



# Managing to clear the air: Stereotype threat, women, and leadership

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## ABSTRACT

In this article, we explore the process and implications of stereotype threat for women in leadership, broadly construed. First, we provide a brief background on the phenomenon of stereotype threat generally. Next, we explore stereotype threat for women in leadership by reviewing a model of stereotype threat in leadership contexts that includes cues to stereotype threat, consequences of stereotype threat, and moderators of stereotype threat appraisals and responses. In this review, in addition to considering research focused squarely on leadership, we include the broader categories of research examining stereotype threat effects in the workplace and in tasks and domains relevant to leadership. Finally, we examine implications for future research and explore practices to reduce the potential for negative stereotype threat effects.

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## Introduction

Today, women hold a greater percentage of leadership roles in political life and the workforce than ever before both in the United States (Pew Research Center Social and Demographic Trends, 2015) and around the world (World Economic Forum, 2014). Nonetheless, women remain woefully underrepresented in the upper echelons of corporations and political systems (Catalyst, 2015; Center for American Women & Politics, 2015; Lawless & Fox, 2012.). The importance of promoting more women into leadership roles is greater than just fulfilling the promise of equal opportunity and making businesses, institutions, and governments more representative. Evidence is clear that fostering full participation for women is important for promoting a prosperous and civil society. Research suggests that women tend to adopt leadership styles that are particularly well suited for the complexity of contemporary organizations and can translate into enhanced institutional effectiveness (Eagly & Carli, 2003; Eagly, Gartzia, & Carli, 2014). Furthermore, women can bring unique and important perspectives and priorities that serve to promote positive social outcomes and greater ethical accountability (Eagly et al., 2014). However, the realization of these potential advantages can be hampered by the disadvantage female leaders experience as the target of negative stereotype-based expectations.

Many explanations have been offered for why women have difficulty in reaching top leadership positions and chief among them is the stereotype-based lack of fit between women's characteristics, skills, and aspirations and those deemed necessary for effective leadership. Gender stereotype-based expectations not only affect who people see as "fitting" the preconceived notion of a leader, but they also affect women themselves. In this article, we focus on the impact that these gender-based expectations

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can have on women in leadership. Women are often acutely aware that their treatment in leadership situations may be contingent upon their gender. Female leaders often find themselves in a double bind: highly communal women are criticized for being deficient leaders, and highly agentic women experience backlash for not being female enough (Eagly et al., 2014; Heilman, 2001; Heilman & Okimoto, 2007; Heilman, Wallen, Fuchs, & Tamkins, 2004; Rudman & Glick, 1999, 2001). In other words, in leadership situations women often experience “social identity contingencies” which “are possible judgments, stereotypes, opportunities, restrictions, and treatments that are tied to one’s social identity in a given setting” (Purdie-Vaughns, Steele, Davies, Dittmann, & Crosby, 2008, p. 615). In these situations, women may experience *stereotype threat* defined as “the concrete, real-time threat of being judged and treated poorly in settings where a negative stereotype about one’s group applies” (Steele, Spencer, & Aronson, 2002, p. 385). In the domain of leadership, stereotype-based expectations of inferiority can be psychologically burdensome for women and can contribute to their underrepresentation (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman, 1995).

### *Gender, leadership, and women’s “lack of fit”*

People have intuitive and preconceived notions of what it means to be a leader, termed implicit leadership theories, and people evaluate their leaders and potential leaders in reference to them (Forsyth & Nye, 2008; Kenney, Schwartz-Kenney, & Blascovich, 1996; Lord & Maher, 1991). In addition to reflecting personality traits and behaviors, these implicit leadership theories often reflect social identities associated with traditional leaders (Hoyt & Chemers, 2008). Two social identities commonly associated with elite leadership include being White and being male. These White and masculine leadership standards can result in biased perceptions and evaluations of people who do not fit the image of a leader, such as women (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Johnson, Murphy, Zewdie & Reichard, 2008; Koenig, Eagly, Mitchell, & Ristikari, 2011; Rosette, Leonardelli, & Phillips, 2008).

The notion that women do not fit the image of a leader has been articulated in both Heilman’s (1983, 2001) lack of fit model and Eagly and Karau’s (2002) role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders. The female gender stereotype is largely incongruent with the leadership role (Eagly, 2004; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman, 2001). Gender stereotypes are generalizations about the attributes of men and women that are shared in a society and include both descriptive components (i.e., describing how women and men are) and prescriptive components (i.e., prescribing how women and men should or should not be; Burgess & Borgida, 1999; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Glick & Fiske, 1999; Heilman, 2012). The particular gender stereotypes most relevant to the domain of leadership are those maintaining that “women take care” and “men take charge” (Dodge, Gilroy & Fenzel, 1995; Heilman, 2001; Hoyt, 2010). Specifically, women are associated with communal characteristics that highlight a concern for others, whereas men are viewed as possessing rationality and agentic characteristics that emphasize confidence, self-reliance, and dominance (Deaux & Kite, 1993; Eagly, Wood, & Diekmann, 2000; Williams & Best, 1990). The qualities used to describe men are similar to those used to describe effective leaders resulting in men being viewed as a better “fit” with the leader role than women (Koenig et al., 2011).

These stereotype-based expectations of inferiority can be threatening to women and can contribute to the shortage of female leaders across diverse occupations (Block, Koch, Liberman, Merriweather, & Roberson, 2011) from law (Vault/MCCA, 2013) to academic medicine (Burgess, Joseph, van Ryn, & Carnes, 2012). The pernicious effects of gender stereotype-based threat can result in performance decrements that can accumulate over time and result in disengagement and decreased leadership aspirations. Chronically experiencing threat can result in women leaving professions early in their careers before they reach high-level leadership positions. Gender-based stereotype threat can be particularly malignant in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) fields (Good, Aronson, & Harder, 2008; Shapiro & Williams, 2012); it can cause women to disidentify with an entire profession and leave few women in the pipeline to assume leadership roles.

In this article, we explore the process and implications of stereotype threat for women in leadership, broadly construed. First, we provide a brief background on the phenomenon of stereotype threat generally. Second, we explore stereotype threat as it pertains to women in leadership by introducing a model of stereotype threat in leadership contexts that includes both cues to and consequences of stereotype threat as well as moderators of stereotype threat appraisals and responses. In this review, in addition to considering research focused squarely on leadership, we include the broader category of research examining stereotype threat effects in the workplace and in tasks and domains relevant to leadership. In other words, to understand the effects of stereotype threat on female leaders, it is important to consider how gender stereotypes can be threatening in the workplace (Kray & Shirako, 2011), in entrepreneurship (Baron, Markman & Hirska, 2001), in specific tasks critical to effective leadership such as negotiations and decision making (Kray & Haselhuhn, 2008), and within specific domains including STEM. Leadership excellence in each of these tasks and these domains is often associated with stereotypically masculine traits such as rationality and agency (Kalokerinos, von Hippel, & Zacher, 2014; Kray & Shirako, 2011). Finally, we examine implications for future research, and we explore practices to reduce the potential for negative stereotype threat effects.

### **Background on stereotype threat**

Members of marginalized social groups are often acutely aware of the stereotypes associated with their social group, and they are aware that others may respond to them based on these stereotypes. Starting with the seminal work by Steele and Aronson (1995), stereotype threat has been one of the most widely studied topics in the field of social psychology (Steele, 1997; Steele et al., 2002). Thinking that one is being evaluated through the lens of negative stereotypes can focus a person’s attention on the negative aspects of a stereotype and serve to undermine achievement (e.g., Steele & Aronson, 1995). A robust body of research

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