



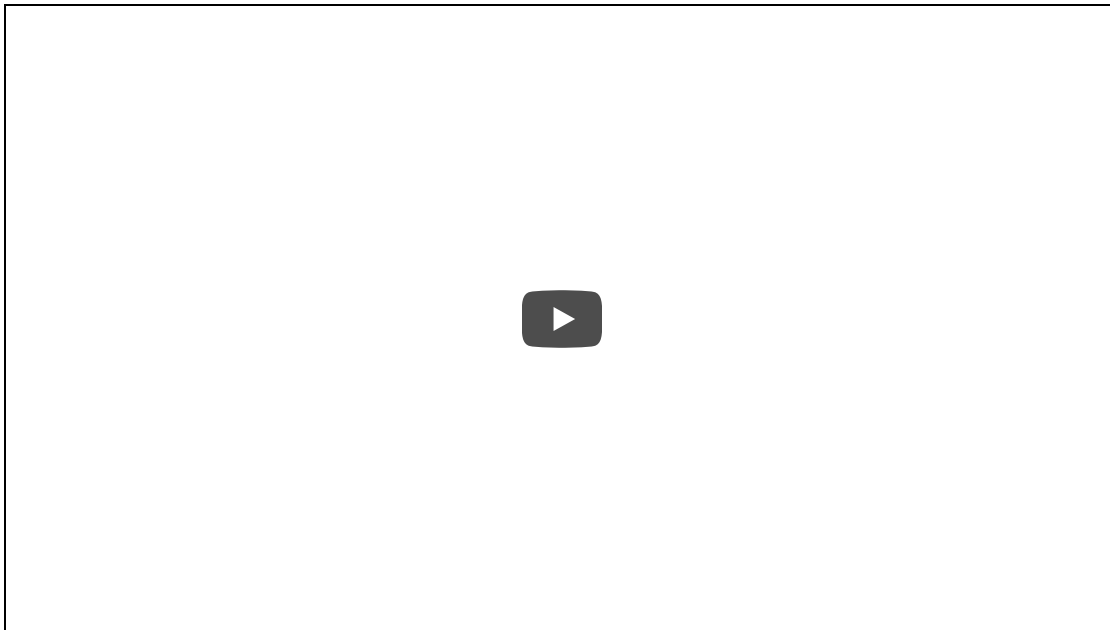
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IDEAS AND INSIGHTS

Are Gender Differences Just Power Differences in Disguise?

Across two decades of studies, persistent gender differences often chalked up to biology can be replicated by manipulating an individual's level of power.

IDEAS AT WORK • Adam Galinsky • March 13, 2018 [f](#) [t](#) [in](#) [✉](#) [🖨](#)



Gender differences and disparate outcomes between men and women populate the landscape. In 2017, women made just 79 cents for every dollar earned by a man. According to a comprehensive review of the literature in 2016, even after controlling for gendered differences in experience and choice of industry and profession, 38 percent of that gap remained unexplained. We also know that women are vastly underrepresented in the highest echelons of organizations, both in the C-suite and on boards of directors.

Gender differences have also infiltrated new ventures and political campaigns. Research done at Harvard Business School found that investors funded male entrepreneurs at twice the rate of females. And a study I conducted of every election in the United States since women gained suffrage found that women are 36 percent less likely to be elected governor or US senator than men.

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So there are clear gender disparities in outcomes. But we also see gender gaps in aptitude tests. For over 50 years, men have consistently scored higher than women in math on the SAT. And that is true for every ethnicity in the United States.

The persistence of these differences has led some to wonder if they might be innate—a product of biology, and the different selection pressures faced by the sexes during evolution. In 2005, Larry Summers, then president of Harvard University landed in hot water for suggesting that the lack of women in top positions in science might be due to “issues of intrinsic aptitude,” a comment that would ultimately cost him his job.

What I’d like to suggest is a different idea, that many observed gender differences are not biologically based, but instead may be power differences in disguise.

I’ve been studying power, negotiations, and leadership for over 20 years, since I began my PhD. One of the most important things to understand about power in this context is that every person has a range of what we might call acceptable behavior. When we stay within that range, we are rewarded by the people we interact with; and we reward ourselves by feeling comfortable. Sometimes, however, we step outside that range: we act too assertively or too meekly and are punished for our behavior.

Our range of acceptable behavior, however, isn’t static. In fact, it’s pretty dynamic. And what determines that range is our power.

Power comes in many forms. In negotiations, power comes in the form of alternatives. If you have strong alternatives, you can bargain more aggressively because you are less dependent on the outcome of any one negotiation. Power can also come from our level of experience, or from our position. And our power changes from moment to moment and situation to situation. But power also comes from our demographic characteristics, and some characteristics afford individuals more power than other characteristics.

When you have lots of power, you have a wide range of acceptable behavior, a lot of leeway in what you can say and do. But when you lack power, your range of acceptable behavior narrows.

I’ve documented across hundreds of studies that power has psychological effects. And one of the things it does is change the range of acceptable behavior that we allow ourselves in our own minds. Our power, however, also affects the range that other people allow us. Across all of these studies, one of the most interesting things that we’ve discovered is that a lot of gender differences can be reproduced by manipulating people’s sense of power.

Research by Linda Babcock has shown that women rarely negotiate for more pay when they receive a job offer. In one study, she found that men graduating from Carnegie Mellon were four times more likely than women to have negotiated their first salary. In another study, she brought people into the lab, and gave people a task involving a word game. At the beginning, she told participants, “you’ll be paid anywhere from three to ten dollars,” but at the end she simply paid everyone three dollars. In response to receiving the very bottom of the promised range, some participants, however, asked for more. And men were seven times as likely to do so as women.

We have replicated these gender differences with power manipulations. What that means is that if men score higher than women on a task, those randomly assigned to a high-power condition

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score higher than those randomly assigned to a low-power condition. In a study similar to Babcock's, we brought a group of participants into the lab and randomly assigned them to a high-power or a low-power condition. We told them, "you're the boss. You control these resources," or we said, "you're the subordinate. The boss is going to direct you." And then we looked at the likelihood that people felt comfortable negotiating and found, regardless of gender, people in the higher power condition felt more comfortable negotiating.

In another study, we focused on something women are better at than men—identifying other people's emotions. Again we brought people into the lab and randomly assigned them to either a baseline or a high power condition. Those in the high-power condition were worse at interpreting the emotions of other people in photographs.

There's something really important here—we randomly assigned people to these conditions; their power was temporary. Yet it affected these basic psychological processes like confidence and social perception, and these effects occur equally for men and women.

As I mentioned before, the experience of power affects not only our own psychology, it also has interpersonal effects.

You may have heard of something called the "gender double bind." Women who don't speak up go unnoticed, but women who do often get punished. But I think this gender double bind represents something broader and larger, what I have labeled the "low-power double bind." When you lack power, you don't speak up and you go unnoticed. But if you do, you get rejected.

There is a really tragic story that reflects this. A woman was offered a job as a professor at a college. In response to their offer, she sent an email that was, in my opinion, perfect—exactly how I would advise one of my MBA students to negotiate an offer.

In that email, she wrote, "I'd like an increase in my salary, some time off for maternity leave, and no more than three class preps. And maybe just to postpone the date one year so I can finish my post doc. I know that some of these conditions might be easier to meet than others, just let me know what you think."

How did the college respond? They withdrew the offer.

Now here's why I think this is related to power. My twin brother is a documentary film maker. And early on his career, with one of his first films, he got an offer from a distributor. I had just started out as a negotiation researcher, and saw this as the perfect opportunity to use my skills in the real world. So, I helped him craft what I thought was the perfect counteroffer. And it actually was perfect—perfectly offensive.

It turns out he didn't have any power. He had no other offers, while they had lots of other films they could buy. They simply withdrew the offer from him, and wouldn't even let him accept the original offer.

So, how do we reduce the low-power double bind? How do we expand the range of acceptable behavior in our own eyes and in the eyes of others?

There is a very clear robust, replicable finding that, on average, when a man negotiates against a woman, the man gets a little bit better of an outcome than the woman. But a couple of researchers, including one of our former PhDs at Columbia Business School, found that there's one situation in which women perform equally well as men—when they're advocating for other people.

When we're advocating for others, we can be assertive because we're also being communal. For women, that creates an opening to be assertive that's actually consistent with gender stereotypes. It's sometimes called the "Mama Bear Effect." Women, when they're advocating for others, are allowed to be ferocious.

Although this effect may help women advocate for better conditions for their team, for example, it does little to help them get their own accomplishments and achievements recognized. And self-promotion is an area where the low-power double bind hits women particularly hard.

According to some brilliant research by Bob Cialdini, Christina Fong, and Jeff Pfeffer, though, we can solve this dilemma by getting others to promote us on our behalf. We don't actually have to share our accomplishments if someone else does.

How do we get people to do that?

One of the things that I've been studying is the strategic benefits of asking other people for advice. When we ask others for advice we flatter them, and we show humility. We ask them to take our perspective. And by sharing their advice they make an investment in us; it's a commitment to us, and they'll want to see us grow and do more. That is incredibly powerful — and it even works when you see it coming.

When I was at the Kellogg School of Management, we had a young assistant professor who, at the end of her first year, went to another junior faculty member and expressed a concern. "I don't really have strong relationships with the senior faculty that will one day vote on my tenure," she said to him. He responded, "why don't you try to follow Adam's research and ask the senior faculty for advice." He also subsequently told me he'd given her this advice

So, one day I get an email from here with the subject line "Advice." She'd just gotten an invitation to revise and resubmit a paper at the top journal in the world, Science. And she said, "I'd love to get your advice about what I should do with these reviews." She was self-promoting a bit — being invited to resubmit at Science is a big deal — but she was doing it in a way that was also humble.

I want to point out three really important things about this example. First, I've studied the strategic benefits of asking other people for advice. Second, I had already been forewarned that she was likely to try this technique on me. And third, it still worked.

Anytime I saw a senior colleague, I'd tell them, "Did you hear she got this great opportunity at Science?" And I sat down that night and really read the reviews and laid out my advice on how she could best respond.

Our power determines our range of acceptable behavior, both in our own mind, and in the minds of others. I've laid out some strategies that can help us negotiate power differences: advocating on behalf of others, and asking other people for advice. But if we really want to take this seriously, and address these long-standing gender disparities then there's really only one solution: We need to give women more power.

While gender disparities in math scores have continued with virtually no change in the United States for decades, researchers at the University of Chicago and Kellogg have found that they're hardly consistent from country to country.

The gap is particularly large in Turkey and Korea, and moderate in the US. But in Norway and Sweden it nearly disappears. And in Iceland, women actually outperform men. What's more, they found that the Women's Emancipation Index, calculated by the United Nations, can be used to predict the size of the gender performance gap in a country.

More recently, I've found this exact same measure can predict not just the performance of female World Cup teams, but also the performance of male teams. Countries that had greater gender quality had higher performing male teams. Why? Because they had better talent. Why? Because more equal treatment of women is associated with more equal treatment of many different types of people.

The conclusion is clear. Many gender differences will be significantly reduced, if not eliminated when — and only when — women have more power. So, we all have an obligation to help this process along, to help women gain opportunities in business, and in politics, and all realms of society. When we do so, it's not just helping those women, it's not just giving people role models, it's literally changing fundamental aspects of the mind, and producing better outcomes for everyone in society.

ABOUT THE RESEARCHER



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