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Psychological Science 2010 21: 1640 originally published online 28 September 2010

DOI: 10.1177/0956797610384744

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Hard Won and Easily Lost: The Fragile Status of Leaders in Gender-Stereotype-Incongruent Occupations

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Received 12/18/09; Revision accepted 5/29/10

In 2009, Americans celebrated the first African American president and female speaker of the House in history. This illustrates the progress that women and minorities have made in attaining leadership positions historically occupied by White men. However, there are reasons to suspect that inspiring biographies and optimistic demographic statistics disguise the fragility of the gains made by individuals in stereotype-incongruent occupations.

Numerous studies have documented the ways in which counterstereotypical individuals are discriminated against (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Glick, Zion, & Nelson, 1988). In addition to hitting the “glass ceiling” impeding their rise to top leadership roles, women often find themselves poised on a “glass cliff”—meaning that they are more likely than men to fall from their position (Ryan & Haslam, 2005). In the research reported here, we examined one potential mechanism for glass-cliff effects—specifically, that making small mistakes on the job is particularly damaging to individuals in gender-incongruent occupations.

Stereotyping thrives on ambiguity. Although minorities with unambiguously strong qualifications are often evaluated fairly, when qualifications are ambiguous, stereotypes strongly influence judgments (Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986). Thus, a Black job candidate with a stellar record will receive high evaluations, but a Black candidate with a mixed record will face discrimination when compared with a White candidate (Hodson, Dovidio, & Gaertner, 2002).

Thus, we predicted that when an individual has achieved a high-status position in a gender-incongruent occupation, making a mistake can prove especially damaging to his or her status. A gender-congruent leader’s competence is assumed, but for a gender-incongruent leader, salient mistakes create ambiguity and call the leader’s competence into question, which, in turn, leads to a loss of status. We hypothesized that this effect is driven by reactions to individuals in roles inconsistent with their gender—and not simply by discrimination against women—and we predicted that a similar penalty would be evident for men and women in gender-incongruent jobs.

Method

Participants and procedure

Seventy-five males and 127 females (mean age = 35.49 years) participated in a study employing a 2 (target’s gender) × 2 (job performance: mistake vs. no mistake) × 2 (occupation: gender congruent vs. gender incongruent) between-subjects design. Pretesting revealed two occupations, one strongly associated with women and the other with men, that were equivalent in both status and gender congruity: president of a women’s college and police chief. Participants were randomly assigned to read a single scenario that described a target’s occupation and a situation in which he or she did or did not make a mistake. In the mistake condition, the target dispatched too few campus police officers or city police officers to a community protest rally. In the no-mistake condition, the target dispatched an adequate number of officers to the protest, and it continued without incident. (For the full text of the scenarios and more information on the way the occupations were chosen, see the Supplemental Material available online.)

Dependent measures

We calculated an index of status conferral from four items assessing how much status, power, independence, and respect the candidate deserved at work (1 = *none*, 11 = *a great deal*; $\alpha = .90$; Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2008). Our index of trait competence was based on participants’ ratings of the target on two 11-point semantic differential scales: *competent-incompetent* and *knowledgeable-ignorant* ($\alpha = .93$; Tiedens, 2001).

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Results

Status conferral

A $2 \times 2 \times 2$ analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed a main effect of job performance on status conferral, $F(1, 196) = 29.48, p < .001$, and the predicted three-way interaction of target's gender, occupation, and job performance, $F(1, 196) = 6.82, p = .01$ (see Fig. 1). In the absence of a mistake, targets were given equivalent status regardless of their occupancy's gender congruency, $F(1, 95) < 1$, n.s. But among those who made a mistake, both male and female targets in gender-incongruent jobs (males: $M = 6.14, SD = 2.14$; females: $M = 6.33, SD = 2.77$) received less status than those in gender-congruent jobs (males: $M = 7.80, SD = 1.88$; females: $M = 7.38, SD = 1.94$), $F(1, 105) = 7.69, p < .01$.

Competence

In a $2 \times 2 \times 2$ ANOVA, we found a main effect of job performance on competence, $F(1, 198) = 91.43, p < .001$, and a three-way interaction of target's gender, occupation, and job performance, $F(1, 198) = 10.14, p < .01$. When the targets did not make an error, they were seen as equally competent whether they were in a gender-congruent job or not, $F(1, 97) = 1.87$, n.s. However, when a mistake was made, both male and female targets in the gender-incongruent occupations were seen as less competent (females: $M = 4.89, SD = 2.04$; males: $M = 5.30, SD = 2.59$) than the targets in the gender-congruent jobs (females: $M = 6.25, SD = 2.24$; males: $M = 5.72, SD = 2.40$), $F(1, 105) = 10.26, p < .01$.

Mediational analyses

Regression analyses tested the prediction that lower competence judgments of gender-incongruent targets who made a mistake would explain their status loss. For targets who made a mistake, competence, status conferral, and occupying a gender-incongruent job were all significantly correlated with each other. In an analysis using competence and gender congruence to predict status conferral, only incompetence was a significant predictor, $\beta(107) = 0.28, p < .01$. The coefficient for gender congruence fell from .26 to .17 and was no longer significant, Sobel's $z = 2.16, p < .05$. Thus, a perceived lack of competence mediated the relationship between occupying a gender-incongruent occupation and the status loss individuals in such occupations incurred after making a professional mistake.

Discussion

When they did not make any mistake, male and female police chiefs, along with male and female women's college presidents, were accorded similar status. However, when female police chiefs and male women's college presidents made a mistake, they were accorded significantly less status, and viewed as less competent, than their gender-congruent counterparts.

We conducted a conceptual replication of this study with female targets using two other careers pretested as gender incongruent for women—CEO of an aerospace engineering firm and chief judge (see the Supplemental Material). The results fully replicated those of the current study, including the

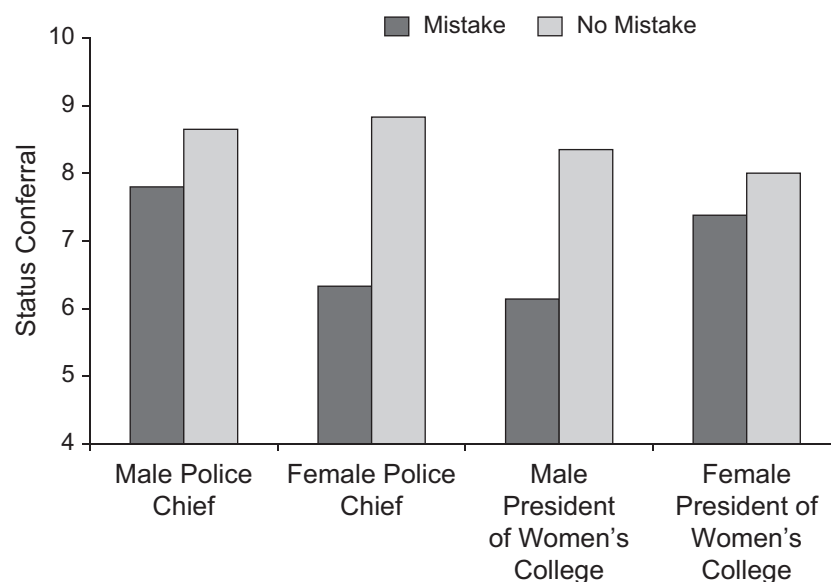


Fig. 1. Status conferral for male and female targets in gender-congruent and gender-incongruent jobs. Results for the mistake and no-mistake conditions are shown.

mediational findings, suggesting that the specific profession in which the mistake occurs may be less important than whether the target's gender is congruent with the job.

This research complements and extends prior work on how perceivers penalize individuals in gender-incongruent occupations. Past research has often emphasized dislike as the underlying mechanism of discrimination. For example, although the competence of assertive female managers is acknowledged, they are perceived as cold and unlikeable (Rudman & Glick, 1999). Our study adds to this work by suggesting that women who are successful in male domains not only are seen as unlikeable, but also are viewed as less competent than their gender-congruent counterparts after making a single mistake.

Thus, the high status achieved by some men and women in gender-incongruent occupations can be unstable, vulnerable, and ultimately fragile. Though women and minorities have made progress in reaching high-status positions, the present research draws attention to an unsettling bias that may readily undermine these achievements.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared that they had no conflicts of interest with respect to their authorship or the publication of this article.

Supplemental Material

Additional supporting information may be found at <http://pss.sagepub.com/content/by/supplemental-data>

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