



Choosing between two semi-finalists: On academic performance gap, sex category, and decision question



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ABSTRACT

We use an application-files experimental design to investigate a new topic in the assessment of candidates for junior-engineering jobs. Our focus is on two semi-finalists, a man and a woman, who show clearly different but still good levels of academic record. We keep the gap between those levels constant, but vary the sex category of the better performer. We also include control conditions in which the two have similar records. Each assessor's task was to choose either one applicant or neither, and to rate both in competence and suitability. The control-group competence ratings indicate no gender bias by either men or women; the experimental-conditions competence data are consistent with the candidates' records as predicted, but also show women minimizing the record of the better-performing male candidate. Choice and suitability, on the other hand, reveal a preference for the female applicant across respondents and conditions, as anticipated given the more open nature of those two questions, while still reflecting the academic records. Findings and their interpretation are presented in detail.

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1. Theoretical and empirical background

This article concerns the formal assessment of candidates who are competing for a valuable position. Many everyday contexts are examples of such competitions: applications for jobs, fellowships, promotions, and admission to post-secondary programs. Our interest here is in those situations in which a small number of semi-finalists hold similar qualifications for the position in question. It is often the case that, at that stage, the assessors' final decisions are influenced by considerations other than each candidate's performance record, such as his or her social status on one or more dimensions. Social identity, affect, political correctness, and/or an intention to redress past employment discrimination against members of a social category are frequently additional factors in those decisions.

Our theoretical background is expectation states theory (Berger and Webster, 2006; Berger et al., 2014; Bianchi, 2010), the long-established research program on status relations in task groups. A status characteristic is defined in this tradition as any socially valued attribute consisting of at least two levels, one implying higher worth (prestige) than the other and, in

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turn, a higher degree of task competence. Findings originating in this program show the predicted status effects from characteristics such as sex category, ethnicity/race, academic performance and organizational rank in a wide variety of settings and population samples (see references above).¹

The present work is part of the more recently developed branch of this program that investigates double standards (namely, requirements) for competence (Berger and Webster, 2006, pp. 287–288; Foschi, 2000).² This branch combines ideas from the two main components of expectation states theory, namely “evaluations and expectations” and “status characteristics.” The focus of double-standards research is on situations in which two or more persons who differ on social status have performed a valued task at a similar level. Are those performances sufficient to counter status effects? Work in this area proposes that often they are not, and that the social mechanism that contributes to the assignment of different degrees of competence to the performers is the activation of a stricter standard for those perceived to be of lower status. This activation is not necessarily conscious. For a formal presentation of these ideas, see Foschi (1989). Examples of the more recent research on performance expectations and double standards, and evidence of the use of this mechanism are: Correll (2004), Correll et al. (2007), Faure and Ndobo (2012), Foschi (2009), Gorman (2006), Quintero (2008), and Thébaud (2010); for a review of work in this area, see Berger et al. (2014, pp. 25–26) and Foschi (2000, pp. 28–32). The research also shows that double standards are usually manifested in subtle rather than overt ways.

Initially, expectation states theory was formulated to apply to a setting in which two persons (“self” and “other”) are engaged in performing a task as a team. Work on double standards is an elaboration and extension of the original ideas of that theory and combines aspects of its two main branches, namely “evaluations and expectations” and “status characteristics.” Double-standards research includes settings in which self is not a performer but rather an assessor of the task competence of performing others – and no collective task is involved (see Foschi, 1989, p. 67, 2000, p. 26). For examples of work in which expectation-states ideas are successfully applied to settings that do not involve collective orientation, see Correll (2004), Lovaglia et al. (1998, three experiments), and Thébaud (2010). In all of these studies participants assessed their own individual skills (either performance on a mental ability test, or career aspirations, or entrepreneurial activity). The differentiating status factors were (i) self’s sex-category in combination with cultural beliefs about gender – either appraised by the participants themselves (Thébaud, 2010) or manipulated experimentally (Correll, 2004) and (ii) random assignment to either higher or lower status for the task at hand (Lovaglia et al., 1998). Furthermore, Correll et al. (2007) report on two experiments in which participants rate a pair of candidates who vary in parental status; Foschi et al. (1994) had used a similar design to investigate two applicants differing in sex category. All of these studies reveal, as predicted, status effects outside a collective setting, and offer discussions of the extension of status characteristics theory to such situations; see in particular Lovaglia et al. (1998, pp. 204–206).³

The related topic of “shifting standards” has been the subject of extensive and significant research by Biernat (2005) and her colleagues; note as well Uhlmann and Cohen’s (2005) work on “constructed criteria.” An analogous notion introduced earlier in the social psychology literature is that of “idiosyncrasy credits” – or advantages (entitlements) that some categories of performers receive simply because of who they are (Hollander, 1958).

It is worth noting, in addition, that there are double standards for other qualities, such as beauty and morality (see, e.g., Foschi, 2000, pp. 35–36) and that these are outside the scope of the present work. Moreover, as we discuss later in Section 2, there are situations in which *reverse* double-standards are activated, that is, requirements that are more lenient for those of lower-status as defined in their larger social context (see, e.g., Jasso and Webster, 1999, p. 378).

1.1. The current study

In this article we extend the ideas on double standards that have been tested so far and investigate a new research topic in this area. We consider two candidates, a man and a woman, both with good qualifications for a junior position in engineering. Rather than studying, as in previous work, the case of equivalent qualifications by two performers, here we focus on the situation in which one of them is clearly (although not substantially) better than the other *by the same extent*, and we vary the sex category of the superior performer. Our question is: would the same performance-gap between the two records be interpreted in similar terms? For example, would the man’s academic advantage over his female competitor be seen as larger than the advantage held by the woman relative to her male counterpart? No earlier double-standards study has investigated this topic. For our case of central interest, we chose good (i.e., mid-range) rather than either excellent or poor performances

¹ We treat “qualifications,” “performance record” and “academic grades” as synonyms. We also use “competence,” “ability” and “skill” interchangeably. Regarding competence and suitability, since we refer to perceptions of these qualities rather than actual possession, we also treat “perceived,” “inferred,” “attributed” and “assigned” as synonyms and often rely on abbreviations (e.g., “competence” instead of “perceived competence”). We use “sex category” (and sometimes simply “sex”) when our objective is merely to refer to individuals as either men or women (as per their self-reports), and use “gender” when we want to emphasize cultural aspects associated with this difference. We use “gender bias” and “sex-category bias” to denote a preference for either the male or the female performer and clarify, as needed, the direction of the preference.

² If the status factor has more than two levels (e.g., three groupings of skin color or four categories of socio-economic class) and each activates a different standard, then the standard is *multiple*. For simplicity, however, here we use “double standards” as the generic term. The practice occurs too if the performances have been judged to be equally poor, and the higher-status person is treated less harshly in the assessment of *incompetence*.

³ As a scope condition of the initial formulation of status characteristics theory, collective orientation ensures that two persons constituting a task group assess their relative competences to achieve the group’s goal. The studies listed in this paragraph illustrate that either such a comparison may be achieved through other design-decisions (as in the present experiment) or that the social status of a single performer can be sufficient to activate competence beliefs.

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