FlashReport

Masculinity, status, and subordination: Why working for a gender stereotype violator causes men to lose status

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ABSTRACT

Occupying gender stereotype-incongruent roles can lead individuals to lose status and earn a lower salary. The present research examined whether merely *working for* a supervisor in a gender-atypical occupational role leads a subordinate to lose status. Two studies found that male subordinates of gender deviants (i.e., a female supervisor in a masculine domain or a male supervisor in a feminine domain) were accorded lower status and were paid less than male subordinates of supervisors in gender-congruent roles (i.e., a female supervisor in a feminine domain or a male supervisor in a masculine domain). However, the status of female subordinates was unaffected by working for a gender atypical supervisor. Moreover, the status loss for male subordinates was mediated by a perceived lack of masculinity. Thus, establishing the male subordinate's masculine credentials eliminated the bias.

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"The road to manhood is a hard one."
–Ian Buruma (1984), *Behind the Mask*

In examining masculinity and femininity throughout the world, anthropologists have found that different cultures universally construct a model of appropriate manhood that is usually difficult for men to achieve and, once achieved, can be precarious (Gilmore, 1990). Thus, men are regularly under a much greater burden to "prove" their masculinity than women are to similarly prove their femininity (Ducat, 2004; Kimmel, 1996; Pleck, 1981). Social psychologists have further shown that people can easily imagine how a man might lose his manhood (e.g., being unable to support a family, losing a job, etc.), but found it more difficult to explain how a woman might lose her womanhood (Vandello, Bosson, Cohen, Burnaford, & Weaver, 2008). Furthermore, work in the area of male gender role strain has found not only that "ideal" masculinity is difficult for American men to achieve (O'Neil & Nadeau, 1999; Pleck, 1995), but that men often have to engage in behaviors such as suppressing emotions and acting in a hyper-heterosexual fashion in order to verify their masculinity.

The workplace is a key area where masculinity is enacted and "proven" (Cockburn, 1991; Collinson & Hearn, 2005). The sex role strain paradigm (Pleck, 1981) proposes that in the modern male role, a primary way that men's masculinity is validated is via their economic achievement and their status within organizations. A number of

ethnographic studies have investigated the ways that men's masculinity can be threatened at work, and the ways in which men attempt to reassert their manhood. For example, when men work in highly feminized occupations (e.g., preschool education, nursing), their masculinity is called into question. As a result, men in these occupations tend to engage in strategies to maintain their identity as men (Henson & Rogers, 2001). In contrast, women in highly masculinized jobs generally do not report engaging in parallel strategies or going out of their way to reassert their "true" femininity. While work roles remain a primary means by which men's masculinity is evaluated, work roles are not as central to the manner in which people evaluate women's femininity.

Thus, when men occupy a workplace role where their masculinity can be called into question, they should be more likely to lose status than women. There are likely a number of roles that men could occupy that fit this description. Here, we investigate whether merely being in a subordinate role to a gender stereotype-incongruent supervisor is one such situation. Past research has found that men and women who occupy stereotype-incongruent roles tend to be accorded lower status than individuals in stereotype-congruent roles (Brescoll, Dawson, & Uhlmann, 2010; Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2005). However, the extent to which this diminished status generalizes to their workplace subordinates remains unexplored. The present studies show that because of the precarious nature of masculinity (Vandello et al., 2008), and the strong reciprocal link between masculinity and workplace status (e.g., Cockburn, 1991), working for a gender deviant supervisor negatively impacts male subordinates more than female subordinates. Social expectations regarding masculine behavior mandate that men avoid subordinating themselves to others—and if they do, it should at least be

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to a deserving person (Barkow, 1975; Connell, 1985, 1987). Stereotype violators (e.g., women in stereotypically male roles and men in stereotypically female roles) are not seen as deserving of status and respect, and occupying a role subordinate to such an individual should be uniquely detrimental for men. Thus, we hypothesize that male subordinates of gender stereotype-incongruent supervisors will lose status because being subordinate to an individual accorded diminished status and respect places these male subordinates at risk of having their gender identity (i.e., masculinity) called into question.

Put more simply, social perceivers may draw the inference that a man "isn't much of a man" if he works for a superior who is stereotype incongruent and therefore low in status. In contrast, female subordinates should be less affected by working for a stereotype-incongruent supervisor because women's gender identity is 1) less precarious than men's gender identity, and further, 2) not linked as closely to their workplace status. As a result, the inference that a female subordinate "isn't much of a woman" because she works for a stereotype incongruent supervisor does not follow as intuitively from her situation. The fact that these men are in a *work* role (which is particularly relevant to men's status) and the individuals they are subordinated to have low status as a result of their *gender* deviance (and not another type of stigmatized identity) should uniquely lead to calling the male subordinates' gender identity into question.

Overview

The present research tested the hypothesis that male subordinates of gender deviants bear the associated costs more than female subordinates—a consequence of the reciprocal links between masculinity, status and workplace roles. Study 1 examined whether a perceived loss of masculinity mediates the effects of working for a gender atypical supervisor on status conferral. Study 2 investigated whether establishing a male subordinate's masculine credentials would mitigate the bias.

Study 1: methods

Participants and design

Seventy-three women and 47 men (*mean age* = 40.12) participated in the study, which employed a 2 (gender of supervisor: male vs. female) × 2 (gender of subordinate: male vs. female) × 2 (masculine vs. feminine occupation) between-subjects design.

Sex-typing of occupations

Participants were randomly assigned to read a scenario that described a male or female assistant, his or her supervisor, and the type of work that they did (construction site supervision vs. human resources). In order to generate these two occupations, we obtained a list of thirty occupations from the Bureau of Labor Statistics database that are typically held by women or by men. Forty-five participants rated these occupations according to whether they believed them to be typically held by men or women (1 = *typically held by a man*, 7 = *typically held by a woman*), as well as their relative prestige (1 = *extremely unprestigious*, 7 = *extremely prestigious*). Of these occupations, construction site supervisor was rated as a stereotypically male occupation (*M* = 1.95, *SD* = 1.89), while human resources supervisor was seen as a stereotypically female occupation (*M* = 6.55, *SD* = 2.01). Thus, a female construction site supervisor and a male human resources supervisor were in stereotype-incongruent roles. At the same time, both jobs were rated as equivalently prestigious (*Ms* = 5.05 and 5.25, respectively).

Dependent measures

Status conferral

Following Tiedens (2001), participants responded to three items assessing how much status, power, and independence they believed

the subordinate deserved in a future job (1 = *none*, 11 = *a great deal*; $\alpha = .91$).

Salary

Participants indicated the yearly salary that they would pay the subordinate.

Trait masculinity and femininity

To measure the perceived masculinity and femininity of the subordinate, we utilized traits that were high in face validity from the Bem Sex Role Inventory (Bem, 1981). The masculine traits included *masculine*, *dominant*, and *strong*, while the feminine traits were *feminine*, *timid*, and *weak* (*reverse-scored*) (1 = *strongly disagree*, 11 = *strongly agree*). A factor analysis revealed only one underlying factor for the six items ($\alpha = .88$).
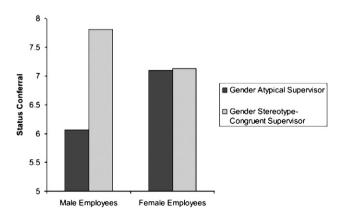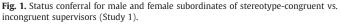
Results and discussion

Status conferral

Participant gender did not moderate the reported effects in either study. Additionally, parallel results were obtained regardless of whether the stereotype incongruent supervisor was a female construction site supervisor or male human resources supervisor; therefore, for ease of presentation we simply break results down by whether the supervisor was stereotype congruent or incongruent.

A 2 × 2 × 2 ANOVA revealed the hypothesized 3-way interaction between supervisor gender, job type, and subordinate gender, $F(1,112) = 5.77$, $p < .05$. To unpack this 3-way interaction, we examined judgments of male and female subordinates separately and found that, as expected, male subordinates of stereotype-incongruent supervisors were accorded less status than male subordinates of stereotype-congruent supervisors (*M* = 6.07, *SD* = 2.30; *M* = 7.81, *SD* = 1.82, respectively), $t(59) = 3.22$, $p < .01$ (Fig. 1). In contrast, there was no significant difference in the amount of status that female subordinates working for a gender stereotype congruent vs. incongruent supervisor received (*M* = 7.04, *SD* = 1.63; *M* = 7.22, *SD* = 1.70), $t(57) = .16$, *ns*.

Yearly salary

We observed a significant 3-way interaction between subordinate gender, supervisor gender, and job type, $F(1,102) = 8.61$, $p < .01$. Male targets who worked for stereotype-incongruent supervisors received lower salaries than male targets who worked for stereotype-congruent supervisors (*M* = $53,371, *SD* = $30,655; *M* = $72,173; *SD* = $23,970), $t(52) = 2.44$, $p < .05$. In contrast, for female subordinates, we did not find a salary difference between those who worked for stereotype-incongruent vs. congruent supervisors (*M* = $70,178, *SD* = $25,503; *M* = $60,678; *SD* = $19,396), $t(54) = 1.57$, *ns*.

Fig. 1. Status conferral for male and female subordinates of stereotype-congruent vs. incongruent supervisors (Study 1).

Trait masculinity/femininity

A 2×2×2 ANOVA revealed the hypothesized 3-way interaction between supervisor gender, supervisor job type, and subordinate gender, $F(1,112) = 4.75$, $p<.05$. Male subordinates of stereotype-incongruent supervisors were seen as significantly less masculine than male subordinates who worked for a stereotype-congruent supervisor, $(M = 5.11, SD = 2.92; M = 7.17, SD = 1.70)$ $t(54) = 3.17$, $p<.01$. However, female subordinates of a stereotype-incongruent supervisor were seen as no less masculine or feminine than female subordinates of a stereotype-congruent supervisor $(M = 6.00, SD = 1.72; M = 6.37, SD = 1.21)$ $t(52) = .97$, *ns.*

Mediation analysis

For male subordinates, working for a stereotype-incongruent supervisor was significantly related to trait ratings of masculinity, $r(56) = -.40$, $p<.01$, and status conferral, $r(61) = -.39$, $p<.001$. Additionally, perceived masculinity was related to status conferral, $r(56) = -.73$, $p<.001$. When we used both 'masculinity' and 'working for a gender atypical supervisor' as independent variables to predict status conferral, only 'masculinity' ratings remained significant, $\beta(55) = -.59$, $p<.001$. The coefficient for 'working for a gender atypical supervisor' fell from $\beta(55) = -.41$ to $-.14$ and was no longer significant, Sobel's $z = 2.87$, $p<.001$. We found the identical pattern of results for the salary allocation dependent variable, Sobel's $z = 2.05$, $p<.05$.

In contrast, for female targets, working for a gender atypical supervisor was not significantly correlated with trait ratings of masculinity/femininity, status conferral, or yearly salary.

Study 2

Study 1 revealed that male (but not female) subordinates of gender atypical supervisors are accorded diminished social status and pay. Moreover, perceived masculinity mediated this effect—male subordinates were perceived as less masculine when they worked for a gender atypical supervisor, and were in turn accorded less status and salary.

If the belief that a male subordinate of a gender atypical supervisor lacks masculine traits is indeed central to judgments of such individuals, then bolstering the male subordinate's "masculine credentials" should mitigate the bias. Lending indirect support to this hypothesis, Heilman and Okimoto (2007) demonstrated that bolstering women's feminine credentials reduces penalties for counter-stereotypical behavior.

In Study 2, we tested the hypothesis that if a male target working for a gender atypical supervisor provides evidence of his masculinity, he will maintain his status. Experimentally manipulating this proposed mediator (i.e., perceived masculinity)—rather than treating it as a continuous variable—would further establish its validity as a mediator of the bias (Spencer, Zanna, & Fong, 2005).

Methods

Participants and design

One hundred sixty one adults (52 males and 104 females; *mean age* = 33.73) participated in the study, which employed a 2 (supervisor gender) × 2 (supervisor occupation: construction site supervisor vs. human resources supervisor) × 2 (masculine credentials vs. control) between-subjects design.

Materials and procedure

Workplace scenarios

The scenarios were identical to those from Study 1, except the subordinate was male in all conditions.

Masculine credentials manipulation

Drawing on the masculinity literature (Brescoll, Newman, & Uhlmann, 2011; Pleck, 1981), we pre-tested a list of hobbies, activities, and behaviors on their relative masculinity/femininity and also their relative positivity/negativity in order to generate a few highly masculine (yet not exceedingly valenced) behaviors. Thus, in our masculine credentialing conditions, the target was said to enjoy watching football, eating steak and ribs, and driving fast cars, all of which were seen as highly masculine behaviors, but neither exceedingly positive nor negative.

Dependent measures

Status conferral

Participants were asked to rate how much status, respect, power, and independence the subordinate deserved to receive in his job ($1 = none$, $11 = a$ $great$ $deal$; $\alpha = .74$).

Salary

Participants reported the yearly salary they would pay the subordinate.

Results and discussion

Status conferral

A 2×2×2 ANOVA revealed the hypothesized 3-way interaction between supervisor gender, job type and masculine credentials, $F(1,153) = 19.04$, $p<.01$. Male subordinates of stereotype-incongruent supervisors who had their masculine credentials affirmed received significantly more status than male subordinates of such supervisors who did not have their masculinity affirmed, $F(1,71) = 42.95$, $p<.001$ $(M = 7.91, SD = 1.81; M = 5.10, SD = 1.86$, respectively). In contrast, for the male subordinates of stereotype-congruent supervisors, having their masculine credentials affirmed had no effect on their status, $F(1,86) < 1$ (Fig. 2). This may have occurred because these individuals were not subordinate to a gender atypical supervisor, and their masculinity was therefore not in question in the first place.

Yearly salary

We also found the predicted 3-way interaction between supervisor gender, job type, and masculine credentials for salary, $F(1,144) = 12.18$, $p<.05$. Male subordinates of gender atypical supervisors whose masculinity was affirmed received significantly higher salaries than male subordinates who did not have their masculinity affirmed ($M = \$78,285$, $SD = \$31,774$; $M = \$50,606$, $SD = \$14,739$), $F(1,69) = 21.07$, $p<.01$. However, among male subordinates whose supervisors occupied stereotype-congruent roles, there was no difference in salaries between
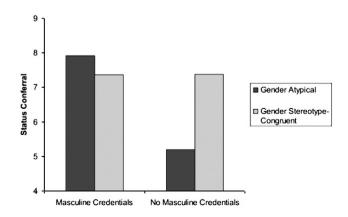

Fig. 2. Status conferral for male subordinates of stereotype congruent vs. incongruent supervisors with vs. without masculine credentials (Study 2).

those who had their masculinity affirmed and those who did not ($M =$ \$65,085, $SD =$ \$23,374; $M =$ \$70,956, $SD =$ \$20,278), $F(1,79) = 1.46$, *ns*.

General discussion

Two studies provide converging evidence that, for men, occupying the role of a subordinate to a gender atypical supervisor can carry serious costs. Male subordinates who worked for a woman in a stereotypically male domain or a man in a stereotypically female domain were accorded diminished status and lower salaries. Expectations regarding masculinity appear to play a key role in this bias, as female subordinates were not significantly affected by the stereotype congruency of their supervisor. Moreover, the diminished status accorded a male subordinate of a gender atypical supervisor was mediated by the perception that he was less masculine. Accordingly, establishing a male subordinate's masculine credentials eliminated the bias. Thus, it appears that only male (and not female) employees lose status when subordinated to a gender deviant boss, because being subordinate to an individual who has lowered status as a result of their gender-deviant role places these male subordinates at risk of having their gender identity (i.e., masculinity) called into question.

We conducted a conceptual replication using two other careers pre-tested as gender-incongruent (for male supervisors, family lawyer and for female supervisors, corporate lawyer). The results fully replicated those of the current studies, suggesting that the specific profession may be less important than whether the supervisor's gender is congruent with the job.

Our findings raise the question of whether male subordinates would experience similar drops in status from working for other individuals in counter-stereotypical roles, such as a gay construction site supervisor or a Black corporate executive. The fact that gender identity (i.e., masculinity) appears central to the effects in the present studies suggests that having a gay supervisor could similarly hurt male subordinates, but in cases in which sexuality and gender are less salient, they may not lose status, as perceived masculinity would not be driving reactions to these male subordinates.

These results further indicate that gender stereotype violations can impact men just as powerfully as women. It appears that at least for male professionals, high status demands masculinity, and vice versa. The links between masculinity, status, and workplace roles are thus both multifaceted and self-perpetuating.

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