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Upfront

What Women *Don't* Want: *How male managers' patronizing behavior undercuts female subordinates' performance.*

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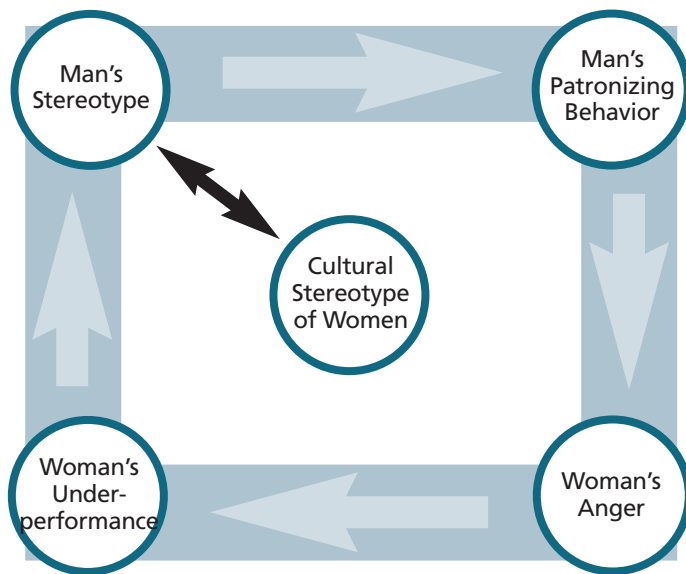
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THE CYCLE OF SEXISM



What Women *Don't* Want

How male managers' patronizing behavior undercuts female subordinates' performance

Since women make up over 70 percent of the independent sector's workforce, nonprofits and foundations have a big stake in understanding what women want.

Social psychologist Theresa Vescio and colleagues recently found that women decidedly don't want patronizing, paternalistic male managers. In two laboratory experiments, Vescio, Sarah Gervais, and Ann Hoover of Pennsylvania State University and Mark Snyder of the University of Minnesota showed that patronizing males not only made their female subordinates angry, but also caused them to underperform on logic and math problems.

In the article, published in the April 2005 issue of the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, the authors defined patronizing behavior as giving subordinates too much praise while withholding valued resources like higher pay, better positions, and greater responsibility. This hypocritical combination of nice compliments with mean stinginess "allows sexism to slip under the

radar, in part because it's hard for men to see that they're being discriminatory when they're giving praise," Vescio says.

It may also be hard for women to know how to handle powerful men's paternalism. "Openly hostile men are easy to detect, label, and avoid," notes Vescio. "But patronizing behaviors are confusing" because they arrive sugarcoated.

Vescio explains that the ambivalence in men's patronizing behaviors stems from the ambivalence rooted in the female stereotype. The negative side of the stereotype says things like "Women are incompetent and weak," while the positive side says things like "Women are nurturing and sweet." When the female stereotype is on men's minds, its negative side may steer them to withhold resources from their female subordinates, who are deemed too incompetent to deserve them. At the same time, the positive side of the stereotype may lead men to shower female subordinates with praise – especially when women turn out to be more

competent than expected. Vescio points out that most of this "thinking" takes place outside of men's awareness.

To test their ideas, the authors first created an experimental situation to summon the female stereotype. They then observed how undergraduate participants designated as "team captains" assigned positions and praise to unseen male and female teammates via e-mail. (Unbeknownst to participants, there were no other teammates; participants were interacting with a computer program.) Participants in the stereotyping condition were told to focus on each other's weaknesses, while participants

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in the control condition were told to focus on each other's strengths.

Vescio and colleagues found that weakness-focused men both assigned women to lower-status positions and gave them higher praise. However, strength-focused men did not exhibit these patronizing behaviors. "Men patronize women when they are focused on removing 'weak links,'"

Vescio concludes. She also notes that women did not patronize their subordinates in any condition.

The researchers then crafted a second experiment to explore how patronizing men affect women's emotions and subsequent performance. Participants in this study received positions and praise from an unseen male team captain via e-mail. Women whose e-mails assigned them to low-status positions, but at the same time offered lots of gratuitous praise, reported being angrier than people in all other conditions – including low-

status women who were not praised. They also performed worst on the cognitive test.

Vescio concludes that “it’s the patronizing behavior that is driving the gender differences in performance. When women get no resources and no praise, they don’t [underperform] on these tasks.”

Vescio further noted that patronizing behaviors may not just undermine women’s performance in the workplace, but may also fuel the broader cycle of sexism. “When female subordinates underperform, they reinforce

stereotypes of women as incompetent,” Vescio says. Managers’ repeatedly reinforced stereotypes may in turn lead them to discriminate against women again in the future.

Vescio’s findings suggest one easy way to reduce patronizing behavior: Concentrate on cultivating employees’ strengths, rather than on identifying their weaknesses. Luckily, this is something both women and men want.

–A.C.S.