

DIVERSITY, INCLUSION & ACCESS

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Inclusion Icebreakers: Biases

Common Types of Bias

Affinity bias: Tendency to gravitate toward people like ourselves in appearance, beliefs, and background, and avoid or even dislike people who are different from us.

Attribution bias: Closely linked to performance bias- we see women as less competent than men, and we give less credit for their accomplishments or blame them for more mistakes.

Likeability bias: Rooted in expectations. We expect men to be more assertive, so when they lead it feels natural. We expect women to be kind and communal, so when they assert themselves we like them less.

Maternal bias: Motherhood triggers false assumptions that women are less committed to their careers—and even less competent.

Performance bias: Deep-rooted and incorrect assumptions about women and men's abilities. Tendency to underestimate women's performance and overestimate men's.

Dig a Little Deeper into Types

AFFINITY BIAS

Because of affinity bias, we often gravitate toward people like ourselves—and may avoid or even dislike people who are different.¹⁶⁹

Affinity bias plays out in several ways in the workplace. Mentors say they're attracted to protégés who remind them of themselves.¹⁷⁰ And hiring managers are more likely to spend time interviewing people who are like them and less time getting to know people who are different.¹⁷¹ They are also more likely to give people like them a favorable evaluation.¹⁷²

Because white men hold more positions of power—and are more likely to gravitate toward other white men—affinity bias has a particularly negative effect on women and people of color.¹⁷³ They can end up being overlooked or left out.

ATTRIBUTION BIAS

Because we see women as less competent than men, we don't always recognize the work they do. Even when women and men work on tasks together, women often get less credit for success and more blame for failure.¹⁵³

We also fall into the trap of thinking women's contributions are less valuable. This often plays out in meetings, where women are more likely to be talked over and interrupted.¹⁵⁴ In one study, men interrupted women nearly three times as often as they interrupted other men, and women fell into the same pattern.¹⁵⁵

Given that women are often blamed more for failure and tend to wield less influence, they are prone to greater self-doubt. The bias women experience can be so pervasive that they underestimate their own performance. Women often predict that they'll do worse than they actually do, while men predict that they'll do better.¹⁵⁶

In some cases, women are also less likely to think they're ready for a promotion or new job. One study found that men apply for jobs when they meet 60% of hiring criteria, while women wait until they meet 100%.¹⁵⁷ Of course, women don't lack a confidence gene. Given we hold women to higher standards, women may rightfully feel like they have to hit a higher bar.

LIKEABILITY BIAS

Likeability bias—also known as the “likeability penalty”—often surfaces in how we describe women. Women are more likely to be described as “too aggressive” or “bossy”—words rarely used to describe men in the workplace.¹⁵⁹

You may even have caught yourself having a negative response to a woman who has a strong leadership style or who speaks in a direct, assertive manner. This is likeability bias at work. And being liked matters. Who are you more likely to support and promote: the man with high marks across the board or the woman who has equally high marks but is not as well liked?

To make things more complicated, women also pay a penalty for being agreeable and nice, which can make people think they’re less competent.¹⁶⁰ This double bind makes the workplace challenging for women. They need to assert themselves to be seen as effective. But when they *do* assert themselves, they are often less liked. Men do not walk this same tightrope.¹⁶¹

MATERNAL BIAS

We incorrectly assume that mothers are less committed and less competent. As a result, mothers are often given fewer opportunities and held to higher standards than fathers.¹⁶³

We fall into the trap of thinking mothers are not as interested in their jobs, so we assume they don’t want that challenging assignment or to go on a big work trip. And because we think they’re less committed, we’re more likely to penalize them for small mistakes or oversights.¹⁶⁴

Research shows that maternal bias is the strongest type of gender bias.¹⁶⁵ When hiring managers know a woman has children—because “Parent-Teacher Association coordinator” appears on her résumé—she is 79% less likely to be hired. And if she was hired, she would be offered an average of \$11,000 less in salary.¹⁶⁶

Men can face pushback for having kids, too. Fathers who take time off for family reasons receive lower performance ratings and experience steeper reductions in future earnings than mothers who do.¹⁶⁷

PERFORMANCE BIAS

We tend to underestimate women's performance and overestimate men's. As a result, women have to accomplish more to prove that they're as competent as men. This is why women are often hired based on past accomplishments (they need to prove that they have the right skills), while men are often hired based on future potential (we assume they have the skills they need).¹⁴⁷

To understand the impact of this bias, consider what happens when you remove gender from decision-making. In one study, replacing a woman's name with a man's name on a résumé improved the odds of getting hired by more than 60%.¹⁴⁸ In another, when major orchestras used blind auditions—so they could hear the musicians but not see them—the odds of women making it past the first round improved by 50%.¹⁴⁹

Performance bias often leads to missed opportunities and lower performance ratings for women—and both can have a huge impact on career progression.¹⁵⁰ This bias is even more pronounced when review criteria aren't clearly specified, leaving room for managers and others to rely more on gut feelings and personal inferences.¹⁵¹

Reference:

50 Ways to Flight Bias, *LeanIn.Org and McKinsey & Company's Women in the Workplace Study*, 2015.