



Why So Slow? The Advancement of Women

Valian, V. (1998), MIT Press, Cambridge MA

This note summarises the key points in Virginia Valian's important book and draws out the implications for leadership and leaders. If you can make the time to read it before attending **Aurora Core Leadership Skills**, and do the activities suggested at the end of the paper, you will get more out of the discussions on leadership on the day.

Virginia Valian poses the question of why so few women occupy positions of power and prestige. Valian uses concepts and data from psychology, sociology, economics, and biology to explain the disparity in the professional advancement of men and women. According to Valian, men and women alike have implicit hypotheses about gender differences—gender schemas—that create small sex differences in characteristics, behaviours, perceptions, and evaluations of men and women. Those small imbalances accumulate to advantage men and disadvantage women. The most important consequence of gender schemas for professional life is that men tend to be overrated and women underrated. Valian has supplemented her work in *Why So Slow* with publicly available tutorials which are also used in this summary of her work.

Schemas are similar to stereotypes. Valian prefers the term schema because it is more inclusive and more neutral. Schemas can apply to social groups such as men or women, different age groups, or different ethnic groups. We can have schemas for chairs and buildings. A schema is a hypothesis about the basics of some category. They are useful – they allow us to categorize people, objects and events around us. They help us to orient ourselves, to know what to expect and to make predictions.

Gender schemas are hypotheses about what it means to be male or female. We all, male and female alike, share these hypotheses, and the content of gender schemas is widely shared throughout a culture. Schemas assign different psychological traits to males and females. So for example we think of males as capable of independent action, as oriented to the task in hand, and as doing things for a reason. We think of females as nurturing, expressive and behaving communally.

Our schemas about males and females directly include expectations about their professional competence and they bias our interpretation of actual performance. Put simply, we expect men to do well, and see men's actual performance in the light of these expectations. Conversely we expect women to do less well, and see their actual performance in the light of our negative expectations. Men carry a small plus sign and women a small minus sign. These expectations colour our judgments about men and women, even in the case of objective characteristics like height. In one study of height college students were shown photographs of other students and estimated their height in feet and inches (all the photographs contained a reference item such as a desk or doorway, so that height could be accurately estimated). For every photo of a male student of a given height the experimenters had included a female student of the same height. The students were affected by their knowledge that on average men are taller than women. They judged the women as shorter than they really were and the men as taller (Biernat, Manis & Nelson, 1991). There were no differences in how male and female observers perceived the photos.

Gender schemas will also affect judgement about professional competence. Men and women are likely to overvalue men and undervalue women because our schema for males is a better fit for professional success when matched against what it means to be professionally competent and successful. Gender schemas will play a large role in evaluations wherever, firstly, schemas make a clear differentiation between males and females, which they do for professional competence as much as for height, and secondly, when evidence is ambiguous and open to interpretation, as is the case with professional competence.

Leadership

The impact of these phenomena on the career chances for women are significant particularly when women aspire to positions of leadership.

In another experiment, the head-of-the-table experiment, Porter and Geis (1981) showed college students slides of five people seated round a table. The group was described as working together on a project. Two people sat at each side and one person sat at the head of the table. Some students saw a group in which all the people were male, others a group in which all the people were female, and yet others a group that included both males and females. Students were asked to say who was the leader of the group.



In the same-sex group, students consistently identified the man or woman sitting at the head of the table as the leader. In mixed-sex groups, if a man was at the head of the table, students saw him as the leader. But if a woman was at the head of the table, students labelled her as the leader about half the time and labelled a man seated elsewhere at the table as the leader about equally often. There were no differences between male and female observers, both made the same judgements.

In a study of applications for post-doctoral fellowships from the Swedish Medical Research Council, 46% of applicants were women but only 20% of fellowships were awarded to women. Researchers (Wenneras & Wold, 1997) found that men received higher scientific competence ratings than women, and this led to their higher success rate. But an investigation of the objective characteristics used to make these judgements included something called 'total impact points', which was a combination of productivity and the prestige of journals in which the scientist had published. The model worked well for predicting men's scientific competence ratings, but not women's. Women had to receive 100 or more impact points to get the same rating from the fellowship judges than a man with 40 or fewer impact points received.

These judgements and evaluations, which consistently under-rate women and over-rate men, have a cumulative effect. Each individual instance may seem small and relatively insignificant; over time these small imbalances build up to disadvantage women. A small amount of bias will accumulate over time. For example, a very small bias in promoting men (1% variability in promotion), beginning at the bottom level, over time and a series of promotional steps, will result in a 65% male representation at the top level (Martell, Lane & Emrich, 1996). In practice the small differences in evaluations by men and women, of men and women, culminates over time in women's smaller salaries, compared to men, and women's slower rates of promotion.

Questions for reflection

What instances of small disadvantages do you notice in your own workplace in relation to women? To what extent do leaders seem aware of these disadvantages?
What could you do to draw attention to the disadvantages?
Identify one female leader and one male leader in your own workplace. Consider how they are each perceived by your colleagues.

References

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- Porter, N. & Geis, F. L. (1981). Women and nonverbal leadership cues: When seeing is not believing. In C. Mayo & N. Henley (Eds.), *Gender and nonverbal behavior*. New York: Springer Verlag.
- Tutorials for Change, 509 Thomas Hunter Hall Department of Psychology Hunter College of the City University of New York 695 Park Avenue, New York NY 10021
www.hunter.cuny.edu/gendertutorial/tutorial1.html
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- Wenneras, C. & Wold, A. (1997). Nepotism and sexism in peer-review. *Nature*, 387, pp.341-343

Additional reading

Eagly, A. H., Karau, S. J., & Makhijani, M. G. (1995). Gender and the effectiveness of leaders: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 117, 125-145.

This meta-analysis of studies which concentrated on evaluations of women as leaders suggests that women are particularly disadvantaged when their style of leading is masculine. Having a style that is assertive to the point of appearing autocratic, rather than cooperative and participative, is especially costly for a woman. When experiments investigated the effects of autocratic leaders - leaders who told people what to do without consulting them - women were especially negatively evaluated. A highly assertive style is incongruent with our conception of women and women are penalized if they adopt such a style. There are no differences between males and females in their judgments.

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