Gendered Language & Stereotype Awareness for Hiring Committees

In a hiring process, stereotypes, unconscious bias and communication styles can **unknowingly influence** impressions of candidates and jobs.

Women's behaviour tends to be stereotyped as **communal** (kind, thoughtful, sensitive to others' feelings, deferent), whereas men are stereotyped as **agentic** (competitive, decisive, aggressive, socially dominant).[1] Women also are encouraged to be more self-assertive, but discouraged from advancing their interests at the cost of others.[1]

Language can also be characterized as **feminine** or **masculine**; being more indirect, elaborate and emotional for the former, or more succinct, direct and instrumental for the latter.[2]

These stereotypes and assumptions can impact a hiring committee's assessment of a **candidate's abilities**, as well as the candidate's assessment of a job description and **their "fit"** within an organisation.

Job ads with masculine language are **less appealing** to women, regardless of job type, and decreased their **anticipated belonging** to the organisation.[3] Conversely, gendered language had **no impact** on men's anticipated belonging.[3]

Gender Discrimination Exists

Gender segregation is the tendency for women to work in **systematically different occupations** and industries than men.[4] This often occurs at **critical career points**, which can dissuade women from continuing in male-dominated industries.[3]

Women grow more aware of the "**glass ceiling**" as they advance in their careers:

♀ Under 20 yrs	63%
♀ 31-44 yrs	71%
♀ Over 45 yrs	77%
♂ All ages	38%
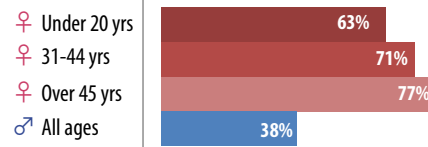
Percentage of workers who believe barriers that prevent women from reaching management level exist[6]
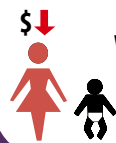
Women with children experienced **declines in earnings** and **hours worked**; men with children correlated with **increased earnings** and **virtually unchanged hours**.[5]

Stereotypes & Their Effects
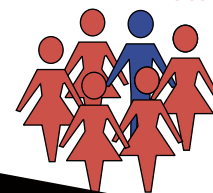
Stereotype: Men

Agentic:
competitive
decisive
aggressive
socially dominant

Stereotype: Women

Communal:
kind
thoughtful
sensitive to others
deferent

Traditionally, companies have valued agentic behaviour over communal behaviour

Agentic women are stereotyped as **competent**, but **interpersonally insensitive**.[7]

This is used to **justify** keeping them out of **male-dominated** management positions.[1,3]

Some women counteract negative stereotypes by adopting a more masculine communication style.[2] This can be effective for some women, but not all. Agentic behaviours have social costs.[2]

Westcoast Women in Engineering, Science & Technology
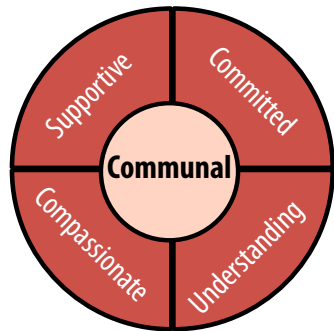
Word Choice Matters

Gendered wording **subtly** signals who **belongs** and **who doesn't**.

Below are examples of language in job advertisements and qualities of candidates.
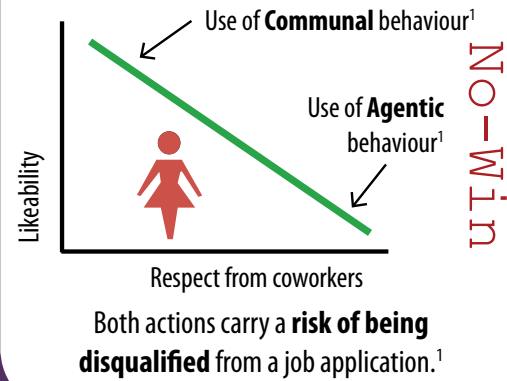
Feminine

- a company's "**excellence**" in the market[3]
- "**understand** markets to **establish** appropriate selling prices"[3]
- "We are **committed** to providing top quality health care that is **sympathetic** to the needs or our patients"[3]

Masculine

- a company's "**dominance**" in the market[3]
- "**analyze** markets to **determine** appropriate selling prices"[3]
- "We are **determined** to deliver **superior** medical treatment tailored to each individual patient"[3]

Communal: Supportive, Committed, Understanding, Compassionate

Agentic: Ambitious, Individualistic, Assertive, Competitive

Women in Leadership Positions

Use of **Communal** behaviour[1]

Use of **Agentic** behaviour[1]

No-Win

Likeability / Respect from coworkers

Both actions carry a **risk of being disqualified** from a job application.[1]

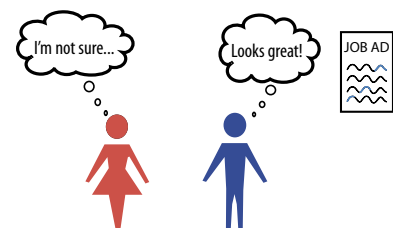## Observed Effects of Women Using Forced Agentic Behaviour

- ⬆ Increase ♀'s **competence scores** to equally agentic men[1]
- ⬇ Seem more **threatening; less persuasive** & less **influential**[2]
- ⬇ Decrease **compliance** of workers for ♀ managers[2]

If women need to manage the impressions they give off, it can lead to **stress, anxiety and reduced task performance**.[2,3]

Gendered Job Descriptions[3]

For an Engineer


I'm not sure... / Looks great! / JOB AD

Gendered language has **no impact** on men's decision to apply, but may dissuade women.[3]

It also goes **unnoticed** in job advertisements; even when explicitly pointed out.[3]

Feminine	Masculine
"**Proficient** oral and written communication skills"[3]	"**Strong** communication and influencing skills"[3]
"Collaborates well, in a **team** environment"[3]	"Ability to **perform individually** in a **competitive** environment"[3]
"**Sensitive** to the clients' needs, can **develop warm** client relationships"[3]	"**Superior** ability to **satisfy** customers and **manage** company's association with them"[3]
"Provide general **support** to project teams in a manner complimentary to the company"[3]	"**Direct** project groups to **manage** project **progress** and **ensure** accurate task **control**"[3]

"Qualified"

Only partially meet the advertised job requirements?
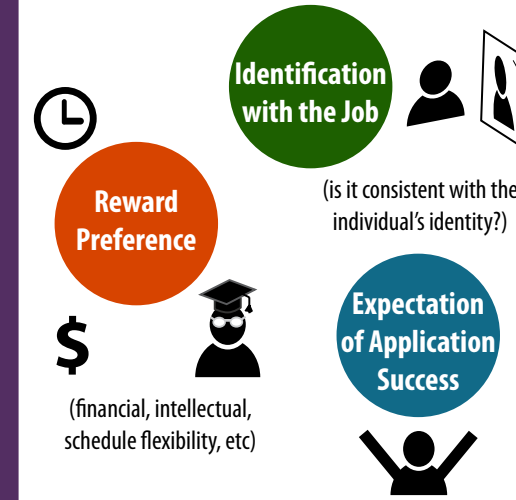
Men are more likely to apply, regardless.[6]
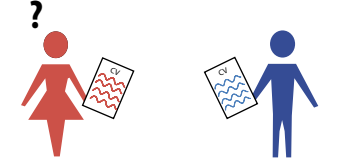
85% of women would only apply to a job if they met the job description **"fully"** or **"pretty well."**[6]
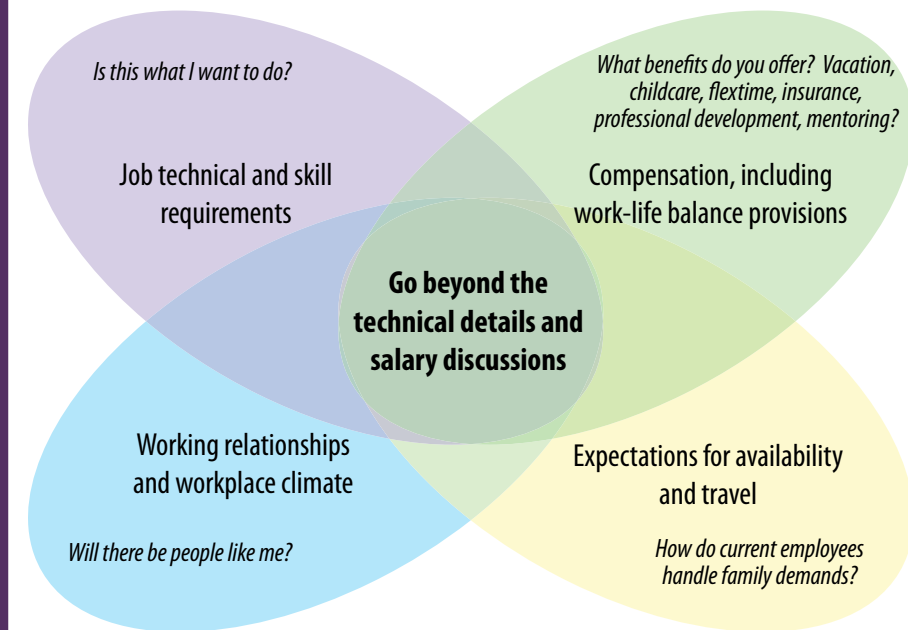
Women are also less likely to apply for masculine-stereotyped jobs.[4]

Deciding to Apply

3 main factors when individuals decide to apply:[4]

Identification with the Job (is it consistent with the individual's identity?)

Reward Preference (financial, intellectual, schedule flexibility, etc)

Expectation of Application Success

Men and women evaluate job decision factors differently because of **gender role socialization**.[4]

Interview Best Practices[4]

Is this what I want to do?
Job technical and skill requirements

What benefits do you offer? Vacation, childcare, flextime, insurance, professional development, mentoring?
Compensation, including work-life balance provisions

Go beyond the technical details and salary discussions

Working relationships and workplace climate
Will there be people like me?

Expectations for availability and travel
How do current employees handle family demands?

Interview best practices help you find the best employee, and are **universally helpful, regardless of gender**.[10,12] Lifestyle and workplace climate discussions are particularly important to women[9] and young workers[8,11] (Millenials / Gen Y).

What Can We Do?

Gendered language is not a deliberate process - most job ads only contain 1% gendered language[3] – but impact women's application decisions. Increasing **feminine language** in job descriptions can **increase women's interest** in the job.[7]

Organisations need to rethink their hiring process, and should ensure career advancement **reflects skills and capabilities** instead of emphasising time served.[6] When attracting women to a job, **flexible working hours** and **work-life balance** are important,[4] as well as ensuring they have a **sense of anticipated belonging** in the organisation.[3] In the study of MBA graduates, women were no less likely to receive offers in masculine jobs; the segregation occurred in the application process where **women self-selected the jobs** they believed they fit.[4]

Women's leadership potential should be maximized through **professional development**, **mentoring**, and **proactively identifying** talented individuals and encouraging them to apply for upper level jobs.[6] The negative effects of communal communication stereotypes can also be eliminated through **self-affirmation exercises**.[2]

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Recommended Readings

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About eng•cite

eng•cite is the working name of the Goldcorp Professorship in Women in Engineering at UBC. The Professorship – established in 2014 – is a vital aspect of the UBC Faculty of Applied Science's efforts to promote the engineering field to young women, to meet its goal to increase female enrollment in Engineering to 50% and to address a national shortage of Engineers expected by 2020.

The Goldcorp Professorship is a catalyst of change for the engineering field, with a commitment to help UBC become the national leader for gender diversity in engineering. Dr. Sheryl Staub-French, who holds the Professorship, works with teachers, counsellors, parents and high school students to promote engineering education, and provide mentorship and role models for young women who might not otherwise consider or pursue engineering education and careers.

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