



W I S E L I

Women in Science & Engineering Leadership Institute
University of Wisconsin-Madison

Unconscious Biases and Assumptions

Implications for Evaluating Women's Leadership



Unconscious biases and assumptions

- What is “unconscious bias”?
- Do I have unconscious biases?
- How might unconscious biases affect the evaluation of individuals in leadership positions?
- How can those doing the evaluation overcome these tendencies?
- How can those in leadership positions actively work to mitigate these tendencies?



What is “unconscious bias”

- Unconscious bias and assumptions
- Schemas
- Stereotyping
- Cognitive shortcuts
- Statistical discrimination
- Implicit associations

The tendency of our minds to judge *individuals* based on characteristics (real or imagined) of *groups*



Unconscious bias

- When shown photographs of people who are the same height, evaluators overestimated the heights of male subjects and underestimated the heights of female subjects.
- When shown photographs of men of similar athletic ability, evaluators rated the athletic ability of African American men higher than that of white men.
- When asked to rate the quality of verbal skills indicated by a short text, evaluators rated the skills as lower if they were told an African American wrote the text than if they were told a white person wrote it, and gave higher ratings when told a woman wrote it than when told a man wrote it.

Implicit Association Test

Gender & Academic Leadership



Evaluation of Leadership

Prescriptive Gender Norms

■ Men

- Strong
- Decisive
- Assertive
- Tough
- Authoritative
- Independent



■ Women

- Nurturing
- Communal
- Nice
- Supportive
- Helpful
- Sympathetic



Unconscious biases against women in leadership positions

- Unconscious biases exist
- Our unconscious biases will more often link “leadership” and “men” than they will “leadership” and “women”
- How does this play out:
 - At point of entry into leadership positions?
 - Evaluations of women’s leadership competencies?



Point of entry—selecting women for leadership positions

- 238 academic psychologists sent a curricula vitae with either male or female name
 - Entry level: more likely to vote to hire man, more likely to indicate man had adequate teaching, research, and service experience
 - High level: no gender differences
 - No differences between male and female evaluators
 - More write-in comments for women



Point of entry—selecting women for leadership positions

- Shifting standards of reference
 - Women rated relative to women, men relative to men; e.g., “good for a woman”
 - Easier for women to meet the “minimum standard”?
 - When women and men are rated directly against each other in a task expected to be performed better by men, lower expectations for women
 - Women held to higher “confirmatory” standards than men, need more evidence of their skill to perform job



Point of entry—selecting women for leadership positions

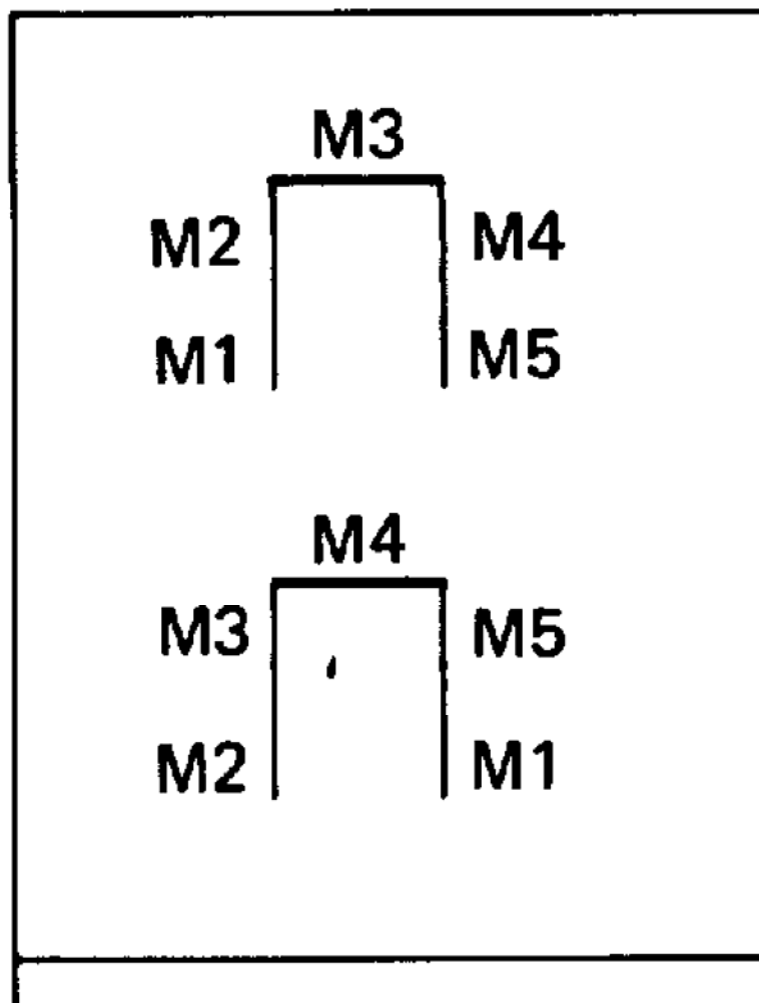
- Redefining merit to justify discrimination
 - Evaluation of candidates for police chief job
 - Candidates were “streetwise” or “formally educated”
 - Respondents selected the male candidate more often, and justified the decision by citing whatever credential, “streetwise” or “educated”, that the male candidate had
 - Also works in reverse; women’s studies professor, “academic” vs. “activist” credentials



Evaluation of leadership

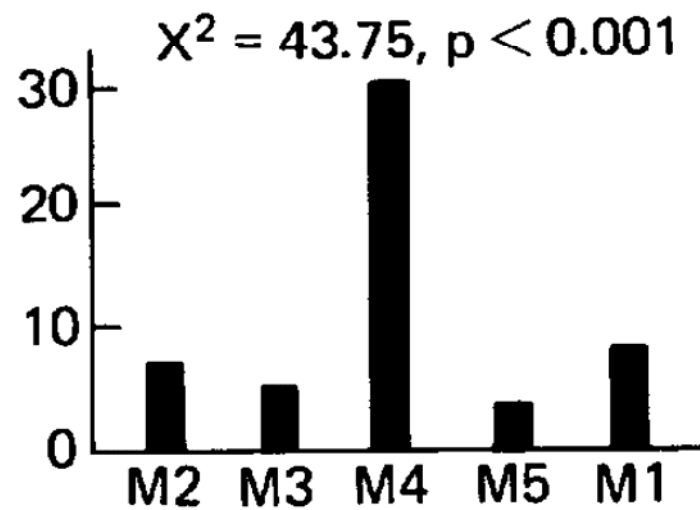
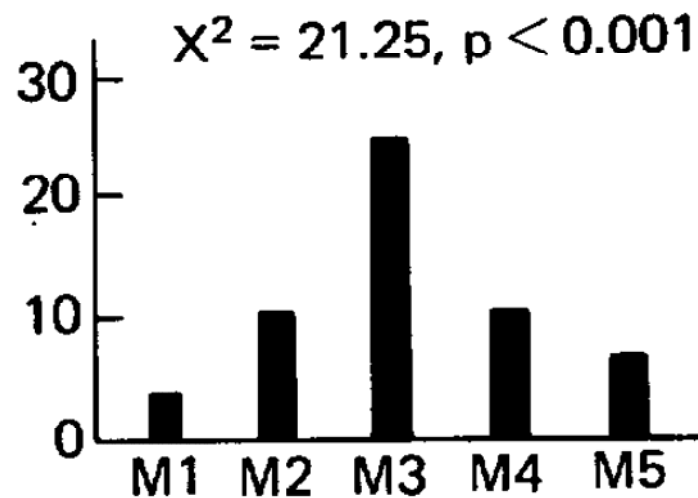
- Students seated around the table—when is the head of the table identified as the “leader?”

MALE

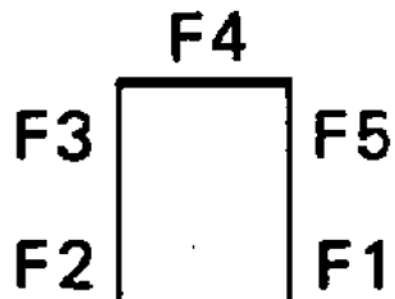
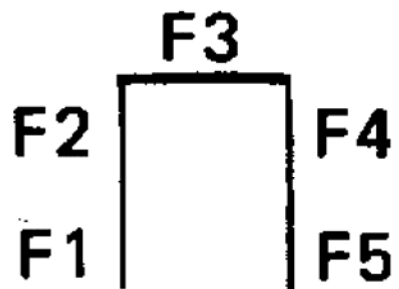


MALE

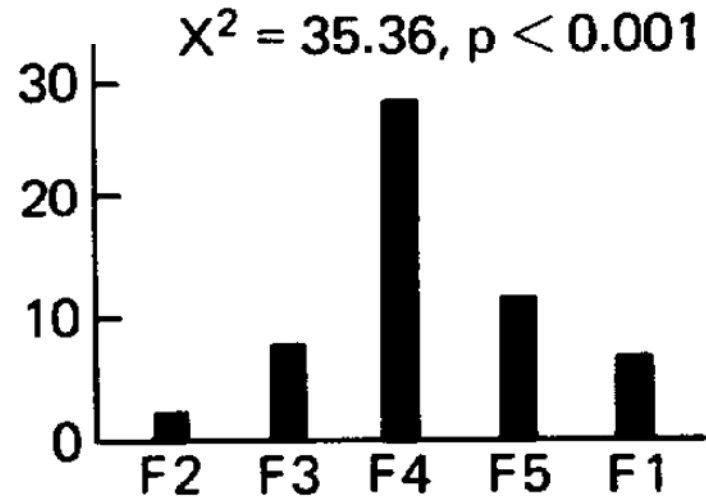
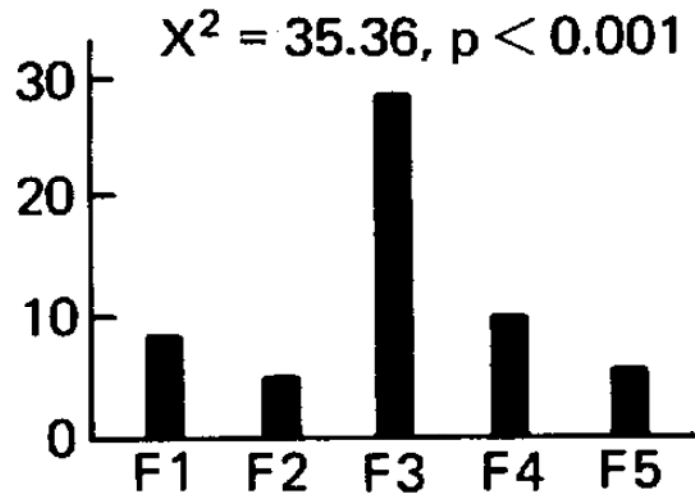
SAME-SEX STIMULUS GROUPS

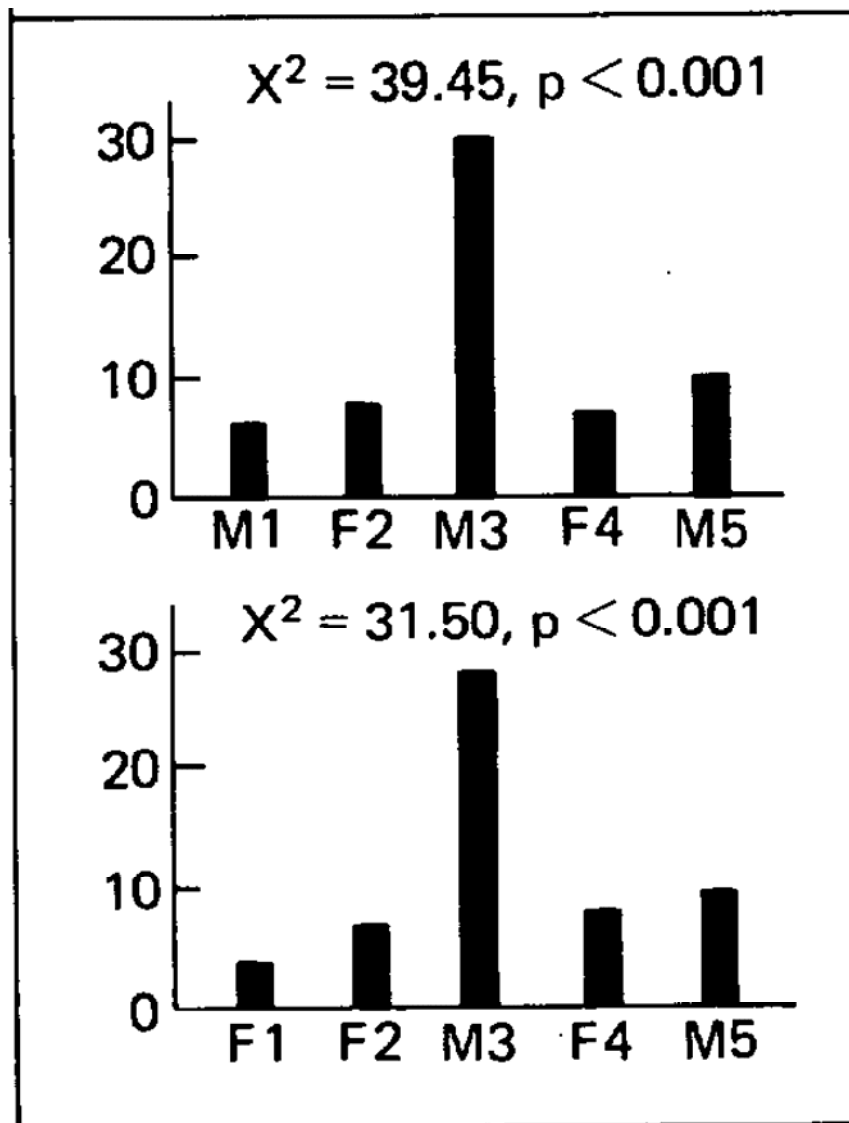
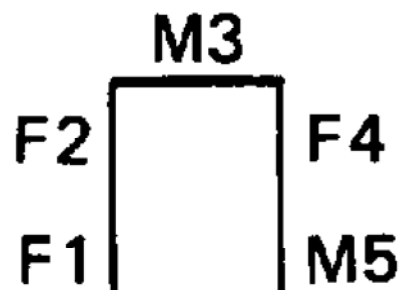
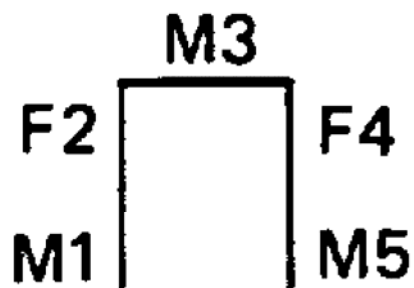


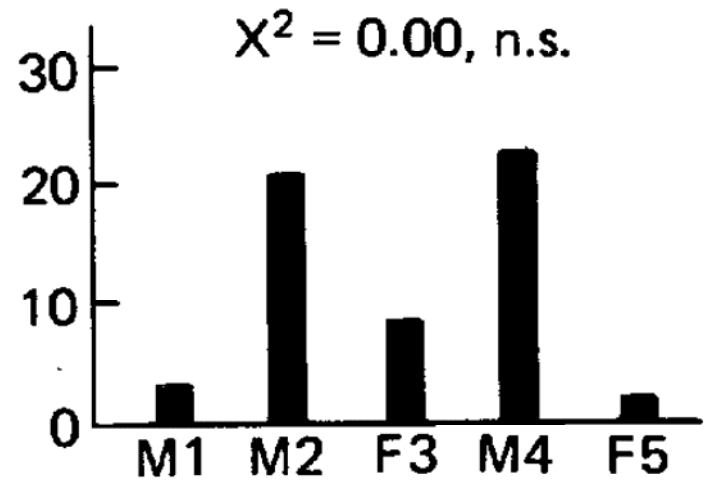
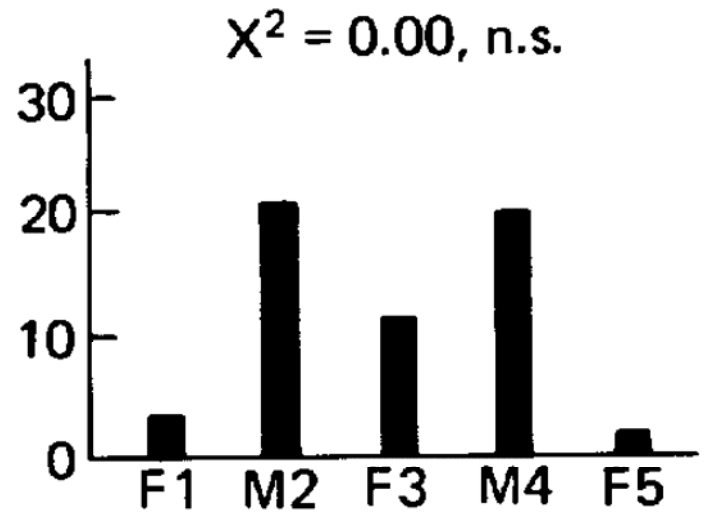
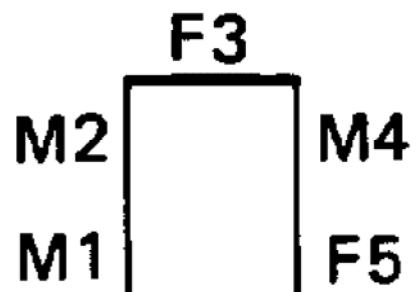
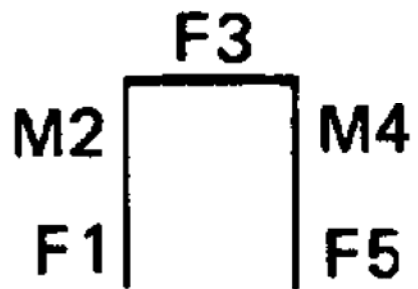
FEMALE



FEMALE









Evaluation of Leadership

- For female leaders, “warmth” negatively correlated with leadership



Evaluation of Leadership/Competence

- Evaluate fictional Assistant Vice Presidents
 - Male-assumed job—company makes engine products and other AVPs are men
 - Rated under two conditions: performance clear and performance ambiguous
 - Characteristics rated:
 - Competence, personality, likeability, interpersonal hostility



Evaluation of Leadership

- **Performance Ambiguous**
 - Women less competent than men
 - Women and men equally likeable

- **Performance Clear**
 - Women and men equally competent
 - Women less likeable than men



Evaluation of Leadership

Prescriptive Gender Norms

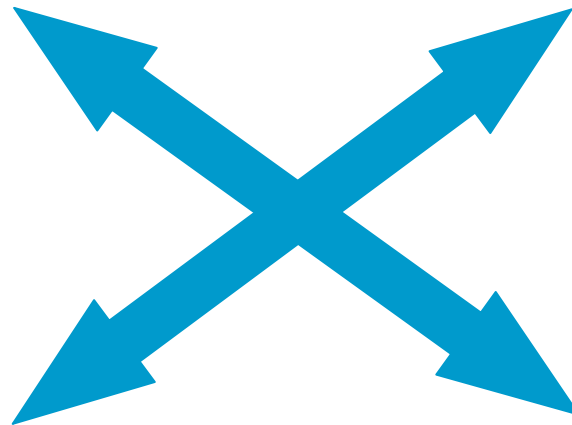
Social Penalties

■ Men

- Strong
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■ Women

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Evaluation of Leadership

- Evaluate fictional Assistant Vice Presidents as before but...
 - Add information about communal qualities: “caring and sensitive to employees” vs. “worked hard to maximize employees’ contributions” vs. no information
- Results
 - “Caring & sensitive”: women more likeable
 - “Maximize ee contributions” or no info: same result as previous—women less likeable

What to do?



Reducing bias when evaluating women leaders

- Women are biased as well as men...maybe more?
 - Biernat & Fuegen (2001) found that women, but not men, were more likely to hire a man for a male-typed job
 - Females more likely to exclude a competent female than a competent male from their group (Hagen & Kahn 1975)
 - Women find self-promoting women less desirable and less hireable than self-promoting men (Rudman 1998)
 - Female reviewers of NSF grants gave significantly lower scores than male reviewers to female-authored proposals (Broder 1993)



Overcoming unconscious bias—best practices

- Learn about research on biases and assumptions—consciously strive to minimize influence of unconscious tendencies on your evaluations (Kruglanski & Freund 1983)
- Instruct committee members to avoid bias (Blair & Banaji 1996)
- Spend sufficient time evaluating each applicant and avoid distractions (Martell 1991)
- Reach out to applicants from under-represented groups individually (Wennerås & Wold 1997)



Overcoming unconscious bias—best practices

- Increase the proportion of women and minorities in the applicant pool (Heilman 1980)
- Do not depend too heavily on any one element of a portfolio (Trix & Psenka 2003)
- Develop evaluation criteria *prior* to evaluating candidates and stick to the criteria. Periodically review evaluation decisions and ensure that criteria continue to guide the selection of candidates. (Uhlmann & Cohen 2005; Biernat & Fuegen 2001)



Overcoming unconscious bias—best practices

- **Ensure that evaluation committees are as diverse as possible** (Lowery, Hardin & Sinclair 2001)
- **Switch the gender/race “thought experiment”** (Valian 1998)
- **Use counterstereotype imaging** (Blair, Ma & Lenton 2001; Dasgupta & Greenwald 2001)



Tips for avoiding trigger of automatic bias

- Be sure to positively highlight your male/agentive qualities, *and* your female/communal qualities.
 - Shifting standards of reference
 - Implied communality deficit



Tips for avoiding trigger of automatic bias

- **Beware stereotype threat**
 - Heightened state of vigilance among women in leadership roles (“threat in the air”)
 - Mitigated when threat is neutralized, e.g., with data
 - Change your own stereotypes about what makes a good leader, whether women make good leaders!



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