

Chapter 5

Barriers to Success: Disadvantages of Gender Normative Language to Women in STEM

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ABSTRACT

Cultural ideals of gender normativity creates stereotypes that lead to the identification of specific occupations as being male-oriented or female-oriented, further perpetuating institutional sexism. Research shows that stereotypical beliefs are pervasive and exist in all professions, including higher education. Women academics, especially in the STEM fields, are still present in low numbers and often have to sacrifice marriage and family for their careers due to the overarching masculine organizational structure that forms the basis of most higher education institutions. This chapter will discuss the history of women in academia, gender equity in higher education, and the consequences of gender normative language on women in academia.

INTRODUCTION

Oppression or exploitation of a person based on their biological sex forms the basis of sexual discrimination (Benokraitis, 1997). Sexual discrimination is pervasive because it invades all aspects of society due to its culturally internalized and socially organized roots (Benokraitis, 1997; Prewitt-Freilino, Caswell, & Laakso, 2012). The Gender stereotypes preservation within a culture occurs through the consistent use of gender normative language that stemmed from proscribed cultural characteristics and roles (Prewitt-Freilino, Caswell, & Laakso, 2012). Further, the overarching cultural norms projected by society become part of the foundation of the hierarchal, organizational structure of institutions including institutions of higher education. Institutional sexism further perpetuates gender role stereotypes of masculinity and femininity because academia has deemed certain disciplines to be either male-oriented or female-oriented (Heilman, Wallen, Fuchs, & Tamkins, 2004). Further, in the workplace, role stereotyping leads to negative expectations, or the belief, that a woman cannot perform the same occupational role as well as a man because according to cultural norms, a woman cannot, or should not, possess the qualities necessary to

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be successful (Heilman, et. al., 2004). Women in academia, especially those at high-ranking research institutions, are still present in low numbers despite the fact that the number of women entering higher education as students and as faculty has increased dramatically since the passage of laws, such as Title IX in 1972, that prohibit sex discrimination in educational programs (American Association of University Professors, 2006). This chapter focuses on the cultural influence that gender normative language has in perpetuating the stereotypical views and hierarchal structure of higher education institutions to reinforce the discrimination of female faculty members, particularly in the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) disciplines. Therefore, the objectives of this chapter include the following:

1. To outline the hierarchal, masculine organizational structure that forms the basis of the culture at the majority of higher education institutions in the United States, and which creates an inherently unequal workplace for women in academia.
2. To bring to light how the use of gender normative language derived from cultural norms influences the hiring and publication rate of women in academia.

BACKGROUND

A Tangled Web: Gender Normativity, Language, and Microaggressions

A continuum that ranges from blatant discrimination to covert discrimination best represents the deeply embedded cultural roots of sexism (Benokraitis, 1997). Both blatant sexism and covert sexism involve unequal treatment or harassment of women with the main difference being that blatant sexism is explicit whereas covert sexism is ambiguous (Benokraitis & Feagin, 1995; Benokraitis, 1997). Although both types are intentional, covert sexism is often malicious and involves direct sabotage to undermine the position of a woman in the workplace, and fits the description of old-fashioned sexism because it endorses and perpetuates traditional gender roles and norms (Benokraitis, 1997). The constructs behind cultural gender normativity creates a foundation for discriminatory practices because categorization by sex promotes both descriptive and prescriptive stereotypical connotations of gender which are then promoted as normal societal beliefs and behaviors (Swim, Mallett, & Stangor, 2004; Bobbit-Zeher, 2011). This practice reinforces institutional sexism because the gender normative beliefs of a culture become the established norms through policies and practices of an institution (Benokraitis & Feagin, 1995; Benokraitis, 1997). Thus, discrimination against people on the sole basis of their sex or identified gender becomes a normal practice (Benokraitis & Feagin, 1995; Benokraitis, 1997). Further, in the middle of this spectrum lies subtle sexism, which is less discernible because it consists of an accumulation of experiences related to the various institutional structures or cultural norms that society internalizes and accepts as normal behavior (Benokraitis & Feagin, 1995). Subtle sexism, also known currently as modern sexism, neosexism, and everyday sexism, encompasses the deeply embedded gender-normative structure that exists in contemporary society that hides among the advances in equality that women have made in the last century and gives society the impression that sexism is no longer prevalent (Benokraitis, 1997; Swim, et al., 2004). However, research presented by Basford, Offermann, and Behrend (2014) suggests that instead of highly visible, blatant sexism, contemporary workers experience subtle forms of sexism in the form of gender microaggressions, which mainly affect women.

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