

Gender Schemas & the Advancement of Women

Dr. Virginia Valian, author of **“Why So Slow? The Advancement of Women,”** and professor of Psychology and Linguistics at Hunter College and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York (CUNY) presented two talks on Accountability Principles for Chairs and Senior Administrators, which also included discussion of relevant gender-based research, (funded in part by an NSF PAID grant). The following are excerpts from her talk with Department Chairs.



Dr. Virginia Valian at UCLA

Gender Schemas & Accumulation of Advantage

“The two main concepts that I put together...are the notion of gender schemas... and the notion of the accumulation of advantage. The short answer to the question why women aren’t better represented in leadership positions in academia and the professions generally is that gender schemas result in our slightly but consistently undervaluing women in the professional domain and overvaluing men in lots of small ways. Those instances of under evaluations and over evaluation add up over time so that women accumulate advantage more slowly and over time they fall further and further behind men. These instances of evaluation, incorrect evaluations, and error-ridden evaluations occur equally by males and females. These errors occur despite people’s best intentions and sincere commitment to egalitarian ideals.”

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“The problem that has concerned me the most is the advancement of women. Women, as you know, are getting degrees in very high numbers in all fields and increasing in almost all fields except in computer science, but that is not matched by an equivalent ride in positions like chairs, deans, provosts, and president. Nor is it matched by women getting awards from organizations like the American Psychological Association or the Association of Psychological Sciences or the National Academy. So the advancement of women remains slow, relative to their numbers, and it’s that that I want to address.”

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What Are Gender Schemas?

“Gender schemas are largely non conscious hypothesis we all have about the different characteristics of males and females. We see females as nurturing, as communal, and as doing things out of concern for other people. And we see males as capable of independent action, doing things for a reason, and getting down to the business at hand. We have schemas about everything, every social group defined by race, age, sex, social class, and roles. So students have schemas about what it is to be a professor. And people have schemas about what it is to be a scientist. And for most professions, the schema that people have for being a professional person overlaps much more with the schema for being male than it does with the schema for being female. So we take requirements to be successful for most fields as being capable of independent action, doing things for a reason, and getting down to the business at hand.”

Gender Schemas in Action

“The first experiment (I will discuss) is by Heilman (2004) and her colleagues. When people didn’t know what the results of the totally bogus performance review was, both males and females rated the man as more competent than the woman and rated them as equally likeable. The competence rating part of it, simply replicates many previous experiments in which both men and women, when the data are ambiguous, rate men as more competent than women. In the condition where the person has gotten a stellar performance review, males and females equally rated them. So they were rated equally competent given this unambiguous evidence, but they rated the men as more likeable than the women. And they rated the women as more hostile than the men. So that was the new twist to this experiment, and what [it suggests] is that for competent women who were violating the gender schema for women, the price that they pay ... is to be perceived as unlikable. And she (Heilman) then did a follow up experiment in which people had to decide what benefits people should get and she crossed likeability and competence and found you want to give more things to people who are more likeable. Women who aren’t liked aren’t going to get things, and they’re partly not going to be liked just if they’re successful. So it’s a difficult position for women to be in.”

Shifting Standards to Justify Decisions

“The second experiment that I’ll mention is by Norton (2004) and his colleagues. It demonstrates how people shift their standards in order to justify a choice that seems reasonable to them ahead of time. And in this case, it’s gender that determines what seems reasonable ahead of time. This has a lot of bearing on search

committees, and promotion and tenure committees. In this experiment, subjects were given dossiers of five people who were supposedly applying for a job in construction engineering and what they were doing was pitting education and experience against each other. So of the five candidates, only two were clearly competitive. One of them had a post engineering certificate, as well as an engineering degree, and the other person didn’t have that. But what the other person had was four more years of work experience than the person who had education. So which are you going to go with? Education or experience? On search committees, you’re frequently faced with those kinds of decisions, things that are not completely comparable. So in one condition,

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people were identified just by initials and in that case the students, (these were male undergraduates), the students 75% of the time chose the person who had more education. When male names were attached, again 75% of the time, they picked the person who had more education. But that is when

a male name was attached to the person who had more education and a female name was attached to the person with more experience, they picked the male and they justified the choice by saying this person had more education. When that was flipped and the person who had more education was the *woman*, and the person who had more experience was the *man*, now less than half the time did people pick the person who had more education. It was actually less than 45% of the time. Now many fewer people said that education was a reasonable criterion. If you have sat on search committees, this might be familiar to you. The same kind of characteristic may be seen as a plus, or not so much as a plus, depending on who has that characteristic. So these are cases

where gender schemas are openly telling you what ought to be the case, and they're affecting the kinds of evaluation that you're making even though you intend to be completely fair."

Schemas in Letters of Recommendation

"There's one more experiment along these lines. This is a study by Trix and Psenka (2003) in which they analyze letters of recommendation that had been written for successful candidates to a large Midwestern medical school. These were people who were hired as MD's or PhDs in the medical school. And they did a number of quantitative analyses. I'll just tell you about some of the qualitative ones. For men, the letters of recommendations had a denser group of adjectives like outstanding, brilliant, creative, and so on --adjectives that they call out 'stand out' adjectives. Those were more densely represented in letters for men, than letters for women. Letters for women had more adjectives that they call 'grindstone adjectives': careful, conscientious, meticulous, hardworking, reliable, and responsible. Things that are good, but if they occur in the absence of these other terms, just makes you think the person works really hard to overcome not being so smart. And then the third category they had, they called 'doubt raisers'. So these were things that would raise doubts about the candidates and these were more frequent in letters for women than letters for men. One example is 'she has a rather challenging personality.' Another example is what they call the boomerang effect: 'she excelled at every task that she chose to take on.' So when you're on a search committee and you are evaluating the dossiers, you are

likely ...to be reading letters that are inadvertently more positive for men than they are for women, which in turn affects how you rate people. So there are a lot of traps for the unwary here."

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Mountains Out of Molehills

"A lot of things happening to women are very small things like somebody not being paid attention to in a meeting, or somebody making a suggestion that nobody follows up on. So those everyday occurrences, which

if a women notices, she is likely to be told 'not to make a mountain out of a mole hill'. And that's where the notion of accumulation of advantage comes in, because what it says is mountains are mole hills piled one on top of the other. So how do you become successful? You become successful by parleying small gains into bigger gains. If you don't get your share of small gains, you can't create big gains out of them. There's a computer simulation by Martel (1996) and his colleagues [where] they simulated an eight-level hierarchical organization, and they put equal numbers, 50/50 percent females and males at the bottom. And then they had a promotion process that would take somebody from one level to the next. And the promotion process was biased against women to a degree that accounted for 1% of the variance. And so they then

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repeated this promotion process until they completely turned over the fictitious organization and now the top was 65% male and 35% female. So their point was that a tiny amount of bias, repeatedly encountered, amounts in the

long haul to a mountain of advantage or disadvantage depending on what side you're on. So it's like compound interest, evolution, any small thing that repeats over time. The way I put these two notions together is *gender schemas result in all of us slightly undervaluing women and overvaluing men* in lots of these small occasions and sometimes not so small like in the letters of recommendation. And over time, that results in many fewer women being in positions of high status and responsibility than men."

Listening is Key

"One thing that's behind the general principles is the idea that you're going to make mistakes. We're all going to make mistakes because gender schemas are not going to go away anytime soon. We're all walking around with them. We're all making decisions on the basis of them and so we're going to make the wrong decision a fair percentage of the time, and what we want to do is put in place procedures that are going to help us correct the mistakes we're going to make, or not make them to begin with. Ok, so one other thing here is as a Chair, you get a lot of people complaining to you about a lot of things a lot of the time. And so you really don't want to hear more of those complaints, but I think it's really useful to talk to the people in your department to find out what their complaints are with respect to gender and to try to listen quietly and not defensively to what they

have to say. They don't necessarily know what the problem is, but they're a good place for you to start. They might say things that you can decide aren't really

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the problem, but it's useful for you to know what they perceive the problem to be. I have been on site visits where we first talk to the women and they have a very well articulated list of problems, and then we talk to the men, senior men usually, and as one of the people

on our recent site visits said, it's as if they're in two different organizations. So the men think everything is fine to the best of their knowledge, and there are no outstanding problems. There are certainly no problems that affect women differently from them. And the women have a laundry list of things that affect women differently than men. There's no way that you can know about those unless you ask people to tell you. And some people will only talk to you one-on-one because they don't want anybody else to know, and some people are only going to want to talk to you as members of a group because they will otherwise feel intimidated. So I think your job is to listen non-defensively and not to tell people all the reasons that they're wrong about what they're saying, but to register what they're saying, to take notes and to get back to them about what you've decided to do and what not to do and why. So I think showing respect for the opinions of [minority members] in your department is an important place to start."