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Role Models

It's well established that people associate certain jobs with gender. Firefighters are male and nurses are female, for example. But what if an occupation, because it's new to society, is seen as neither male nor female?

A paper co-authored by a UC Santa Barbara scholar explores how a managerial role can become gender-stereotyped and the effect that has on the authority of both male and female managers.

Using a unique set of data from a microfinance bank in Central America, Sarah Thébaud, an assistant professor of sociology at UCSB, and Laura Doering of McGill University in Montreal, found that clients quickly treated previously gender-ambiguous roles as if they were male- or female-typed, and gave more authority to the managers who filled the role when they associated the job with men rather than women.

"The Effects of Gendered Occupational Roles on Men's and Women's Workplace Authority: Evidence from Microfinance" in the American Sociological Review, Thébaud said, also reveals that men are not immune to the disadvantages inherent in gender stereotyping. Although research has shown men generally are perceived as more competent managers than women, a man who steps into a female-typed role will experience a kind of trickle-down disadvantage, she explained.

"It's an unusual case when we really can show empirical evidence for how gender stereotypes can disadvantage men," Thébaud said. "In this instance, the men who

happen to be coming into a role that is female-stereotyped are experiencing a real penalty. That is eye-opening and important because we often think, ‘Oh, gender stereotypes are bad because they disadvantage women.’ Well, no, they disadvantage everyone, and let’s think about ways that we can ameliorate that.”

The deep trove of data from the microlending bank provided Thébaud and Doering a unique opportunity to study the gendering of occupational roles.

For-profit microfinance is a relatively new phenomenon in Central America, and about half of the loan managers at the bank are women. These features mean that, when clients initially come to borrow money, they likely don’t come in with especially strong gender stereotypes about the loan manager role, Thébaud noted.

The researchers found that clients quickly associated the gender of their initial manager with that occupation. Those who had male managers were more compliant — meaning they missed fewer payments — than clients with female managers. Thébaud said, “After adjusting for other factors that might affect repayment, such as credit history, clients are significantly more likely to miss payments to their first manager if that person happened to be a woman rather than a man.”

But, in a key twist, this gendered behavior also persisted over time for clients who were subsequently transferred to new managers. As Thébaud put it, “The gender of the first manager is a stronger predictor of behavior toward the second manager than the gender of the second manager is.” In other words, if a client’s original manager was a woman, that client will continue to attribute less authority to their loan manager, even if their subsequent manager is a man. The upshot: That client will remain relatively less compliant, regardless of the gender of the new manager.

This finding suggests that the cultural bias against female managers is something of a pre-existing condition. “It’s consistent with a lot of literature,” Thébaud explained. “Some studies have shown women can have an advantage in female-typed roles, but this is a managerial role, and in managerial roles you don’t so much see that effect as much because there’s something about managing. When women tell other people what to do, people don’t like it. It ruffles their feathers. We call it the backlash effect in the literature.”

Importantly, that bias against women managers is strong enough that, downstream, it can affect men, too. Men garner substantially less authority when they take on female-typed roles than male-typed roles, Thébaud said. “It’s illuminating for us

sociologists because it tells us something about another one of the reasons why we might not see as many men going into female-typed jobs, because they are likely to experience this social penalty," she noted.

What can be done? The authors suggest two actions that employers can take to combat this kind of gender bias. First, high-level managers could make public endorsements to bolster the authority and capabilities of individuals working in roles that are likely to be discounted on the basis of gender stereotypes. Second, employers might use more standardized criteria for the performance of both managers and the people who work for them — a strategy which has been shown to mitigate bias.

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