Are We Becoming Part of the Problem? Gender Stereotypes in Negotiation Research

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Abstract

The study of gender and negotiation has come a long way since the basic sex difference research carried out in the infancy of the field More recent study of contextual factors (roles, styles, gender composition of the dyad) often have the effect of reinforcing gender stereotypes. By expanding the diversity of populations studied, by selecting more gender neutral contexts, by considering purpose in choice of style and roles, and by locating our studies of how gender plays out in negotiation in different organizational contexts, we will be in a better position to move beyond the stereotypes that dominate so much of the current work.

A recent comparative study of women and men MBAs from elite business schools found that, from the outset, the women employees were disadvantaged relative to men (Carter & Silva, 2010). Not only were they more likely to be hired at a lower rank, despite similar work experiences and ambitions; they were paid an average of $4600 less. The salary gap persisted well into their careers. This would not come as a surprise to those of us who follow the research on gender and negotiation because we have known for a long time that women don't ask, especially where compensation is involved (Babcock & Laschever, 2003; Stuhlmacher & Walters, 1999). Indeed, what has motivated much of the recent research on gender and negotiation has been an attempt to understand better this wage and achievement gap. What is interesting about the Catalyst study, however, are the explanations business leaders provide for these gaps. The CEOs of such companies as Xerox, Deloitte, Ernst & Young, Kimberly Clark, and Texas Instruments identify the integrity of their hiring and recruitment processes and lack of transparency on compensation as the reasons these discrepancies exist. In contrast to these systemic explanations, our field blames individuals and how they negotiate. The

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time has come to consider the political implications of how we do this research and ask ourselves the question—are we perpetuating gender stereotypes?

The study of gender and negotiation has come a long way since the basic sex difference research carried out in the infancy of the field (Rubin & Brown, 1975). It is rare to find a study that is content just to compare women and men, find only women deficient, and trace that deficiency to some unexamined theory about social roles and early childhood socialization. Recent studies are more likely to focus on contextual factors that give rise to gender difference such as the agent/principal role; the social risks and costs of asking, the topics to be negotiated and the gender composition of the dyad, among others (Bear, 2011; Bowles, Babcock, & Lai, 2007; Bowles, Babcock, & McGinn, 2005; Bowles & Flynn, 2010; Kray, 2007; Olekalns, Kulick, Simonov, & Bradshaw, 2011; Tinsley, Cheldelin, Schneider, & Amanatullah, 2009). It is important to note that the findings from this line of research have given the lie to the assumption that generic negotiation prescriptions, for example, the dual requirements of empathy and assertiveness (Mnookin, Peppett, & Tulemello, 2000), work the same or are equally effective for all men and all women. No one size fits all when it comes to negotiation strategies and tactics. These are important contributions.

A major drawback of the early research was its focus on individual sex differences, differences that were conceptualized as stable characteristics of the negotiator and that invariably treated women as deficient (see Kolb, 2009). The most recent study of contextual factors raises a different set of concerns. Contrasting negotiator roles (agent vs. principal), styles (competitive vs. accommodating; agentic vs. communal), and gender composition of the dyad creates a new set of challenges for women negotiators. Where they had to worry about overcoming deficiencies in the past, now they find themselves tied up in double binds, forced to choose between efficacy as a negotiator and fulfilling gender stereotype of niceness and accommodation. Further the lines of advice that follow from this work—to avoid directness and act relationally—may have the effect of actually reinforcing these stereotypes.

I want to suggest that there are least four ways we, as researchers, can avoid becoming part of the problem we are presumably trying to ameliorate.

(1) *Be clear about which groups of women (and men) we are studying.* There is a long line of research in the field of leadership that captures the "double bind" women face in exercising authority (see Ely & Rhode, 2010; for a review). In parallel with the study of competitive and accommodating style, these works suggest that women face a no-win trade-off: conform to a feminine style and they are not respected as leaders, or adopt a more masculine style and be experienced as too cold and self-promoting. In negotiation, a similar line of research has highlighted the social cost of asking that women face as principals (Bowles et al., 2007; Tinsley et al., 2009).

What should give us pause with the designation of a double bind for women is that these stereotypes tend to represent behaviors associated with white, heterosexual, middle-class groups of women and men (Ridgeway, 2011). With other groups, the gender stereotype may be less likely to apply. Replicating the studies of job candidates and the trade-off between being hired and being liked, Katherine Phillips suggests that black female candidates do not experience the same backlash effects of dominance and likeability. The black female candidate with a dominant style was both more liked and more likely to be hired than her white counterpart displaying the same behaviors (2011). One's family status makes a difference. Mothers, for example, may face more of a backlash than other groups of women regarding pay and promotion (Correll, Benard, & Paik, 2007). Status, in the sense of hierarchical position, has an effect. Agentic behavior is seen as legitimate for both women and men in high status organizational roles and in professions like law (Ridgeway, 2011; Tinsley et al., 2009; Schneider et al., 2010). Demography also matters—the more women there are in senior leadership roles, the less likely one style of behavior is to dominate (Ely, 1994; Williams, 2010).

Williams (2010) calls attention to the fallout from this work on double binds, what she labels "ambivalent sexism." Women can internalize the stereotypes such that when they take up a caring role in the public sphere of work, it can lead to "self erasure." In the context of negotiation, it can cause women to become more anxious and less willing to negotiate. Indeed, this is a conclusion that some have reached (Kray & Babcock, 2006). Self-erasure is indeed a problem, but we, as researchers, need to take more care to specify which groups of women face this double bind and not universalize the problem.

(2) *Select more gender-neutral negotiating contexts.* One of the consistent findings that come from the research on gender stereotyping is that the nature of the task and/or job being studied makes a difference. Gender is more likely to be salient in contexts that are culturally linked to gender or to situations where the stereotypic skills of one sex over another predominate (Ridgeway, 2011). In studies of masculine-typed jobs such as operations and finance, it is more likely that women will face double binds (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Heilman & Okimoto, 2007).

While negotiations happen everyday and routinely at work, the dominant context for studying gender in negotiations is distributive negotiations over compensation (Kray & Thompson, 2005). And negotiation over compensation has been described as, and has been shown to be, a masculine-gendered task. Why would we then be surprised that, without prompting to the contrary (see Kray, Thompson, & Galinsky, 2001), gender stereotypes will be primed? Research has shown that women do ask, and ask quite directly, when issues like time, flexibility, schedules, resources, and job title, among others, are the issues (Bohnet & Greig, 2007; Kolb & Kickul, 2006). In a recent study, Julia Bear (2011) shows that negotiation context makes a difference. She finds that women were more likely to avoid negotiating over compensation (masculine-gendered task) and men are more averse to negotiating access to lactation rooms, an obvious feminine-gendered concern. While these two tasks seem to be extreme examples, it should be possible to identify more gender-neutral tasks. These could include work schedules, support for an initiative, among others (see Severance et al., 2011).

It is also worth observing that that one is more likely to get gender-stereotypic behavior in laboratory studies and in assessment studies where participants are not directly familiar with or implicated in the organizational processes (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Again, we should not be surprised that gender-stereotypic outcomes result from the methods we use. Indeed, in field studies of negotiators, some of the common gender stereotypes are not in evidence. Women who are asked about negotiations in their organizations are no more likely to anticipate backlash than men and are even more likely to negotiate when they perceive they have not been fairly treated (Bowles, Bear, & Thomason, 2010). They are also likely to negotiate about a host of issues related to their success in a new leadership role (Kolb & Kickul, 2006; Kolb, Williams, & Frohlinger, 2010).

(3) *Avoid dichotomizing stylistic/role choices.* It is typical in experiments to instruct a negotiating subject to be competitive or accommodating or to act agentically or communally. By dichotomizing these choices of style, we implicitly draw on "separate spheres ideology" (private v public) that equates accommodation, community, selflessness, and an ethic of care to women (the values of the private sphere) and public sphere competencies, such as competition, agency, and self-interest with masculinity (Fletcher, 1999; Williams, 2010). In so doing, we create a hierarchy of competencies that implicitly devalue feminine skills in workplace negotiation simulations. When we dichotomize these styles, we fail to appreciate the purposes that may undergird these choices and also miss potential opportunities to help negotiators unlock what double binds exist.

Fletcher's work (Fletcher, 1999, 2010) helps us make some of these important distinctions. In her work on relational practice and leadership, she talks about how agentic behavior gets conflated with assertiveness and communal behavior or accommodation with being nice and liked. She calls the latter, relational "malpractice," which seems to be exactly the advice we give to women to escape the double bind—be accommodating and nice when you negotiate if you want to be trusted and hired! Critically to avoid relational malpractice, one needs to connect behavior to the requirements of the task. Some tasks call for agentic decision-making, and others more communal support. To the degree that negotiators can justify, to themselves and others, that their actions serve a larger purpose, they are less likely to find themselves trapped in the either/or thinking of a double-bind stereotype.

Similarly, Ely and Rhode (2010) suggest women can exhaust themselves trying to find the right balance between the two sides of a double bind—being warm or competent as leaders, or in negotiation parlance, being competitive or accommodating. The choice needs to be tied to a larger purpose—what is needed in the moment to get work done. We miss these choices in part because the task, typically compensation and studied in the laboratory, does not lend itself to this kind of thinking. Thus, rather than promote accommodative behavior through relational requests and indirect asks (Bowles & Babcock, 2008; Severance et al., 2011), we need to consider how asking can be tied to some defensible purposes. In their field studies, Bowles et al., 2010, show that negotiators have good reasons or rationales to negotiate for themselves and on behalf of others. Instead of dichotomizing stylistic choices, we can consider testing what differences purposeful "asks" make under varying conditions.

(4) *Expand Research Beyond the Immediate Interactive Context.* The evolution in the study of gender dynamics in negotiation has expanded from a focus on the individual, and how she and he negotiate and fare in the process, to an interactive perspective that explicitly takes into account the expectations of others. Indeed, this shift has been important because expectational effects frequently dwarf individual differences in

explaining stereotyped behaviors and outcomes (Eckel, de Oliveira, & Grossman, 2008). However, the field has generally not taken the next steps to consider explicitly the broader situational contexts that shape the negotiated interactions in which stereotypes are produced (Deaux & Major, 1990).

This has consequences for how we understand the phenomena. In addressing race, for example, Loury (2002) suggests that a focus on self-confirming stereotypes conveniently encourages us to ignore the larger institutional and organizational contexts that produce the stereotypes. As a result, we lack the curiosity to delve deeper into more contextual explanations and so the stereotypes remain unchanged. Further, if we focus on stereotypes and ignore broader institutional contexts, we make the power relationships and inequities embedded in these stereotypes seem nonproblematic (Ridgeway, 2011). But they are a problem with real consequences.

Just as law provides a framework for negotiators who bargain in its shadow (Mnookin & Kornhauser, 1978–1979), so too do organizational structures and cultures cast a shadow when people negotiate over organizational matters, for example, work and its compensation. Organizations are not gender neutral. Workplace structures, policies, and practices, that appear unbiased, generally reflect the values and the life situations of men who have dominated the public domain of work. As such they constitute a gendered "negotiated order," that has implications for the types of issues that are negotiated and the relative power and influence of negotiators to raise and bargain over them (Kolb & McGinn, 2009).

If we take the notion of a gendered negotiated order seriously, we not only need to expand the range of issues we study, but also reconsider what constitutes an agreement or a good outcome. The range of issues, as I have already suggested, need to encompass the kinds of negotiations that routinely occur in organizations over jobs, opportunities, time, and resources. Women, for example, disproportionally (67% vs. 18% for men) negotiate to overcome disadvantage (e.g., being passed over, having a project undermined), both for themselves and on behalf of others (Bowles et al., 2010). Further, these types of negotiations are not well suited to simple formulations of stereotypical styles and clear distinctions among roles. For example, to negotiate for a job or opportunity, when a job is gendered, in that its description has historically fit the work and life experiences of men (Britton, 2000), requires neither asserting one's qualifications nor accommodating to a rejection. Rather, it can involve a negotiation over what the requirements of a job should be given the current, not traditional, needs of the organization (Meyerson & Kolb, 2000).

When negotiators bargain in the shadow of gendered negotiated orders, status hierarchy ranks women and men differently (Ridgeway, 1997). Men are seen as more deserving of benefits and rewards over equivalent women, hence making it more legitimate for the former to ask. Further, those who are advantaged by gender status beliefs are often oblivious to their advantage and so are less likely to attend to information that might challenge those beliefs. Thus, it is not just that society's views of femininity and masculinity are reflected in negotiations, it is that these have material consequences for what is negotiable, how issues get raised, the legitimacy of bargainers to negotiate about them, and the outcomes that are possible (Kolb, 2009).

Gendered negotiated orders imply that negotiators are differentially *positioned* to raise issues and negotiate about them, women for some issues, men for others (Kolb & McGinn, 2009). Positioning means the ways negotiators construct legitimate social roles and identities for themselves, subject to the expectations and constraints of the social structures in which they are operating (Davies & Harre, 1990). Yet, we know little about how and what negotiators do to enhance their legitimacy and influence and what they do when that legitimacy is challenged (Kolb & Williams, 2003). We can consider these in the context of issues that are generally seen as negotiable, such as budgets and contracts, but also ones that are not so obvious, for example, overcoming disadvantage (Bowles et al., 2010).

Finally, when we locate negotiation interactions in the shadow of gendered negotiated orders, we need to consider how these orders may differ (See Olekalns et al., 2011). Ridgeway (2011) observes that gender stereotypes frequently lag actual changes in social and material conditions in different workplaces. For example, in biotech, where women are well represented, women are likely to be more empowered to negotiate for flexible work arrangements than in information technology firms, which are more gendered. Further, some organizations make policies and practices more transparent and equitable such that compensation and job opportunities are less directly traceable to the outcomes of individual negotiations. That was the aim of the leaders cited at the start of the paper in response to the inequities in salary and position (Carter & Silva, 2010). In some organizations, individuals, so-called organizational catalysts, can play a major role in mitigating potential disadvantages by making information about salaries and job requirements more widely available (Sturm, 2009). By locating our studies of how gender plays out in negotiation in different organizational contexts, we will be in a better position to move beyond the stereotypes that dominate so much of the current work.

As I was completing the work on this column, I was contacted by a freelance journalist who asked to interview me about women and negotiation. In her email to me about the topics to cover, she wanted to make sure that we discussed the problem of "why do women bargain themselves down." Interestingly, when I asked her is she bargains herself down, she responded that she did so early in her career, but no longer. Yet, she wanted to be sure to discuss the problem.

The lure of stereotypes is compelling. They help us make sense of the world. People identify with them. My experience tells me that women are very quick to accept that asking is risky and that they'd better temper their asks if they want to succeed. Is this really what we want negotiators to take away from our research? I think it is time to rethink some of the political implications of our work.

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