WISELI

Women in Science & Engineering Leadership Institute

University of Wisconsin-Madison

Unconscious Biases and Assumptions

Implications for Evaluating Women’s Leadership

Unconscious biases and assumptions

- What is “unconscious bias”?
- Do I have unconscious biases?
- How might unconscious biases affect the evaluation of individuals in leadership positions?
- How can those doing the evaluation overcome these tendencies?
- How can those in leadership positions actively work to mitigate these tendencies?

What is “unconscious bias”

- Unconscious bias and assumptions
- Schemas
- Stereotyping
- Cognitive shortcuts
- Statistical discrimination
- Implicit associations

The tendency of our minds to judge *individuals* based on characteristics (real or imagined) of *groups*

Unconscious bias

- When shown photographs of people who are the same height, evaluators overestimated the heights of male subjects and underestimated the heights of female subjects.
- When shown photographs of men of similar athletic ability, evaluators rated the athletic ability of African American men higher than that of white men.
- When asked to rate the quality of verbal skills indicated by a short text, evaluators rated the skills as lower if they were told an African American wrote the text than if they were told a white person wrote it, and gave higher ratings when told a woman wrote it than when told a man wrote it.

Biernat et al. 1991; Biernat and Manis 1994

Implicit Association Test

Gender & Academic Leadership

Evaluation of Leadership

Prescriptive Gender Norms

- Men
  - Strong
  - Decisive
  - Assertive
  - Tough
  - Authoritative
  - Independent

"Leader"

?

- Women
  - Nurturing
  - Communal
  - Nice
  - Supportive
  - Helpful
  - Sympathetic

Unconscious biases against women in leadership positions

- Unconscious biases exist
- Our unconscious biases will more often link “leadership” and “men” than they will “leadership” and “women”

- How does this play out:
  - At point of entry into leadership positions?
  - Evaluations of women’s leadership competencies?

Point of entry—selecting women for leadership positions

- 238 academic psychologists sent a curricula vitae with either male or female name
  - Entry level: more likely to vote to hire man, more likely to indicate man had adequate teaching, research, and service experience
  - High level: no gender differences
  - No differences between male and female evaluators
  - More write-in comments for women

Steinpreis, Anders, and Ritzke 1999

Point of entry—selecting women for leadership positions

- Shifting standards of reference
  - Women rated relative to women, men relative to men; e.g., “good for a woman”
    - Easier for women to meet the “minimum standard”?
  - When women and men are rated directly against each other in a task expected to be performed better by men, lower expectations for women
    - Women held to higher “confirmatory” standards than men, need more evidence of their skill to perform job

Biernat et al.,1991, 1994, 1997, 1998, 2001; Eagly et al.,1995, 2001

Point of entry—selecting women for leadership positions

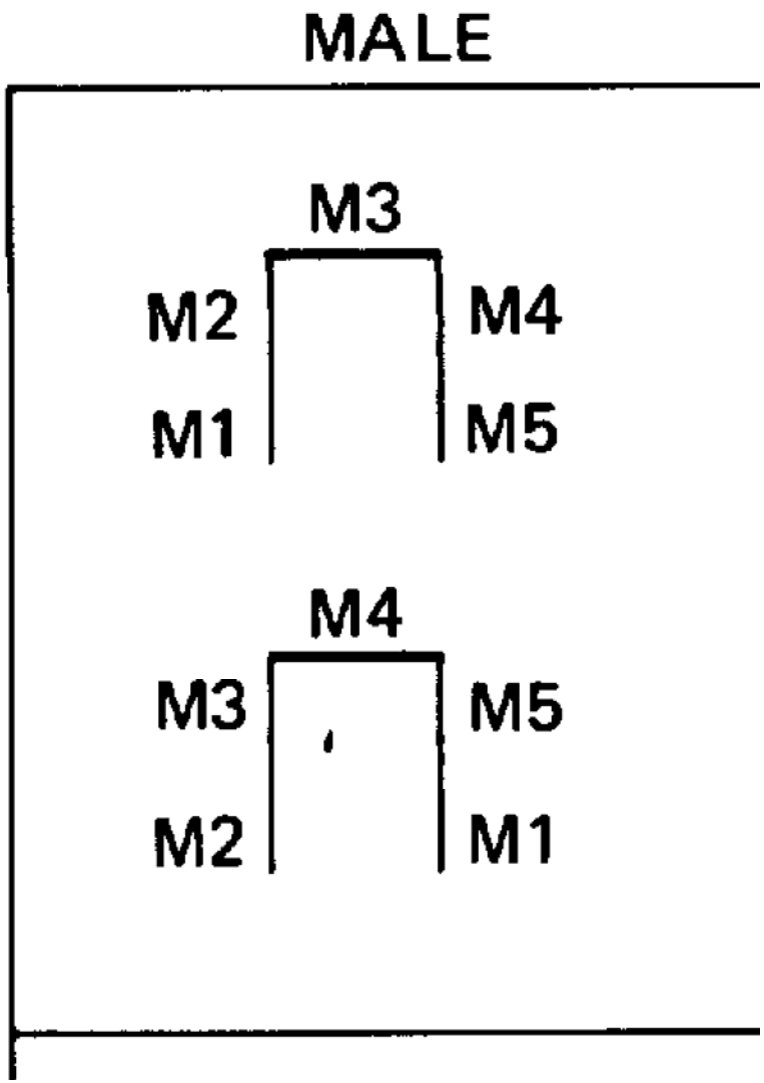
- Redefining merit to justify discrimination
  - Evaluation of candidates for police chief job
  - Candidates were “streetwise” or “formally educated”
  - Respondents selected the male candidate more often, and justified the decision by citing whatever credential, “streetwise” or “educated”, that the male candidate had
  - Also works in reverse; women’s studies professor, “academic” vs. “activist” credentials

Uhlmann and Cohen, 2005

Evaluation of leadership

- Students seated around the table—when is the head of the table identified as the "leader?"

Porter & Geis 1981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M3
M2
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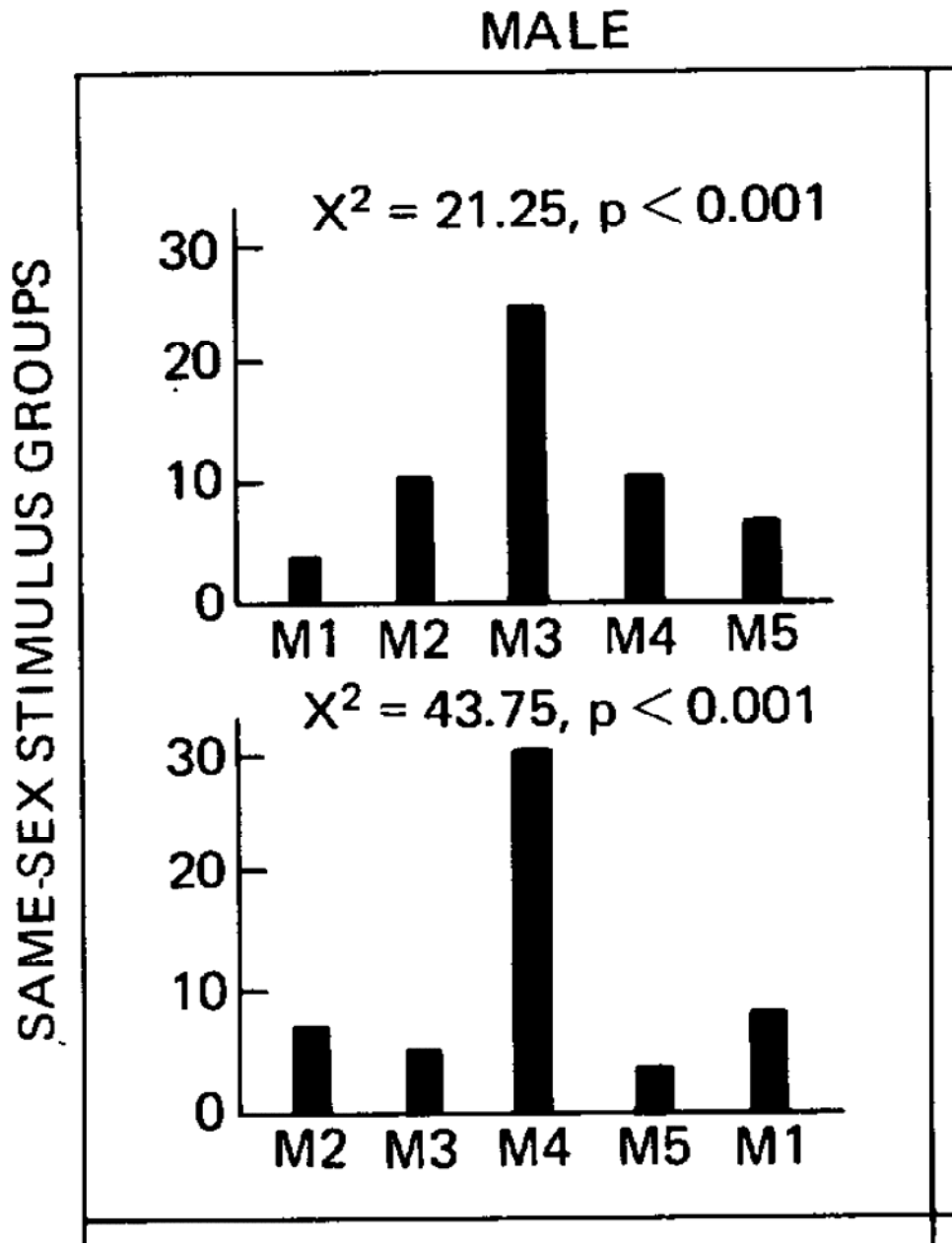
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SAME-SEX STIMULUS GROUPS
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30
20
10
0
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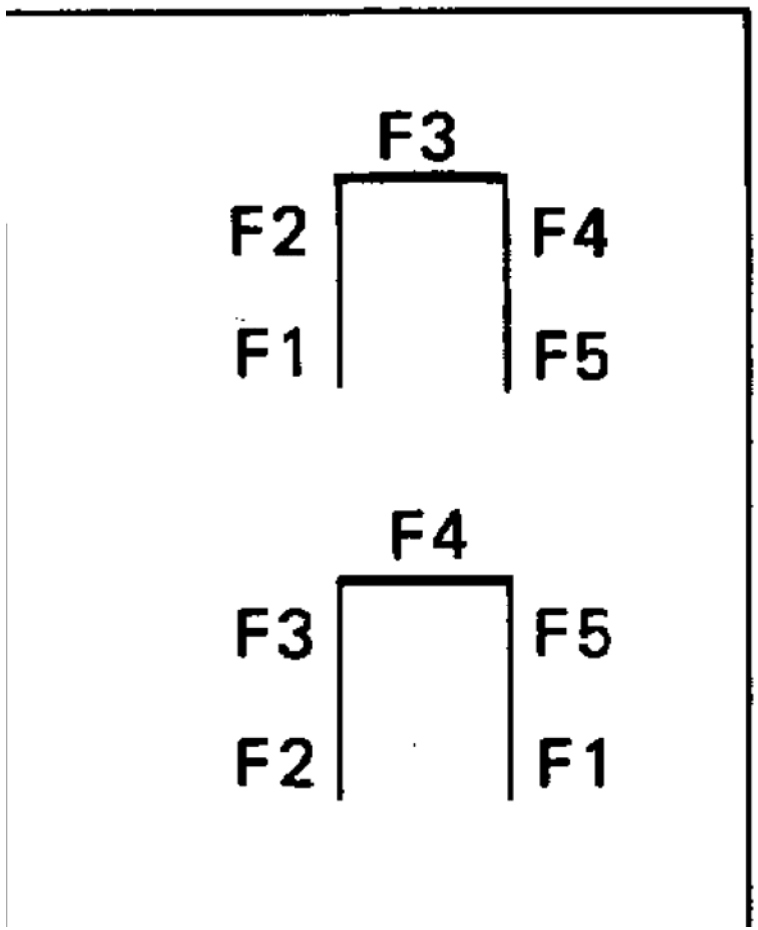
M2 M3 M4 M5 M1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F5
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F5
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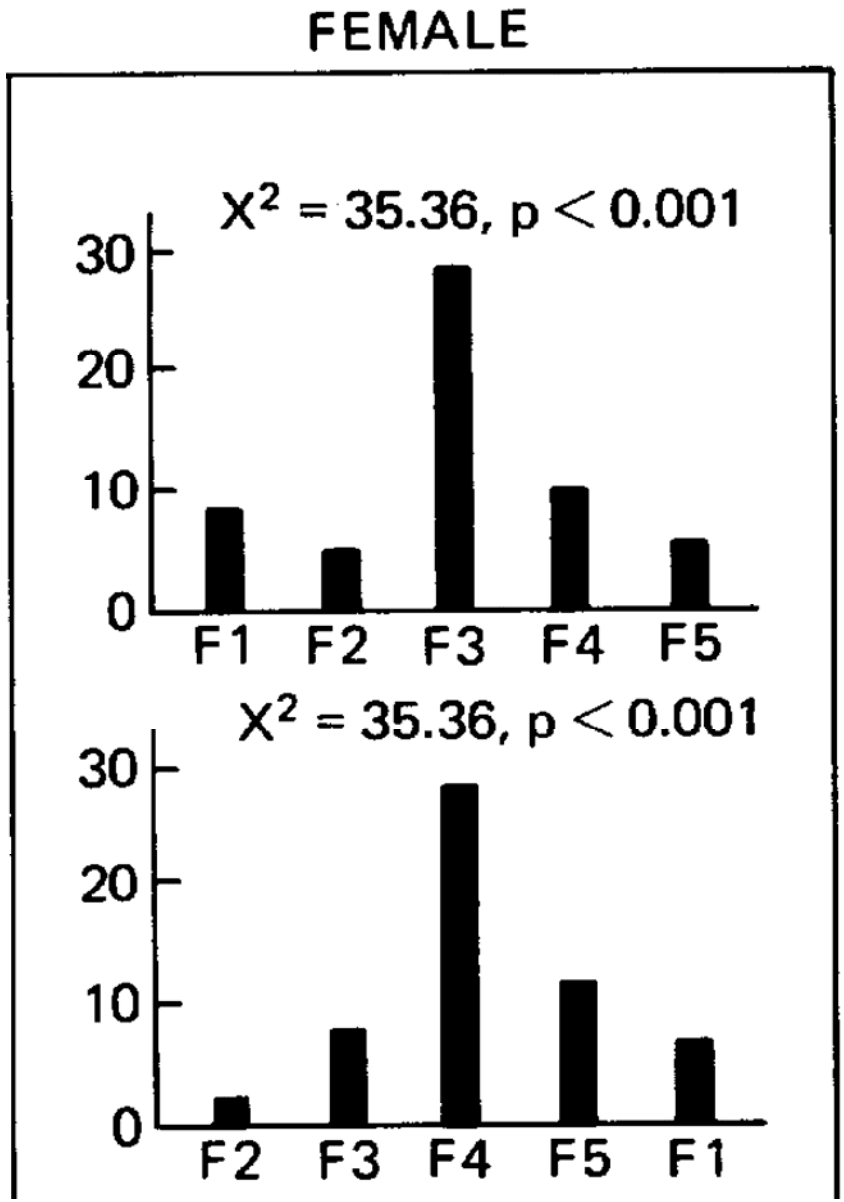
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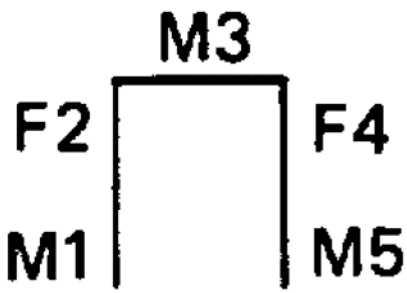
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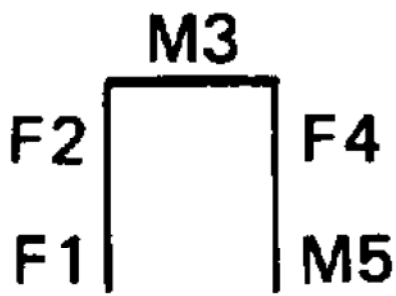
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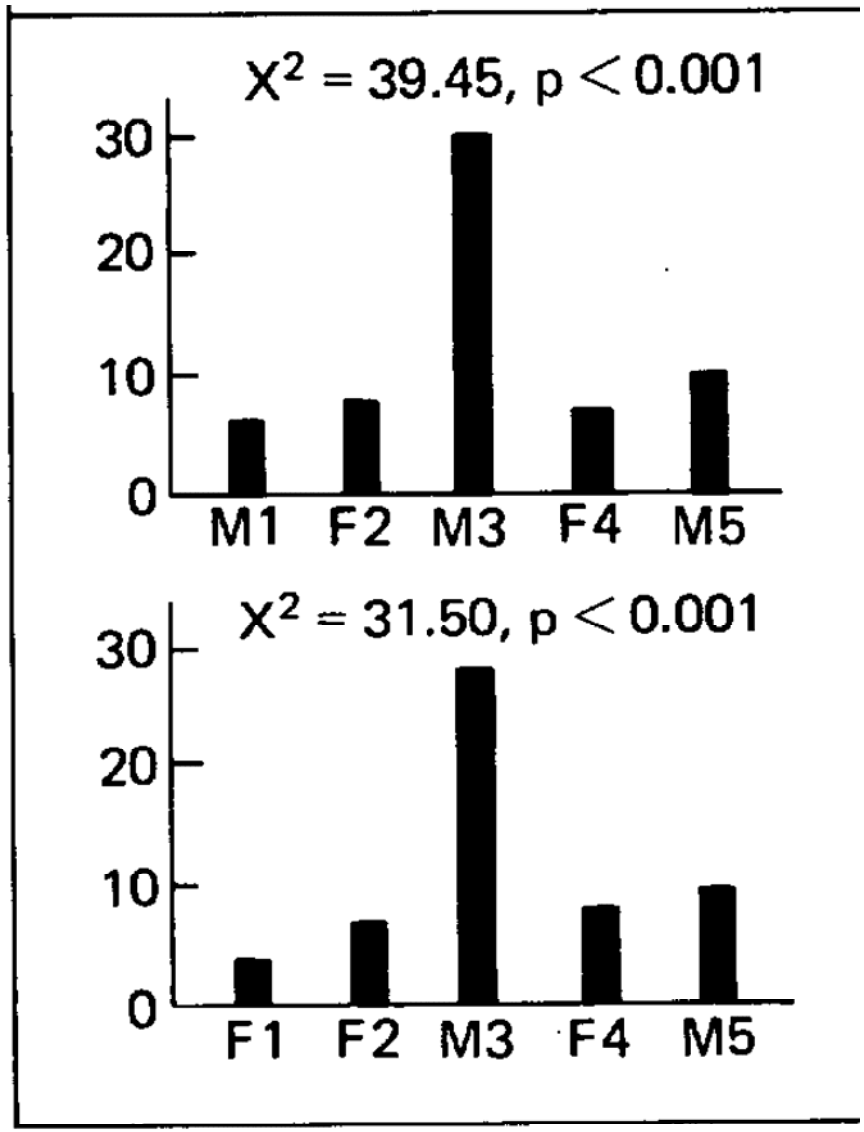
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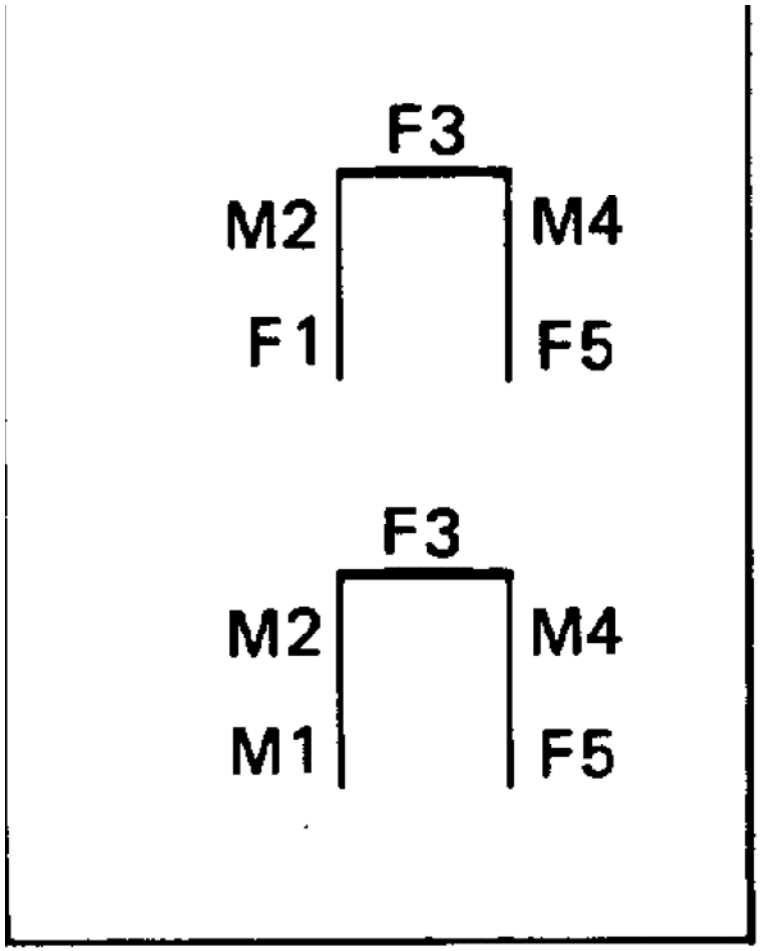
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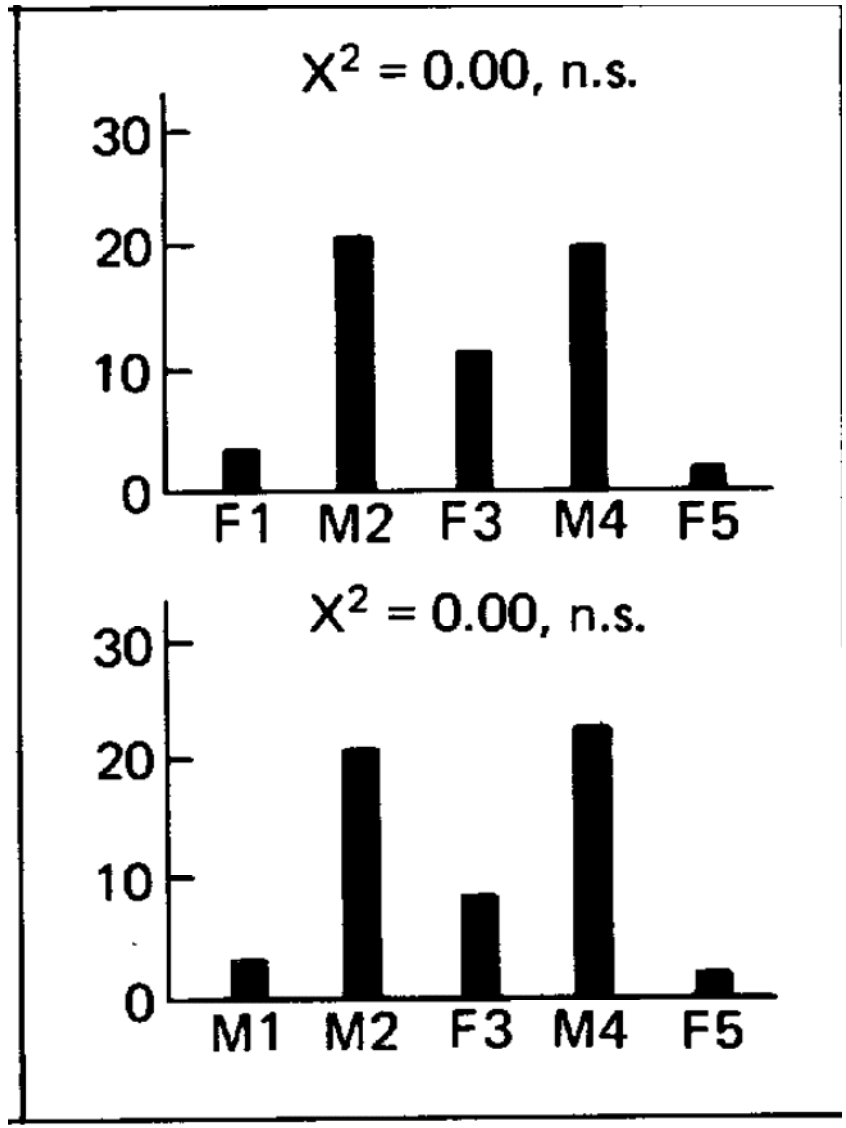
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30
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F5
X² = 0.00, n.s.
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M1
M2
F3
M4
F5

Evaluation of Leadership

- For female leaders, “warmth” negatively correlated with leadership

Evaluation of Leadership/Competence

- Evaluate fictional Assistant Vice Presidents
  - Male-assumed job—company makes engine products and other AVPs are men
  - Rated under two conditions: performance clear and performance ambiguous
  - Characteristics rated:
    - Competence, personality, likeability, interpersonal hostility

Heilman, Wallen, Fuchs, and Tamkins 2004

Evaluation of Leadership

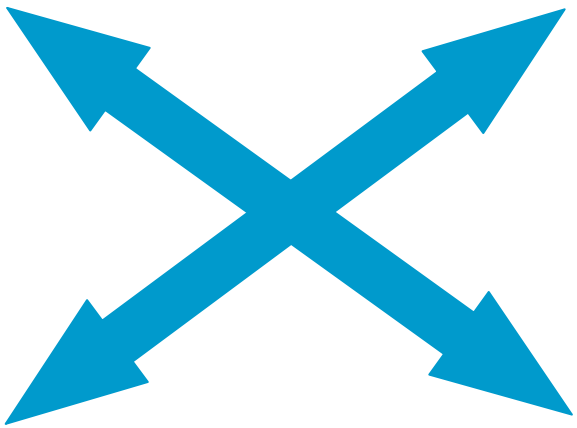
- Performance Ambiguous
  - Women less competent than men
  - Women and men equally likeable
- Performance Clear
  - Women and men equally competent
  - Women less likeable than men

Evaluation of Leadership

Prescriptive Gender Norms

Social Penalties

- Men
  - Strong
  - Decisive
  - Assertive
  - Tough
  - Authoritative
  - Independent



- Women
  - Nurturing
  - Communal
  - Nice
  - Supportive
  - Helpful
  - Sympathetic

Evaluation of Leadership

- Evaluate fictional Assistant Vice Presidents as before but…
  - Add information about communal qualities: “caring and sensitive to employees” vs. “worked hard to maximize employees’ contributions” vs. no information
- Results
  - “Caring & sensitive”: women more likeable
  - “Maximize ee contributions” or no info: same result as previous—women less likeable

Heilman & Okimoto 2007

What to do?

Reducing bias when evaluating women leaders

- Women are biased as well as men…maybe more?
  - Biernat & Fuegen (2001) found that women, but not men, were more likely to hire a man for a male-typed job
  - Females more likely to exclude a competent female than a competent male from their group (Hagen & Kahn 1975)
  - Women find self-promoting women less desirable and less hirable than self-promoting men (Rudman 1998)
  - Female reviewers of NSF grants gave significantly lower scores than male reviewers to female-authored proposals (Broder 1993)

Overcoming unconscious bias—best practices

- Learn about research on biases and assumptions—consciously strive to minimize influence of unconscious tendencies on your evaluations (Kruglanski & Freund 1983)
- Instruct committee members to avoid bias (Blair & Banaji 1996)
- Spend sufficient time evaluating each applicant and avoid distractions (Martell 1991)
- Reach out to applicants from under-represented groups individually (Wennerås & Wold 1997)

Overcoming unconscious bias—best practices

- Increase the proportion of women and minorities in the applicant pool (Heilman 1980)
- Do not depend too heavily on any one element of a portfolio (Trix & Psenka 2003)
- Develop evaluation criteria *prior* to evaluating candidates and stick to the criteria. Periodically review evaluation decisions and ensure that criteria continue to guide the selection of candidates. (Ulhmann & Cohen 2005; Biernat & Fuegen 2001)

Overcoming unconscious bias—best practices

- Ensure that evaluation committees are as diverse as possible (Lowery, Hardin & Sinclair 2001)
- Switch the gender/race “thought experiment” (Valian 1998)
- Use counterstereotype imaging (Blair, Ma & Lenton 2001; Dasgupta & Greenwald 2001)

Tips for avoiding trigger of automatic bias

- Be sure to positively highlight your male/agentic qualities, *and* your female/communal qualities.
  - Shifting standards of reference
  - Implied communality deficit

Tips for avoiding trigger of automatic bias

- Beware stereotype threat
  - Heightened state of vigilance among women in leadership roles (“threat in the air”)
  - Mitigated when threat is neutralized, e.g., with data
    - Change your own stereotypes about what makes a good leader, whether women make good leaders!

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