Bound by stereotypes?

Elisabeth Kelan shows that many organizations make sweeping assumptions about working women – and men. Do you?
In an ideal world gender would not matter. We would be judged based on our own merit instead of on our gender. In actuality, the world is far from ideal, and conscious and unconscious assumptions about men and women influence our judgement. For example, although many women today are well-educated and earn their own income, there is still a tendency for women to marry men who are financially better off. The same is true in relation to the height of a potential partner, with women choosing men who are taller. These behaviours clearly reflect our unconscious ideals of masculinity and femininity.

One assumption about women is that they all like the colour pink. Manufacturers realized that women make 80 per cent of the buying decisions in a household and increasingly have their own disposable income but that fewer women than men buy technical gadgets. The assumed logical consequence for consumer electronic producers was to produce “pinked up” gadgets. However, research by Saatchi & Saatchi (ladygeek.org.uk) has shown that only nine per cent of women like these pink or, alternatively, crystal-encrusted mobile phones, game consoles and laptops. The research estimated that UK consumer electronic producers alone miss out on £600 million a year by not targeting women consumers appropriately.

Less committed?
There are many assumptions and stereotypes about women in business, too. One is that women have children and are responsible for them, which means they are less committed workers. However, research has shown that women in leadership positions often do not have children. In a recent study undertaken by the Lehman Brothers Centre for Women in Business at London Business School 52 per cent of female team leaders reported that they do not have children. This means that, for 52 per cent of women, childcare is not an issue. Of the 48 per cent who have children, this does not mean that these women are less committed to their work than men, of whom 96 per cent are fathers. The research showed, in fact, that for men, the negative spillover from home to work and vice versa is much stronger than for women. This is counterintuitive to our assumptions and contradicts the stereotypes we have about both men and women.

Earlier research on corporate best practice in relation to women in the workforce also revealed underlying assumptions. Studies found that organizations usually follow four waves of initiatives in relation to women at work: measuring and counting women, creating flexible working practices, creating networks and developing women as leaders. What was interesting is that, while organizations try to create policies, such as flexible working practices, to allow women to combine their roles as workers and mothers, they are less adept at developing women as leaders.

Unfortunately, flexible working is seen as the “mommy track”. Organizations are doing little to remove the stigma attached to flexible working and to make it a viable option for all workers, not just working mothers. That women are not developed as leaders possibly relates to unfair assumptions about the desire of women for leadership (“they would really rather stay at home”) and their dedication to the organization (“they don’t care as much about this business as male workers do”).

There are also other career-related costs to stereotypes. In my research, I have found that women tell their career biographies differently from men, even when they are factually similar. The main difference I found in the narratives is that women tend to attribute their careers to coincidence, serendipity and luck. Women construct their stories in such a way that it appears they just “ended up” in a certain position.

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Men, in contrast, tell different stories. According to them, their career trajectories are the result of rationally planned action, of their goal to achieve. These stories fit in with stereotypes about men and women in society: men are active and self-determined, while women are passive; things “just happen” to them. In organizations, however, narratives with clear direction and a sense of purpose are preferred when it comes to hiring and promotion. Women not conforming to this ideal of masculinity lose out simply because they don’t project themselves as loyal, committed and self-determined as men do.

Research has shown that women in the workplace are often in a Catch-22 or double bind. If they fulfill managerial ideals that are traditionally masculine, they may be seen as not feminine enough; but, if they are too feminine, they are not seen as managers. The same is true in regard to negotiation, pay and promotion. It is commonly assumed that women do not ask for a promotion or for more money but wait to be noticed and nominated. If women violate this rule, they are penalized by both men and women for doing so. While it makes economic and personal sense to ask for more, women doing so regularly get evaluated negatively for it.

**Stereotypical?**

Gender stereotypes are clearly powerful, but what are they exactly? They are commonly held beliefs about men and women as mutually exclusive groups. We can distinguish between descriptive gender stereotypes, how women and men behave, and prescriptive gender stereotypes, how men and women ought to behave. Stereotypes are used consciously or unconsciously to judge people and to put them into categories. These categorizations are useful in organizing a great deal of information into a manageable size but are limiting if one applies the stereotype indiscriminately without looking to the individual.

People have a strong belief that women and men behave differently due to either biology or socialization. This is, however, a false dichotomy. There is a constant interaction between biology and environment; and gender differences are changeable, for instance, through training. Overall, there seem to be very few gender differences that hold up under analysis. In meta-analysis (a statistical method), the results from different individual studies on gender related to mathematics, computer use, job attitude, preferences, leadership and so on can be collated, aggregated and compared. Conclusions can then be drawn. Meta-analyses reveal overall trends and are more reliable than individual studies, as they allow for larger samples and different situations to be considered. Meta-analyses on gender have shown that there are very few gender differences that hold up across different studies. Only motor performance (throwing things), measures of sexuality (such as attitudes towards sex in casual and committed relationships) and physical aggression were significant. In all other areas, no consistent gender difference was found.

Why do we then believe that men and women are fundamentally different?

Reasons for this are varied. There is, for instance, a tendency for people to see what they are looking for. If they see what they think is gender difference, this supports their belief in men and women being different. In academic research, it is known that studies that show no gender difference are not publishable, leading to those that show small-scale gender difference getting disproportionately blown up. The same is true for the media at large, in which gender difference seems to be easier to sell than gender similarity.

One can illustrate how gender stereotypes work in the following example of women and mathematics. It is generally assumed that women are not as good at mathematics as men. Therefore, if a woman has to sit an exam in mathematics, she may unconsciously reflect on this and say to herself, “I am a woman and women are not good in mathematics, so I am probably not going to do well.” She may put less effort in the exam and, consequently, do less well. This is, in effect, a self-fulfilling prophecy. Stereotypes influence our behaviour, and people may fear that the stereotype is correct. This fear in turn has detrimental effects on performance, a phenomenon called stereotype threat.

Management literature also illustrates the power of stereotypes. Earlier management literature simply excluded and ignored women. It was written about men, for men and by men. My research has shown that this has changed somewhat. Women now appear in management literature but usually in rather stereotypical roles. An example is the construction “mompreneur” used in one book. A mompreneur results from the combination of

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mother and entrepreneur, a mother who decided to set up her own business to spend more time with her children, as the stereotype has it. The fact that many women choose to set up their own businesses - because of barriers in traditional organizations that do not allow them to use their full potential or for other reasons - is ignored. What would be innovative is to stop viewing women as potential mothers and thereby as potential problems. One could, in fact, see men as potential fathers, who might want to become “dadpreneurs”.

If gender stereotypes are pervasive, how can they be changed? Following are a few of the ways to challenge and change gender stereotypes.

**Make gender stereotypes visible** Often stereotypes lurk in the dark and we are not aware of them. However, on a conscious level, we find them irrelevant. If we spell out gender stereotypes, this brings stereotypes to the conscious level. Research has shown that women are quoted higher prices when negotiating for cars, even when they use the same bargaining strategies as men. Here the stereotype that women are less effective in negotiations is served. If the stereotype is voiced, it becomes obvious and women react to it. This may happen because women want to do extra well to counteract the stereotype.

**Reprogramme stereotypes** Stereotypes are social constructions and, therefore, are flexible; they can be changed by giving them a different meaning. An obvious example is role models. One could, for instance, point out a highly successful businesswoman who is an excellent negotiator to dispel the stereotype that women are weaker negotiators than men. One can also link successful performance with stereotypical feminine skills. For instance, it is possible to construct a good negotiator as someone who is a good listener and sensitive to the feelings of others, skills usually associated with women. However, we have to be careful not to repeat and reverse stereotypes; the goal is to make them irrelevant in the long run.

**Question assumptions** Many of the assumptions we make do not hold up under scrutiny. For example, there is an assumption of gender difference regarding spatial thinking; some assume that women are less capable of managing three-dimensional challenges. However, a recent study showed that playing an action video game for only 10 hours eliminates the gender difference in spatial attention and decreases the gender difference in mental rotation ability. These effects were the same when people were tested again after five months. Rather than focusing on elements in relation to gender we cannot change, it makes more sense to focus on assumptions we can actually change.

Stereotypes are deeply enshrined in our belief system, whether consciously or not. Attempts to change something so central to us will be met by resistance; therefore, incremental change is better than drastic change. Those who challenge stereotypes need to be patient with others since they rely on stereotypes to make sense of the world. But, it is vitally important that we continually question our own assumptions and stereotypes and become aware of them. It might then be possible to see someone not as a man or a woman but rather as a person, a human being, a colleague.

**Resources**


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