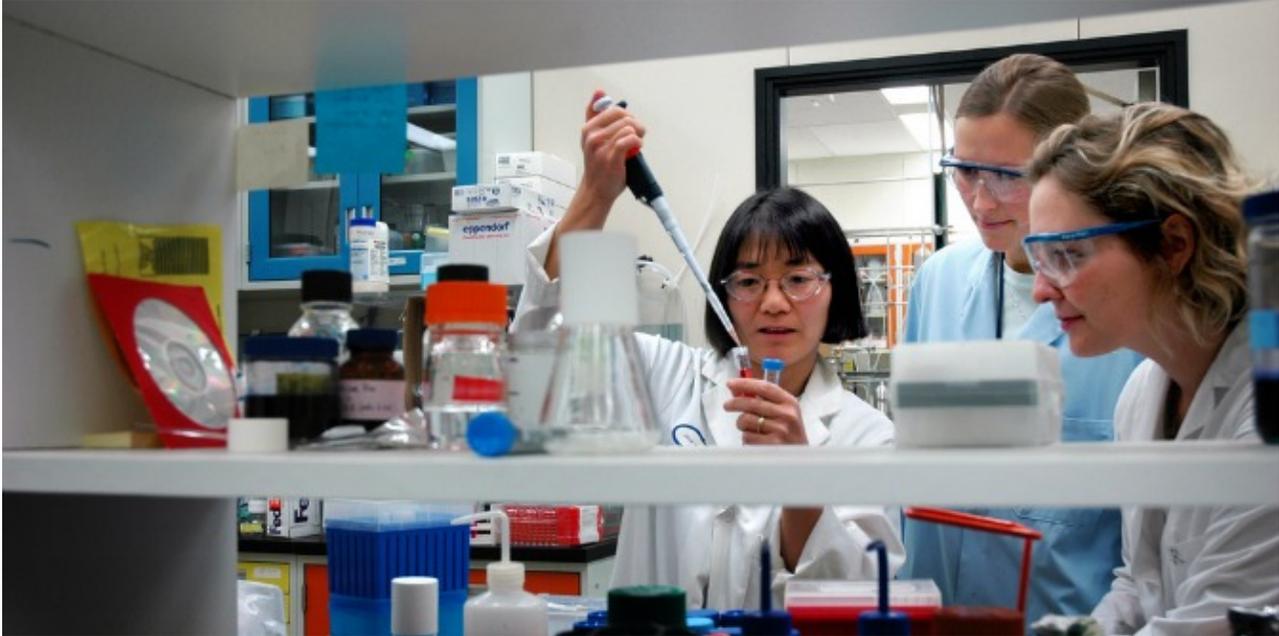


Women scientists differ in how they see the role of gender in their careers

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"I am a little more open, polished, quick-witted, talkative, a little ... more arrogant, pushy... Moreover, I am a woman. That means, I have simply a lot more ambition, and I am substantially more communicative."

This is Irene. She is a biochemist at a prestigious university for Science, Engineering and Technology. In this quote, she describes how she sees herself. She positions herself as extraordinary, as better and different from men.

Her statement may sound pretentious but is justified when you look into her professional biography. Irene grew up in a well-educated family and there has been no question that she would study and start an academic career. She chose biotechnology and was excellent during her studies.

This is the reason why she was hired for a PhD position, where she was promoted and supported by a male professor. Her life consisted of work on challenging and exciting research problems, participation in international conferences, the collaboration with famous people from MIT and the publication of her scientific work in peer-reviewed scholarly journals. But at some point, the situation changed: Although she had more international publications than any peer in her department, it was her male colleague who was finally promoted to a tenure-track position.

When she talks about this time in her life, she gets angry about how she was treated and how her career ambitions were overlooked. Confronting her supervisor with the question why her colleague was favored over her, her boss said that that her male colleague was simply *"an undefined factor"* better and that he – as a man – would be better able to balance his private life with a challenging career in academia.

Women in male-dominated professions attract the attention of their male peers, supervisors or potential mentors. However, women should not stand out too much. They can be feminine but must not be too sexy. They should be

competitive but not aggressive. They need to be ambitious but must not be not career-obsessed. And they have to be self-confident but must be humble at the same time. To confirm these norms, they often end up as the feminine version of the masculine ideal. At the same time women can not escape their difference as it is visible all the time.

To get a deeper impression on how female scientists perceive their professional lives and how they deal with these ambivalent expectations, we investigated their life stories. We were not only interested in the content of the stories, but also how these female scientists crafted their life stories.

Like Irene, part of the women use a *difference strategy*. They point to their different gender, their minority status and its related challenges and dilemmas. However, other women use a *similarity strategy* instead and rationalise all structural decisions on the basis of meritocratic principles. They downplay any discrimination or do only mention it when explicitly asked about unfavourable situations. They say that it was easy to survive in the male environment: if you are good enough, you will be treated the same as men.

However, none of these ways to cope with the idea if and to what extent women are able to succeed in a scientific career, and how much they have to prove themselves, is able to distract our view from the very obvious: Gender is salient in academe, especially in male-dominated, technical fields. Both strategies point to the individual dilemma that women are still facing in science and technology – although there has been much effort to attract more women for this profession.

In our study we used a biographical-narrative approach where we asked our interview partners to tell their whole life story. They could start from wherever they wanted to start, set their own focus and priorities, narrate about personal or professional events, just as they like. The reasons for this very open format is to be found in the idea that people become absorbed by their memories: By telling their “story“ they gave lots of information about what is meaningful for them, and how they want to be seen by others.

More details about the life-story approach are to be found in our [paper](#).



Notes:

- This article is based on the authors' paper [Breaking Patterns? How Female Scientists Negotiate their Token Role in their Life Stories](#), in *Gender, Work & Organization*, 23, pp. 397–413, 2016. DOI: 10.1111/gwao.12124.
- The post gives the views of its author, not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.
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