certain work settings and differing degrees of perceived gender norm violation. Indeed, some of the effects we have noted here, such as gender discrimination as a function of job fit (Derous et al. 2015) or the display of agency (Livingston et al. 2012) have been shown to be moderated by race and ethnicity. Others have found that penalties for prescriptive gender stereotype

violations change as a function of age (Chatman et al. 2022). The pattern of these effects does not always tell a cohesive story, with some research pointing to added adversity for individuals with multiple marginalized identities (Sesko & Biernat 2010) and other work suggesting a reversal or attenuation of the gender discriminatory effects we have described here (Livingston et al. 2012). To this end, researchers are beginning to develop models for understanding the complexity of intersectional stereotyping and discrimination (Hall et al. 2019, Petsko et al. 2022).

The Gender Binary

In most Western societies, gender continues to be viewed as binary and closely aligned with biological sex (Morgenroth & Ryan 2021). Consequently, most people are categorized as either female or male, woman or man. As this review has shown, these binary gender categories are associated with stereotypical perceptions of communality and agency that can have important implications for how a person is evaluated and the treatment they receive in the workplace. However, people who do not adhere to the gender binary (e.g., nonbinary identities, gender nonconforming individuals) are also subject to discrimination arising from gender stereotypes. While some of the processes outlined in this review may affect binary and nonbinary individuals alike, job candidates and employees who challenge the gender binary also experience unique forms of discrimination that have not been discussed here. Like counter-stereotypical women, nonbinary and transgender employees are often disliked and their job performance is devalued (Dray et al. 2020). However, unlike women, nonbinary and gender nonconforming individuals are often delegitimized (e.g., misgendered or denied their gender identity), ostracized, and even met with blatant hostility and violence (Morgenroth & Ryan 2021).

National Culture

The research literature on gender stereotypes has largely centered on Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic (WEIRD) cultures, raising questions regarding how the processes we have reviewed in this article vary by country and culture. Existing studies shed some light on the ways in which the content and intensity of gender stereotypes align and diverge across countries. Generally, this work suggests that gender stereotypes are globally held and that stereotypes about women are generally viewed as inconsistent with the characteristics thought necessary for success in male-dominated contexts (Fiske 2017, Schein et al. 1996). However, studies also reveal important cultural differences. Cuddy et al. (2015), for example, found the content of gender stereotypes to shift depending on a country's core cultural values, with stereotypes about men aligning more closely than stereotypes about women with the characteristics that are valued most in a culture (e.g., collectivism versus individualism). Cultural differences also have emerged regarding the intensity with which gender stereotypes are held, how these stereotypes are thought to have changed over time, and the specific facets of agency and communion that are ascribed the most to men and women (Bosak et al. 2018, Obioma et al. 2022).

Despite these differences in gender stereotypic beliefs, research suggests that the processes underlying gender discrimination are similar across cultures. In fact, countries with a stronger adherence to gender stereotypes have been shown to have greater occupational segregation (Breda et al. 2020, Miller et al. 2015). Nonetheless, it is clear that as organizations across the world seek to implement strategies to mitigate gender discrimination, it is critical to consider whether these strategies will be equally effective across cultures. The recommendations proposed here not only may be more relevant to some countries than others but also may be more or less difficult to enact depending on the country's societal and structural conditions (e.g., gender quotas are permitted in some countries but not others).

CONCLUSION

The past five decades have ushered in major advances in our psychological understanding of gender bias and discrimination in the workplace, with a wealth of studies suggesting that gender stereotypes play a key role in perpetuating discrepant evaluations of men and women. In this article, we reviewed this growing literature, delineating how gender stereotypes bring about bias and discrimination through both descriptive and prescriptive means. The evidence suggests that gender stereotypes continue to impose constraints on women's career advancement by sustaining perceptions of their incompetence in male gender-typed settings and by limiting the kinds of workplace behaviors that are deemed suitable for them. However, the evidence also underscores the role that work conditions can play in facilitating and mitigating gender bias and discrimination—a point that we view as critical not only to advancing psychological understanding of gender bias but also to equipping organizations with strategies to minimize gender discrimination and foster gender equality.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

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Errata

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