Why So Slow?
The Advancement of Women

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The MIT Press
Cambridge, Massachusetts
London, England
Evaluating Women and Men

It is the first day of my upper-level university seminar entitled Gender and Achievement. All the students, who range in age from 18 to 40, are women. They come from a variety of social and ethnic backgrounds and have, or intend to have, professional careers. If asked explicitly, they would all say that women are as professionally capable as men. To begin the course, we conduct an experiment that is a short variation of one the students will soon learn about. First, they are given a checklist of descriptive phrases, such as "has leadership ability," and are asked to rate the "typical woman" on those qualities. Then they rate the "typical man" and, finally, "the typical successful manager."

When I analyze the data afterward, I am not surprised to find that the students have rated women lower than men on many of the characteristics seen as typical of successful managers. That is why I performed the experiment. I wanted to show the women something they would have rejected and denied if I had told it to them directly: that they believe, implicitly, that women in general have fewer of the abilities needed to be successful professionals than men do. Our gender schemas for women do not include professional competence.

Perceptions of Leadership

In the study on which I based the in-class experiment, the investigators asked several groups of male managers ranging in age from 24 to 63 to rate different groups of people on a series of adjectives (Heilman, Block, Martell, & Simon 1989). The first group rated successful managers on ninety-two different characteristics according to how typical of the group
they thought each quality was. The characteristics ranged from leadership ability to fearfulness. Most people, naturally, rated successful managers as typically high in leadership ability and low in fearfulness. A second group rated women in general on the same qualities, and a third group rated men in general. The managers’ ratings of men in general and successful managers were very similar, much more similar than their ratings of women in general and successful managers.

The 1989 study was a replication of a 1973 study in which male managers also rated men as having many more of the characteristics typical of successful managers than women had (Schein 1973). Sixteen years later, male managers’ attitudes had not changed.

In the 1989 study, however, several groups of male managers rated two additional categories, successful female and successful male managers. Once “successful manager” was explicitly part of the definition of women, most of the sex differences in the ratings disappeared. But an important difference, perhaps the most important difference, remained: even successful women managers were perceived as having less leadership ability than successful men managers. Furthermore, women managers were seen as possessing negative qualities that men managers did not have, such as being bitter, quarrelsome, and selfish.

The experiments did not address men’s and women’s actual qualities but only male managers’ perceptions of them. Women might in fact have less leadership ability than men; they might in fact be more likely than men to be bitter, quarrelsome, and selfish. The experiments don’t tell us. What they tell us is that a woman selected at random who aspires to a management position will initially be seen by her superiors as less likely to succeed than a comparable man. Even if she is as capable as a man, she will initially be regarded as less capable.

As the example about perceptions of height discussed in chapter 1 demonstrates, even an accurate schema—such as that women are on the average shorter than men—can yield inaccurate perceptions and judgments. People will mistakenly see women who are as tall as men as shorter than men. In the case of leadership, the schema may or may not be accurate; we have no ruler for measuring leadership. But even if the schema is accurate, it will yield inaccurate perceptions and judgments of individuals. People will misjudge women who do possess leadership ability, perceiving them as less capable than they really are.

Even when a woman bears the traditional emblems of leadership, she will not necessarily be perceived as a leader. In another study of leadership perception, college students were shown slides of five people sitting around a table (Porter & Geis 1981). 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. Sometimes all the people were male, sometimes they were all female, and sometimes the group included both males and females.

When asked to identify the leader of same-sex groups, the students always identified the man or woman sitting at the head of the table. In mixed-sex groups, the students identified a man at the head of the table as the leader. But when a woman was at the head, the students did not reliably label her the leader; instead, they labeled a man seated elsewhere as the leader about equally often.

Several points about this experiment are worth noting. First, failing to perceive a woman at the head of a table as the leader may have no discriminatory impetus behind it. On average, a woman is less likely to be a leader of a group than a man is—perhaps even when she is sitting at the head of the table. Observers may be responding to the situation only on the basis of what is most likely, and men are more often leaders, wherever they sit.

It is also important to notice, though, that regardless of the reason, a female leader sitting at the head of a table loses out compared to a male leader. The symbolic position of leadership carries less symbolic weight for her. She is less likely to obtain the automatic deference that marks of leadership confer upon men. Her position will be weakened—even if observers do not intend to undermine her authority. Finally, it is important to notice that male and female observers see the situation in the same way: they are both less likely to perceive women as leaders. Gender schemas affect us all.

Perceptions of Competence

Other studies look at how a woman fares when her qualifications are identical to a man’s. In one study, fictitious résumé summaries of ten psychologists with Ph.D.s were sent to 147 heads of psychology departments (Fidell 1975). The chairs were asked to rank the psychologists according
to the professorial rank they should be hired at. The summaries contained information about productivity, teaching, administrative work, and sociability. Four of the fictitious names were female, and six were male. The names were rotated in such a way that the same résumé sometimes carried a male name and sometimes a female name. The résumés with male names were assigned the middle rank of associate professor. When the same résumés carried female names, however, they were assigned the entry-level rank of assistant professor. The identical qualifications bought a man a higher rank than a woman. This occurred even though the men and women were rated as equally desirable appointments.

In an actual situation, it is hard to know the reasons for a woman's lack of success relative to a man's. An individual may be properly judged as performing below the standard of her profession. Alternatively, her evaluators might be unable to judge her accurately. In an experiment, the researcher can tease apart the contributions of the judge and the person being judged. In the résumé experiment, the department chairs were affected by their preconceptions about which gender has more professional ability and perceived candidates' qualifications for a given rank in those terms. Other studies report similar findings. A review of several studies on the relationship between gender and the likelihood that a candidate will be recommended for hiring found an overall advantage in favor of men (Olian, Schwab, & Haberfeld 1988). The phenomenon of overrating men and underrating women job candidates appears to be widespread.

Once women achieve positions of authority, however, subordinates appear to evaluate them as positively as they do men. When asked to evaluate managers in equivalent positions in a research and development organization, the people who worked under them rated male and female managers equally positively (Ragins 1991). It may be more difficult for a woman to achieve a position of power, but once she attains it she appears to receive equal recognition and respect from subordinates. That holds whether the subordinates are male or female.

Subordinates' evaluations, however, are not necessarily shared by other people in the organization or by outsiders. Managers wield power over the people below them, but not over peers, their own supervisors, or outsiders. Another study examined supervisors' ratings of the low- and mid-level managers who worked directly under them in three different companies (Greenhaus & Parasuraman 1993). The data, collected in the 1980s, showed that female managers were just as likely as males to receive highly successful job-performance ratings from their supervisors. Yet, in evaluating the extent to which highly successful managers' achievements were due to ability (as opposed, for example, to hard work), the supervisors rated the male managers as having more ability. For managers who were rated as only moderately successful, there were no sex differences in their supervisors' ability ratings.

The results suggest that moderate success in low- or mid-level positions does not violate gender schemas. Supervisors do not see moderate success as unusual for women (Greenhaus & Parasuraman 1993). High success, however, is less compatible with the female gender schema; one way of retaining the schema is to attribute women's high success not to their ability but to other factors, like hard work.

In sum, studies of managers suggest that both subordinates and supervisors can recognize the high achievements of women managers. In the eyes of their supervisors, however, women's success may be attributed to factors other than ability.

Perceptions of Assertiveness

When women actively adopt an assertive leadership style, they are perceived more negatively than men. The focus of one laboratory study was people's facial reactions to men and women trained to act as leaders, co-leaders, or nonleaders (Butler & Geis 1990). The study demonstrates that both women and men—nonconsciously but visibly—react negatively to women who take a leadership role in a group trying to solve a problem. People respond especially negatively to women's attempts to be assertive.

The experiment is worth describing in detail. The researchers created a common everyday situation, a meeting of four people who had ten minutes to reach a decision. Their task was to rank the usefulness of nine items (such as a first-aid kit and a map) to a person who had crash-landed on the moon. Two members of each group—one male and one female—were naive participants, undergraduate college students. The other two members—also one male and one female—were upper-level undergraduates trained to play three different roles. In one role the student acted as
a leader, using a friendly, cooperative, and pleasantly assertive style. In another role, she or he acted as a nonleader. In a third role the student acted as coleader with the other trained student. The trained students rotated their roles from one group to another so that they each performed each role an equal number of times.

During the group meeting, one trained student proposed four items as very important and four as less important. The other trained student proposed a list that reversed the importance of the items. That scenario corresponds to common work situations in which different people have different goals that they want to persuade others to implement. The trained students followed well-practiced scripts in which they presented their reasons for preferring some items over others. In that way, regardless of whether a female or male student was proposing an item, the suggestions, proposals, and reasons given were identical, and the styles were as similar as possible.

The experimenters' main interest was the subtle reactions of the naive participants to the females and males who were making the same suggestions in the same way. The researchers observed the groups to measure the naive participants' negative and positive facial reactions to the proposals. Facial reactions, because they are under less direct control than verbal comments, are a good, subtle measure of a person's response to another person.

As expected on the basis of gender schemas, no matter which role they played, the trained females received a greater number of negative facial reactions than positive ones. The trained males, by contrast, always received more positive reactions than negative ones. Overall, the females also received more negative reactions than the males did. Those data show that women in general are perceived less positively than men in problem-solving situations, even when they adopt the role of a nonleader.

The particular role adopted, however, also made a difference in the number of reactions the trained students received. When the students played the role of nonleader, they received, as might be expected, the fewest reactions of any sort. When they played the role of leader, both men and women received more negative reactions as well as more positive reactions. An assertive leader appears to arouse a certain amount of resentment in other group members, even when the leader is male. For male leaders, though, the negative reactions they receive are more than offset by positive reactions. Men end up with a net gain. For female leaders, on the other hand, the negative reactions outnumber the positive ones. Women end up with a net loss.2

When the naive participants were queried afterward about the personalities of the trained students, they rated the trained males in each leadership condition as having more ability, skill, and intelligence than the corresponding females. The females were rated as too emotional, relative to the males. When the females served as leaders or coleaders, they were perceived as bossy and dominating relative to the males. Yet, in answering questions designed to measure any explicit bias against women, the naive participants expressed none. They may have been sincerely egalitarian in their overt beliefs, but their facial reactions and personal evaluations revealed their underlying beliefs.

To be sure that the trained students' performances were equal, the experimenters videotaped some sessions and asked a separate group of people to rate the students' performances on a variety of measures. The experimenters found no differences between male and female students on most measures, including aggressiveness; the male and female confederates used exactly the same content and the same cooperative and pleasantly assertive style.

The one difference that independent coders observed between the trained males and females was that women talked more than the men did when they were leaders or coleaders. The reason for that difference was that the naive participants paid less attention to the women than to the men; for example, they made fewer facial reactions to the women per minute of talking time than they did to the men. Since the trained students' job, as leader or coleader, was to influence the naive participants to accept their suggestions, the women had to speak more in order to obtain equal attention for their ideas. This finding coincides with the experience of professional women, who frequently get the impression that they receive less attention than men and that their suggestions are more likely to be ignored than the same suggestions coming from men. Those perceptions are likely to be accurate. Objectively, women are attended to less, even when they say the same things in the same way as men do.

When women attempt to be leaders they lose, relative to men, in three steps. First, they are attended to less; they have more difficulty than men do in gaining and keeping the floor. Second, when women do speak and
behave like leaders, they receive negative reactions from their cohorts, even when the content and manner of their presentations are identical to men’s. Men are encouraged to be leaders by the reactions of those around them, and women are discouraged from being leaders by the reactions of those same people. Third, even observers with no overt bias are affected by negative reactions to women leaders and tend to go along with the group judgment.

An incident illustrating the problems women encounter in getting and keeping the floor occurred at a professional conference I attended in 1994. Immediately after the first talk of a session held in a large auditorium I raised my hand to ask a question of the male speaker, whom I had never met. I was seated in the middle of the fourth row, directly in his line of vision. He saw my raised hand but called on a man two rows behind me. The man asked his question and then a lengthy follow-up question.

When the speaker finished answering I immediately raised my hand again. The speaker looked at me for a second time and then called on a man in the last row of the auditorium. The second man asked his question and a follow-up question.

When the speaker finished answering I immediately raised my hand a third time. The speaker looked at me for the third time and began to call on yet a third man. Perhaps my face showed astonishment. Perhaps the speaker realized on his own that he was about to pass me by for the third time. For whatever reason, he stopped and said, “I guess you were next.” I asked my question, which the speaker answered. I opened my mouth to ask my follow-up question, but the speaker was already calling on the third man.

The studies reviewed thus far suggest that the event was a net loss for me. To the extent that my difficulty in getting the floor was noticed, it was likely to be perceived by those who did not know me as a difficulty that would be encountered by someone with nothing worthwhile to say. Similarly, to the extent that my being prevented from asking a follow-up question was noticed it was likely to be perceived as due to the lack of interest of my question.

Another laboratory study has shown that evaluators rate an individual’s comments positively if the people around the individual respond to them positively and negatively if the surrounding people respond negatively (Brown & Geis 1984). Thus, it is likely that the speaker’s lack of interest in what I had to say negatively influenced other people in the auditorium—again to the extent that they registered the incident.

During a break at the same conference I overheard a conversation about the morning session. One man asked a woman what she thought of a talk that had criticized her theory. She said she thought the speaker had misrepresented her theory. The man said, “Oh, why didn’t you say something?” She replied, “I tried. I had my hand raised the whole time, but he called on five other people.”

The combined results of the studies reviewed in this section indicate that women face a very difficult situation. In trying to assume leadership, a woman will have to work overtime to get people’s attention and, when she does, is likely to evoke disproportionately negative facial reactions from those she is trying to influence. Those reactions, in turn, will have a negative effect on other observers who might originally have been neutral or undecided. Because all concerned are unaware of the extent to which they are affected by the woman’s gender, they will attribute their reaction to the woman’s lesser ability, or to her bossiness. Thus, even a woman who is herself completely unaffected by and indifferent to the reactions of those around her will have a tough time being a successful leader.

The extent to which we perceive men and women as leaders is relevant to women’s chances of professional achievement. It is harder to be a leader if the people around you do not perceive or accept you as a leader. The studies reviewed thus far—whether the evaluators are business managers, heads of academic departments, or college students—converge. Evaluators see leadership and professional ability as masculine traits that are valued more positively when displayed by men than when displayed by women.

The Cost for a Woman of Being Masculine

A meta-analysis of studies concentrating on evaluations of women as leaders suggests that women are at a particular disadvantage when their leadership style is perceived as masculine (Eagly, Makhijani, & Klonisky 1992). Having a style that is assertive to the point of appearing autocratic, rather than cooperative and participative, is especially costly for a woman. In experiments investigating the effects of autocratic leaders—
bosses who tell their subordinates what to do without consulting them—women received especially negative evaluations. The reviewers hypothesize that a highly assertive style is incongruent with our conception of women and that women are penalized if they adopt such a style. Ann Hopkins, the woman who failed to make partner at Price Waterhouse despite her outstanding achievements (see chapters 6 and 13), is a vivid example of the consequences for women of behaving in a masculine manner (Fiske, Bersoff, Borgida, Deaux, & Heilman 1991). Her evaluators advised her to wear make-up and go to charm school.

The meta-analysis also concludes that women whose styles are identical to men’s are seen as more task-oriented than men (Eagly et al. 1992). A focused woman appears more focused on business than an equally focused man, because being oriented to the demands of the job is seen as a masculine characteristic. Being masculine is not noteworthy for men, but it is for women.

Yet another, later, meta-analysis notes that leaders are likely to be judged in terms of the fit between their sex and the conception of the job (Eagly; Karau, & Makhijani 1995). If the job is seen as masculine, men will be considered more effective leaders, but if the job is characterized as feminine, women will be perceived as better leaders. Whether a job is seen as masculine or feminine depends, in turn, on whether it requires typical masculine characteristics, such as task-orientation, or typical feminine characteristics, such as cooperativeness.

About fifteen years ago a friend informed me that when she telephoned people to ask them something she should first inquire how they were. I protested that it was a time-consuming and transparently phony practice, since I obviously didn’t care at that moment how they were; moreover, when people called me I preferred them to get right to the point. She explained that people knew you weren’t interested in how they were right then, but that the formalities made the interchange less abrupt and brusque. (So now I usually remember to say, “How are you?”) The data suggest that a man’s getting down to business would be perceived as consonant with his greater task-orientation and instrumentality and therefore would not be offensive.

Women and men are held to different standards of politeness. Both sexes expect women to be polite in every situation. College students view women who do not say “please” in making a request as behaving less appropriately than women who do (Kemper 1984). It doesn’t matter whether the woman is addressing a man or a woman, or whether her request concerns a neutral subject (such as asking for directions), a “feminine” concern (such as asking someone to make tea), or a “masculine” matter (such as asking for a hammer)—a woman should always say “please.”

The same students’ views of men, on the other hand, depended on the nature of the request. A man making a neutral request was seen as behaving equally appropriately whether or not he prefaced his request with “please.” In making a “feminine” request, he was seen as behaving more appropriately if he used “please.” Finally, in making a “masculine” request, he was seen as behaving more appropriately if he did not say “please.”

Women, then, must always be polite, no matter what sort of request they are making, while the demands of courtesy for men vary according to circumstances. Not all cultures, however, require women to be the polite sex. Among the Malagasy, women are abrupt, direct, and confrontational, while men are more delicate and indirect (Ochs 1992).

One day I went to Lincoln Center to buy theater tickets. I couldn’t remember where the theater was, so I stopped at the Metropolitan Opera box office to get directions. A woman, perhaps twenty years older than I, was at the ticket window. I stood behind her. When there was a lull while she searched her purse for a credit card, I made eye contact with the clerk and asked him, “Where is the Met? Newhouse Theater?” The woman turned around and told me where the theater was. I nodded and went on my way.

As I was going out the door I heard the woman say to the clerk, “I’m sure that woman has no idea how rude she was.” What! My intention had been to disrupt her proceedings as little as possible, to slip in my request without interfering with her transaction. Since I was in a hurry, I didn’t go back to explain myself but went to the theater, bought my tickets, and walked to the bus stop. When the bus came, I got on after a number of other people had boarded and sat down. The woman next to me said, “Did you get your theater tickets?”

Surprised, I turned and saw that my seatmate was the woman I had seen at the Met. “Yes,” I said, “I did.” Since she seemed friendly, I asked her, “Why did you think I was rude?” She explained that I had not said
“excuse me” before asking for directions nor said “thank you” after receiving them. I explained my motivation, she accepted it, and we chatted amiably as the bus made its way across town. I have no way of knowing whether she would have reacted in the same way if I had been a man, but the experimental data suggest that women will be considered rude in circumstances where men will be seen as neutral. Alternatively, we can say that rudeness is acceptable and sometimes appropriate in men but never is in women.

The Cost for a Woman of Being Perceived as Feminine

We have seen that the more masculine a woman appears to be the more antagonism she will arouse. But it is also true that the more a woman is perceived as a woman the less likely it is that she will be perceived as professionally competent (Heilman 1980; Heilman & Stopeck 1985). The qualities required of leaders and those required for femininity are at odds with each other.

Physical Attractiveness

Take the case of attractiveness. Attractive people of both sexes are seen as better representatives of their gender. An attractive man is more masculine than an unattractive man, and an attractive woman is more feminine than an unattractive woman (Gillen 1981). It should be a professional advantage for a man to be considered attractive, because people associate masculinity with professional competence. By the same token, being an attractive woman should be a professional disadvantage, because people associate femininity with incompetence. Those expectations are borne out by an experiment in which working men and women were participants (Heilman & Stopeck 1985). Four different groups of participants were asked to account for the success of a fictitious company executive they believed was a real person, an assistant vice president who was career-oriented and interested in advancement. The executive’s starting salary and current salary were supplied, as well as a xerox of a fictitious identification card, which included a photograph supposedly taken when the executive had joined the company. Each group of participants saw a different photograph. One group saw an attractive man, another an unattractive man, a third an attractive woman, and the fourth an unattractive woman. All the participants received the same written description of the executive; only the photographs varied.

The participants evaluated the executive in several different ways. One important question tested whether the participants’ perceptions of the attractiveness of the people in the photographs coincided with those of the experimenters. They did. The photographs the experimenters had designated as attractive were in fact seen as more attractive than the ones designated as unattractive. In addition, the attractive male was seen as more masculine (and less feminine—two scales were used) than the unattractive one; and the attractive female was seen as more feminine (and less masculine) than the unattractive one.

Participants also answered a number of questions about the reasons for the executive’s progress, in particular, the executive’s ability, effort put forth in attaining her or his position, and luck. Whereas attractiveness helped a man be perceived as competent and able, it hurt a woman. Ability was rated as a more important reason for the success of the attractive male than it was for the unattractive male, but the reverse was true for females. Ability was seen as a more important element in the achievement of the unattractive female than of the attractive one. Luck, which participants saw as more important for the unattractive male than for the attractive one, was considered more important for the attractive female than for the unattractive one. The participants also saw the attractive male as more capable than the unattractive one but the attractive female as less capable than the unattractive one.

Male and female participants were affected in the same way by attractiveness. In both groups’ judgments, attractiveness was a plus for men and a minus for women. Participants were unaware that the attractiveness as gender of the person in the photograph affected their evaluations. Women’s and men’s evaluations of others appear to be very similar; both are subject to influences they are unaware of, influences that reveal the impact of gender schemas.

It appears, then, that attractiveness works differently for men and women because it intensifies masculinity and femininity. Attractive men are seen as more masculine and therefore as more deserving of their success and more capable than unattractive men. Attractive women are seen as more feminine and thus less deserving and less capable than their unattractive colleagues. In a professional setting, then, being attractive helps
men and hurts women. The heightened awareness of an attractive man's maleness leads to impressions of competence and ability. Awareness of a attractive woman's femaleness, by contrast, leads one to see her as lacking in competence and ability. People of both sexes want to be considered attractive, but women who are seen this way are at a distinct disadvantage.

An example from Wall Street, however, suggests that attractiveness has more complicated effects than the experiment just described can demonstrate. Alice, a recent college graduate, told me this story of her internship at a major investment banking firm. Her group of interns had few women, and about half of them dropped out during the program because of the stressful working conditions. One woman, whom I will call Jane, was beautiful. Jane received a lot of attention from the men who were her superiors. At the end of the training period, a senior man who usually had nothing to do with the interns personally invited her to be a member of his team, which was the most prestigious one in the firm. Alice thought that his personal invitation—a hitherto unheard-of event—was directly due to Jane’s beauty.

I asked Alice how people viewed Jane’s ability. Alice thought the other interns attributed Jane’s success to her beauty rather than to her competence, perhaps partly out of envy. In their opinion, Jane had only average ability. Alice herself wasn’t sure how capable Jane was. She believed that the others downgraded Jane’s ability because of her beauty but also thought that Jane would never have succeeded to the extent she did solely on the basis of her competence.

Alice’s story is compatible with the research on attractiveness, but it illustrates a dimension the research does not investigate. Attractiveness can indeed help women advance, especially in a male-dominated field, because men want to be around attractive women. Alice thought that she herself had been invited to some meetings simply because she was a woman; a woman softened the atmosphere a little and pleased the clients. But attractiveness carries a price, because it undermines the impression of competence.

When decisions are made purely on the basis of competence, less attractive women may fare better. A professor told me the following story about her department in a large urban university. All her department’s introduc-

tory and survey courses meet in an auditorium that holds about four hundred people. It is an alienating environment, with steeply raked seats and poor acoustics. No one enjoys teaching in the room, but most of the faculty do so at one time or other. Graduate assistants also teach a certain number of undergraduate courses, including those held in the auditorium.

Yet, the professor noticed, with one exception, the women graduate students were never assigned to teach courses there. The exception fit in with the experiment reviewed earlier: this woman wore shapeless and outmoded clothing, was somewhat overweight, and had an almost neuter appearance, neither feminine nor masculine. The professor’s analysis was that the faculty—both male and female—did not see the other women graduate students as able to hold their own in the large room, which they perceived as requiring the more commanding presence of a male. (Chapter 1 tells a similar story.) The exceptional woman did not violate the faculty’s unconscious perception of what was appropriate for women, because she did not seem very feminine.

What brought the situation to the professor’s attention was her experience writing letters of recommendation for students applying for jobs. She noticed that when she wrote for male students she could point to their experience teaching large lecture courses but could not say the same thing when she wrote for female students. Prospective employers want to know about students’ teaching experience and regard it as a plus if they can lecture to large groups. With one exception, the female students were at a disadvantage compared to the male students, both in terms of landing jobs and in how well they would handle the jobs they got. The female students’ femininity seemed at odds with the demands of the job.

Size of Pool

Attractiveness is an obvious way of highlighting someone’s gender, but other conditions also contribute to making a woman’s gender noticeable. The number of women in an occupation is one such condition. Perhaps counterintuitively, the more numerous women are, the less important their gender is. Two studies dramatize the consequences of numbers.

One of them examined how positively supervisors rated the performance of men and women in 486 different blue-collar and clerical work groups. The ratings were recorded in an archival data base of the U.S.
Employment Service (Sackett, DuBois, & Noe 1991). The researchers found that women’s performance ratings were more negative than men’s when women were only 1 to 10 percent of a work group; they were somewhat less negative when women constituted 11 to 20 percent of a group and shifted to being more positive than men’s ratings when women were 50 percent or more of a group. (The gender of the supervisors who rated the workers was unknown.)

The women’s lower ratings were also affected by their cognitive-test scores, psychomotor-test scores, and length of experience in the firm. The women tended to score worse than the men in each of these areas, and each variable explained some of the difference between overall male and female performance ratings. Even when all these effects were taken into account, however, the proportion of women in the group had an independent effect on how positively they were evaluated. Women who were in a small minority were judged more negatively than women who were part of a large minority or were half the staff.

The results suggest that being in a minority increases a woman’s likelihood of being judged in terms of her difference from the male majority, rather than in terms of her actual performance. Her minority status highlights her gender and, accordingly, makes her seem less appropriate for the job, which seems more masculine because of the large number of men filling it. Evaluators appear to conclude that if women had the appropriate characteristics for a job they would be present in greater numbers. When there are large numbers of women in a job there is less disparity to be explained; undisturbed by gender, the evaluator can then judge on the basis of merit. (See the discussion in chapter 6 about gender schemas as a rationalization for an unequal division of labor.)

That the phenomenon occurs at the professional level as well as at blue-collar and clerical levels is apparent from a laboratory study (Heilman 1980). Students in an M.B.A. program were asked to evaluate a female applicant for a managerial job. The students were given eight applications filled out on standard forms in different handwritings; the forms provided information about each applicant’s academic background, work experience, and interests. The application to be evaluated was rotated from one student to another. Students were told to read all the applications before evaluating the target applicant, so that they could compare her to all the other candidates.

Students evaluated the target applicant on the basis of how qualified she was, whether she should be hired, and how much potential she possessed. In addition, they rated her on four dimensions: ambitious-unambitious, emotional-rational, decisive-indecisive, and tough-soft.

The hypothesis was that if the candidate pool contained a small minority of females the applicant would fare worse than when the pool was totally female, half female, or had a large female minority. One basis for that hypothesis is the reasoning I applied to the results of the performance rating study. (Heilman herself has a slightly different basis.)

Each application existed in two versions, carrying either a female or a male name. That allowed the experimenter to vary the gender composition of the applicant pool. For one group of students, the female applicant was the only woman out of the eight applicants; thus, women were 12.5 percent of that applicant pool. For a second group, the female applicant was one of two women and six men, so that women were 25 percent of the pool. For a third group, women were 37.5 percent of the pool; for a fourth, 50 percent; and for a fifth, 100 percent.

When women were 25 percent or less of the applicant pool, the female applicant was evaluated more negatively than when women made up 37.5 percent or more of the pool. Being in a small minority made a female applicant appear less qualified, less worth hiring, and less potentially valuable to the firm. Even more interesting were the results of the adjective ratings: when women made up 25 percent or less of the applicant pool, the female applicant was perceived as more stereotypically feminine—that is, she was rated as being closer to the unambitious, emotional, indecisive, and soft ends of the scales—than when women made up 37.5 percent or more of the pool.

Again, there were no differences between the evaluations by female and male students; both were affected to the same degree by the number of women in the pool. Being female does not exempt one from the power of gender schemas. And, as usual, the students were unaware of what was affecting their evaluations; they had no idea that they were being influenced by the small representation of women in the smaller pool. They no
doubt believed that they were carrying out their evaluations objectively and impartially. The intent to evaluate people fairly does not protect one from nonconsciously rating men higher than women.

We can conclude from this study that personnel decisions are very likely to be affected by the composition of the applicant pool and that women will fare significantly better if they are in at least a sizable minority. They will fare better because they are less likely to be perceived in terms of their gender and more in terms of their qualifications. They will not be women applying for a man's job, but people applying for a person's job.

In addition to the studies just described, there is statistical evidence supporting the notion that women do better when there are more women in an organization. Women law professors, for example, are more likely to be granted tenure in faculties with a higher proportion of tenured women than in faculties with a very low proportion of tenured women (Chused 1988). Men's tenure rates are unaffected by the proportion of women.

The statistical data can explain some of the difficulty women have entering heavily male-dominated professions. The very small number of women in them means that new women are likely to be perceived more negatively than they would if there were more women. They also find it difficult to advance in such professions, because their evaluators can see the small number of women as a justification for their negative evaluations. Only women who are both exceptional and lucky will advance, and their advancement will help other women very little.

Accumulation of Advantage and Disadvantage

In the foregoing sections I highlighted the differences in our perceptions of male and female performance. We do not, however, always discount women's performance, nor always judge a woman's performance as worse than a comparable man's. If we did, there would be no women in professional life. Everyone can think of occasions when they evaluated a woman very positively. Everyone can think of times when they rated a woman more highly than a man. Everyone can think of notable female successes. Our evaluations are not determined purely by gender schemas. We are inaccurate judges, but our judgments do not completely exclude reality.

Because our evaluations are not determined purely by gender, because we are often unaware that our evaluations are gender-based even when they are, because a number of women are modestly successful, and because a few women are extremely successful, it is difficult for us to appreciate the full extent of biased evaluations of women, and similarly difficult to appreciate their impact.

If we want to believe that advancement is determined by merit, as most of us do—especially if we are ourselves successful—we can easily interpret the available data as confirming our hypothesis that we live in a "just world" (Lerner 1975). In a just world, bad things do not happen to good people and good things do not happen to bad people. We interpret the fact that some women make it to the top as showing that evaluations are basically fair and that truly able women succeed. The fact that we admire the competence of some women is evidence to us that we are free of gender bias, or at least free enough. Our interpretations make it hard for us to see that we are in error. We have the beliefs we do because we see ourselves as fair and impartial. That view of ourselves allows us to place the rule governing our behavior in the background and to put the exceptions to it in the foreground. We fail to see just how often the rule—that we inappropriately judge women more negatively than men—operates.

More important than the invisibility of our everyday evaluations is their cumulative effect on the advancement of the people we judge, even when each individual effect is minor. The importance of the accumulation of advantage and disadvantage, as pointed out in chapter 1, is that even small imbalances add up.

John and Joan, new lawyers hired at the same pay and at the same level by the same firm, may start off completely equally. According to the data just discussed, the following scenario is a likely one. On Day 2 of the new job, John's suggestion receives a positive reception in one office; Joan's equally good suggestion is ignored or gets a negative reception in another office. That initial difference sets off a chain of consequences. John's excellent first impression will cast a slight halo over whatever he does next. He is also in a slightly better position to be thought of positively when the next opportunity to excel arises and to obtain, in turn, the next organizational reward. John has done a small thing and gotten a small reward, on which he can build a professional future. Further, he will be perceived
as having earned his opportunity, because his superior will remember his good suggestions and good performances and feel sure that the evaluation procedures are fair and meritorious.

Joan, in contrast, has not made a good first impression. She has either made no impression at all or a bad impression (for example, she is "bossy") and so is not in a good position to obtain the next organizational benefit. At the end of Day 2 she is already very slightly behind John. Her evaluators, who failed to register the quality of her suggestion, will rank her slightly below John and feel justified in doing so.

Naturally, Joan can still go on to do stunning, brilliant work that, combined with superior interpersonal skills and an in-depth understanding of how institutions work, will guarantee her a partnership. Only a tiny percentage of people, however, turn out stunningly brilliant work, have extensive interpersonal skills, and understand thoroughly how to exploit institutional procedures. Most advancement comes from having a small to medium edge over other employees. Our way of expecting women puts them at a disadvantage, compared to men, in acquiring that edge.

Fairness does not consist in letting the tiny percentage of exceptional people succeed, but in making sure that no one has an edge because of the group they belong to. Exceptions should not reassure us that we are fair. On the contrary, they are evidence of our unwitting lack of fairness.

Some writers (e.g., Cole 1979) have speculated that women, compared to men, may be less interested in exploiting or less willing to exploit the tacit structure of organizations, to figure out whom to impress or befriend or aid, and to understand what alliances to form. The line of argument I am developing suggests that one reason women do not exploit organizational structure is that others' perception of them makes it difficult for them to use that structure to their own advantage. Women cannot exploit opportunities that are not genuinely open to them. On the surface, everyone is in the same organization, but the underlying reality is that men and women work in different organizational environments. Women work in an environment that is less likely to offer them the rewards they deserve.