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Sugar-Coated Discrimination

Research Symposium

# GENDER & WORK:

CHALLENGING CONVENTIONAL WISDOM

# STEREOTYPES

GENDER & WORK

# SUGAR-COATED DISCRIMINATION:

## How Subtle Sexism Undermines Women

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Contemporary forms of gender-based discrimination are often subtle and, from some vantage points, seemingly sweet rather than blatant and uniformly negative. For instance, stereotypically warm and communal women are often seen as wonderful (Eagly & Mladinic, 1989) and put on a pedestal to be provided for and protected (Glick & Fiske, 1996; 2001). Despite benevolent intent, however, to be provided for and protected implies lesser power and inferiority, which may motivate acts of condescension rather than respect (Glick & Fiske, 2001; Jackman, 1994). Consistent with this notion, in simulated work settings, powerful men often behave in patronizing ways toward their female subordinates, giving low-power women fewer valued resources than low-power men but praising those very same women more than the men (Vescio, Gervais, Snyder, & Hoover, 2005). Likewise, field research has documented parallel anti-female biases in the quantitative evaluations used as the primary determinant of promotion for Wall Street lawyers and pro-female biases in the praise contained in their supporting narratives (Biernat, Tocci, & Williams, 2011). Importantly, when treated in patronizing ways by powerful men, low-power women reported more anger, perceived less personal control over outcomes, and performed worse (Gervais & Vescio, 2012; Vescio et al., 2005). In fact, in masculine domains, the patronizing behavior of powerful men created gender differences in performance on a standardized math test where such differences did not otherwise exist (Vescio et al., 2005). Whereas low-power women are often praised in ways that make it difficult for powerful men to see the co-existence of group-based inequities in the allocation of limited resources, some findings suggest that women who threaten power in masculine domains may become the targets of aggression (Berdahl, 2007; Rudman & Fairchild, 2004).

Here we consider how men respond when outperformed by a woman in stereotypically masculine domains, where the attributes predictive of success are stereotypically linked to men but not to women (e.g., physical sciences, technology, engineering, business). To consider this issue, we first conceptualize masculinity, noting its meaning in Western cultures and how men respond when challenges to masculinity are encountered. At the outset, however, we stress a core assumption that guides our theory and research; like others, we assume that power differentials are most typically and effectively maintained through soft rather than harsh influence tactics (Raven, Schwarzwald, & Koslowsky, 1998). From this standpoint, open acts of hostility represent failures of power (Jackman, 1994; see also Guinote & Vescio, 2010) and gender-based discrimination, we suggest, tends to be sugar-coated, in that acts that can be construed as kindnesses either mask or justify sexism.

### Masculinity

In Western cultures, masculinity has three key components (Brannon, 1976; Fischer & Good, 1998; Fischer, Tokar, Good, & Snell, 1998; Pascoe, 2007; Thompson & Pleck, 1986). First, masculinity is linked to power, status, and dominance (Bosson, Vandello, Burnaford, Weaver, & Wasi, 2009; Kimmel, 2008; Rudman & Glick, 2008; Vandello, Bosson, Cohen, Weaver, & Burnaford, 2008). Importantly,

power refers to the potential to influence others in meaningful ways (French and Rave, 1959) by giving or withholding rewards or punishments and/or controlling outcomes (e.g., Fiske, 1993; Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003). As a result, to be a “good man” means to be able to influence rather than be influenced, to lead rather than follow, and to control rather than be controlled. Second, masculinity prescribes that men should be physically, mentally, and emotionally tough. To be a “good man,” then, requires consistent behavior showing physical strength, tolerance of pain, cognitive features of steadfast determination, or an ability to carry on in the face of pain or adversity. Third, masculinity demands that one avoid or flee from activities, traits, or behaviors that could be interpreted as unmanly, feminine, or “sissy.” This component of masculinity can be thought of as an abject identity that motivates one to move away from undesired and toward prescriptive notions of masculine identity (Butler, 1993,) or as an anti-goal or as a feared possible self (Carver, Lawrence, & Scheier, 1999).

Importantly, it has been suggested that masculinity is a cherished but precarious social identity. Masculinity is cherished, given that the attributes associated with masculinity are socially valued and linked to status. However, manhood can be easily lost if not continuously displayed and reaffirmed (Vandello, Bosson, Cohen, Burnaford, & Weaver, 2008). In addition, masculinity is rigorously socialized in male groups, with failings of masculinity being socially and physically punished (Pascoe, 2007). It is, therefore, not surprising that men experience anxiety and psychological discomfort (called role stress, Thompson & Pleck, 1986) when confronted with threats to masculinity (Babl, 1979). In fact, anything that calls one’s manhood status into question should be anxiety-provoking (see Vandello et al., 2008), particularly when threats to masculinity are visible to other men (Rudman & Fairchild, 2004). Yet demonstrations of anxiety, fear, and/or sadness are stereotypically female emotions that men are taught to reject and that result in punishment in male groups. Therefore, when masculinity is threatened, men should report concern about others’ responses to their gender transgressions and role-congruent feelings of anger and aggressive behavior (Shields, 2002). Consistent with this notion, men report concerns about how they will be viewed by others after experiencing various threats to masculinity, including completing cross-gendered tasks (e.g., hair braiding; Bosson, et al., 2005); learning that they have responded more like women than men (Rudman & Fairchild, 2004); and interacting with a partner (e.g., a feminist) who questions the veracity of men’s higher social status (Maass et al., 2003).

Threats to masculinity sometimes inspire acts of aggression, which have been argued to be particularly effective means of reestablishing power, status, and dominance (e.g., Bosson & Vandello, 2011). For instance, threats to masculinity have been shown to be linked to the activation of physically aggressive thoughts (Vandello et al., 2008) and, among highly sex-typed men, increases in endorsement of aggression, fighting, and other antisocial behaviors (Babl, 1979). Following threats to masculinity, men also prefer physically aggressive activities (such as hitting a punching bag) to gender-neutral tasks (such as a puzzle task) and exhibit more aggression (e.g., hitting harder; Bosson et al., 2009). Threats to masculinity have also been linked to sexual aggression among men who are highly identified as masculine. Specifically, highly gender-identified (and high social-dominance orientation) men were more likely to send pornographic materials to a female target following threats to masculinity, even after she expressed discomfort about being sent pornography (Maass et al., 2003). Importantly, however, classic and contemporary findings suggest that it is only the highly sex-typed men who respond to masculinity threats with antisocial behavior (Babl, 1979; Maass et al., 2003), including physical and sexual aggression.

### Initial Research Questions

This brings us to two initial questions that motivated our theory and research. First, might the presence of a superior-performing woman in a masculine domain pose a threat to masculinity? Because competence in a valued domain conveys power and influence (i.e., informational or expert

power; French & Raven, 1959) and because gender stereotypes prescribe that men have power, especially relative to women, it is likely that being outperformed by a woman will present a threat to masculinity (Hitlan et al., 2009). If being outperformed by a woman in a masculine domain poses a threat to masculinity, then men should experience public discomfort and anger, and be more likely to engage in reparatory masculinity. Second, might men working with competent women engage in reparatory behavior that functionally asserts masculinity without seeming to be hostile? Power is typically and most effectively exerted through soft rather than harsh forms of influence (Raven et al., 1998), with open acts of hostility representing a failure of power (Jackman, 1994) and being inappropriate in most situations, especially when directed at women. Consistent with this notion, after threats to masculinity, men forewent demonstrations of aggression when non-aggressive forms of masculine behavior were available (e.g., shooting baskets; Bosson et al., 2009). Therefore, when outperformed by a woman, we reasoned that men may engage in reparatory behavior that functionally asserts masculinity and reestablishes the status quo without seeming to be hostile.

We suggest that the sexualization of well-performing women may be a particularly effective means of appeasing threats to masculinity. When men sexualize women, they demonstrate heterosexuality and virility, which are stereotypically masculine qualities. The sexualization of women also stresses heterosexual intimacies and power dynamics in which men are dominant and women submissive (Keifer & Sanchez, 2007). As a result, the sexualization of women implicitly construes women in subordinate roles that can be justified as complimentary actions following from attraction rather than from threat and anger. The suggestion that men may sexualize well-performing women in masculine domains is consistent with Berdahl's (2007) findings showing that women with masculine (vs. feminine) personalities (i.e., dominant, independent, agentic) and/or women who worked in male-dominated versus female-dominated companies were most likely to be sexually harassed. However, a broader conceptualization of sexualization stresses more subtle forms of sexualization, which may be harder for women to unambiguously construe as unwanted sexual attention without seeming to be overly sensitive or potentially erroneous in their judgment. For example, when Sheryl Sandberg was the first woman to accept an executive position at Facebook in 2008, she met resistance from a male-dominated work community (Sandberg, 2013). To attempt to appease his employees, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg subtly sexualized Sandberg, noting that the first thing he noticed about her was her beautiful skin and telling his male employees that "everyone should have a crush on Sheryl" (Losse, 2012 pg. 168). Similarly, when Marissa Mayer was announced as the new CEO of Yahoo!, sexualized images of her emerged, as did the following headline from the *Huffington Post*: "Yahoo's Marissa Mayer is the 'Hottest CEO Ever'..." (Casserly, 2012).

### When Outperformed In Masculine Domains

To examine whether men might experience threats to masculinity when outperformed by a woman in a masculine domain, we first sought to replicate and extend prior masculinity threat findings using a well-known masculinity threat: Rudman and Fairchild's (2004) imputations of femininity manipulation. In a lab study, as in Rudman and Fairchild (2004), we asked male undergraduates to complete an ostensible gender knowledge test. Following the apparent scoring of their responses, participants were provided with performance feedback, which was altered to manipulate threat condition. Participants learned that they performed either like the average undergraduate woman (threat condition) or the average undergraduate man (no-threat condition). Participants then reported their concerns about how they would be viewed by others (i.e., public discomfort) and reported their emotion. Replicating prior findings, men in the threat (vs. no threat) condition reported feeling more public discomfort or concern about how others would view them (Bosson et al., 2005; Rudman & Fairchild, 2004). We also extended prior research, showing that public discomfort in turn predicted anger. In sum, threat led to public discomfort that, in turn, led to feelings of anger.

We then turned attention to the question of whether similar response patterns emerge among men when they are outperformed by a woman in a masculine domain; specifically, when outperformed by a woman, do men feel public discomfort that, in turn, predicts anger? Furthermore, once angry, might men engage in attempts to appease threats to masculinity by sexualizing the woman who outperformed them? To examine these possibilities, we created a simulated work situation in the laboratory and compared men's responses in two conditions: when they were outperformed by a female partner versus when they outperformed their female partner. After receiving worse performance feedback relative to their female partner, participants reported public discomfort and anger. In addition, to measure sexualization, participants were then asked to choose a computer avatar that would ostensibly represent the female teammate in subsequent computer interactions. The avatars differed only in how sexually revealing their outfits were; the most sexualized avatar had the most revealing top (i.e., a bikini top) and the least sexualized avatar had the most conservative top (i.e., a winter coat). All data were collected in winter months.

The findings replicated prior findings and provided evidence of the sexualization of well-performing women in masculine domains. More specifically, men who were outperformed by a woman felt increased public discomfort that, in turn, resulted in increased anger. In addition, increased anger predicted the selection of more sexually revealing outfits for their partners. These findings are consistent with the notion that men experience a threat to masculinity when outperformed by a woman in a masculine domain, which they attempt to appease via the sexualization of that woman.

From the perspective of men who have just been outperformed by a woman in a masculine domain, the subtle sexualization in the form of selecting more revealing clothing for one's female partner may slip by undetected as problematic. In fact, despite the fact that the sexualization of one's female partner follows from anger, one could justify one's behavior (if noticed at all) as complimentary and stemming from genuine fondness for and attraction toward one's partner. However, as has been documented with other forms of subtle sexism (e.g., Jackman, 1994), subtle forms of social influence are often linked to stereotypes in status-quo-maintaining ways. This leads to a logical question: what are the consequences of the seemingly subtle sexualization of women?

### The Consequences of Sexualizing Women

To consider the possible consequences of the sexualization of women, we integrated theory and research on sexual objectification with theory and research on object versus person perception. According to sexual objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), women's bodies are scrutinized to a greater degree than are men's bodies. This greater scrutiny of women's bodies presumably results in sexual objectification, or the viewing of an individual in terms of the mere use and function of one's sexualized body parts (Bartky, 1990). Recent findings reveal that sexual objectification is related to decreased mind attributions (Loughnan et al., 2010), diminished perceptions of personal agency (Cikara, Eberhardt, & Fiske, 2011), and dehumanization (Vaes, Paladino, & Puvia, 2011). Importantly, our research has also documented two related sets of cognitive processes that may underlie or be involved in some of the "inhuman" perceptions just described as being linked to sexual objectification. More specifically, our theory and research shows that when sexually objectified, women are perceived as (a) objects rather than people (Code, 1995) and (b) fungible, or interchangeable with other like objects (i.e., women) that serve the same function (Nussbaum, 1999).

**Perceiving women as objects rather than people.** When perceiving people, we tend to focus on the gestalt whole; to perceive and later recognize a person we need information about specific body parts (e.g., nose and arms), as well as information about the relations among body parts. By contrast, to recognize objects (e.g., houses), we need only information about the parts that comprise the house (e.g., the doors, windows). One robust indicator of person versus object processing is the part versus whole recognition paradigm (Seitz, 2002; Tanaka & Farah, 1993). In this paradigm, perceivers are presented with a series of trials in which they see a person or an object

(entire body or object). After seeing the initial object (or person), perceivers are presented with either two entire images (complete house) or two parts of images (e.g., doors of a house). In each set, one of the two images is the original seen and the other image is a slightly modified version of the original. The task for perceivers is to identify which image was the original image. Importantly, object and person perception strikingly differ; when it comes to perceiving objects, people are equally able to recognize the parts of an object when they are presented in isolation (only a door) or when they are presented in the context of the entire object (whole house). By contrast, the parts of people are better recognized when presented in the context of the entire person versus when the parts are presented in isolation (see Reed et al., 2006; Seitz, 2002; Tanaka & Farah, 1993).

To examine whether sexual objectification results in women being perceived in object-like terms, participants were presented with a series of original images of whole men or women (Gervais, Vescio, Forster, Maass, & Suiter, in press). After viewing each original image, participants then saw two images side-by-side, one original and one slightly modified image. The second images were presented either as whole people or as parts of people (waists unmodified versus slightly modified waists, chests unmodified versus slightly modified chests). Findings revealed that men were perceived as people: the body parts of men were much better recognized when presented in the context of a whole body rather than in isolation. By contrast, women's bodies were reduced to their sexual body parts in perceivers' minds, with their sexual body parts being recognized better when presented in isolation (body part recognition) than when presented in the context of entire bodies (whole body recognition). Consistent with objectification theory, these findings suggest that perceivers see women in a manner that reduces women's bodies to their sexual body parts.

**Perceiving women as fungible or interchangeable.** Objectification theorists have introduced the fungibility hypothesis, or the notion that people may be perceived as interchangeable with other people of like kind (Nussbaum, 1999; see also Haslam, 2006). In his critique of capitalism, for example, Marx (1964) suggested that employers may see their employees as completely fungible workers, reduced to a set of body parts that perform the job at hand. Likewise, if a person is sexually fungible or replaceable with others, she is treated as if sexualized body parts or functions represent her entire person—that is, one woman should be entirely interchangeable with other women. To test this fungibility hypothesis, Gervais, Vescio, and Allen (2012) altered images of men and women to create (1) images of stereotypic men and women, who were average in the magnitude of their sexualized body parts (chest and hip-to-waist ratio), and (2) images of hyper-stereotypic men and women whose sexualized body parts had more magnitude (bigger chests and smaller hips). Participants saw images of stereotypic and hyper-stereotypic men and women once before completing a surprise recognition task requiring that they match the bodies and faces that appeared together in the original images. Consistent with predictions, we found that women, regardless of body type, and hyper-stereotypic men (e.g., large arms and chests, narrow waists) were perceived as more fungible than stereotypic men (or men that represent the cultural average body size of men). In other words, perceivers made more body-face pairing errors when matching heads and bodies of women (regardless of body type) and hyper-stereotypic men than when matching stereotypic (or average) men.

In sum, theory and research from our lab indicate that the sexualization of women is associated with two perceptual tendencies. First, consistent with sexual objectification theory, women appear to be perceived in object rather than person terms. More specifically, the sexualized body parts of women are just as well recognized when they appear in isolation as when they appear in the context of one's entire body, whereas men's body parts are better recognized when presented in the context of a whole body. Second, women (regardless of their body type) are perceived as more fungible—as interchangeable objects—than are average men, as evidenced by greater errors in face-body matching of women. While such findings would be expected to have consequences for information-seeking and judgments about women in work contexts, questions also arise about whether the sexual objectification of women has performance implications.

**Performance implications.** Experiences with sexual objectification have been suggested to reduce peak motivational flow states, directly or indirectly causing women to reduce concentration or disrupt cognition (Frederickson et al., 1998). In addition, although prior research has not examined whether performance is adversely affected when women are sexually objectified by others, there is evidence that self-objectification (focusing on one's body in a swimsuit vs. a sweater) undermines cognitive performance on a math test (Frederickson et al., 1998). In addition, as noted at the outset, other forms of subtle sexism (i.e., patronizing behavior) have been found to undermine women's performance (Vescio et al., 2005). To examine whether women's performance suffers when they are sexually objectified, Gervais, Vescio, and Allen (2011) created a simulated interview in which men and women were interviewed by an opposite-sex interviewer. In the control condition, interviewers made eye contact throughout the interview segment. By contrast, in the objectification condition, interviewers greeted the participant and, for two seconds, fixated their eyes on the participant's chest and gazed down past their hips and back up to their chest. Then, during the five question interview, participants were the recipients of the objectifying gaze (from chest down past hips and back to chest again) after being asked the first, third, and fifth question. As predicted, sexual objectification causes decrements in women's but not men's math performance.

In sum, in masculine domains, the sexualization of well-performing women represents another form of sugar-coated discrimination. Prior theory and research by Vescio and her colleagues (Vescio et al., 2005) has documented how patronizing behavior is comprised of benevolently-motivated acts of trivial kindness (praise) that make it hard for men to then see the gender-based inequities that emerge in the allocation of valued resources. Sexualization is a different form of sugar-coated discrimination. Instead of being benevolently motivated, the sexualization of well-performing women follows from threats to masculinity and feelings of anger. Importantly, however, the sexualization of well-performing women may not be perceived as an act of open hostility. Instead, sexualization may allow men to justify their actions in complimentary terms, with the acceptance of seemingly sweet acts of sexualization being offered in the shadow of greater threats of backlash and hostility. In this sense, the sexualization of well-performing women is a form of sugar-coated discrimination, in the sense that it allows one to argue a complimentary intent and to paint women who do not view such acts as complimentary as being overly sensitive or simply misunderstanding. Importantly, like Berdahl (2007), we stress the fact that the sexualization of women stems from threat and is associated with an array of adverse outcomes. When they are sexualized, women are perceived as interchangeable objects (Gervais et al., in press, 2012) who lack agency (Cikara et al., 2010), lack basic humanness (Vaes et al., 2011), and underperform (Gervais et al., 2011).

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Theresa K. Vescio is an Associate Professor of Psychology at the Pennsylvania State University. She received a PhD in Social Psychology from the University of Kansas and did postdoctoral research at the University of California, Berkeley. Her research seeks to understand the factors that can facilitate or temper the expression of sexism, racism, and heterosexism. Dr. Vescio's research on the underrepresentation of women in masculine domains (e.g., science, technology, engineering, business) is funded by the National Science Foundation. Dr. Vescio has published numerous articles, edited a recent volume on *The Social Psychology of Power* (with Ana Guinote), and served as Associate Editor for both the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology: Interpersonal Relations and Group Processes* and the *British Journal of Social Psychology*. In recognition of the contribution of her work, Dr. Vescio, along with her colleagues, has received the Gordon Allport Intergroup Relations Prize from the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues, the Georgia Babladelis award from the Society for the Psychology of Women, and the Roy Buck outstanding publication award from the Pennsylvania State University.



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