

Supportive or Patronizing? Perceptions of women-targeted professional programs

Jessica L. Cundiff¹, Sohee Ryuk², and Katie Cech²

¹Missouri University of Science and Technology, ²Colgate University

Contact: cundiffj@mst.edu

INTRODUCTION

One strategy for recruiting and retaining women into male-dominated professions is to offer professional development resources specifically aimed at women employees. Women-targeted programs no doubt have positive implications by providing social support, skills building, and safe spaces for women to voice concerns. However, by targeting women, these programs may unintentionally convey that women are perceived stereotypically as incompetent and needing help. Across two studies, we examined how women-targeted professional programs are perceived.

HYPOTHESES

- **H1:** A company will be perceived (a) less positively and (b) more gender biased when it offers a development program geared toward women rather than all employees. (Studies 1 & 2)
- **H2:** Results will be stronger for fields where women are equally (vs. under-) represented. (Study 1)
- **H3:** Results will be weaker when women-targeted program is framed as initiated/led by women rather than upper management. (Study 2)

STUDY 1: METHOD

Participants & Procedure

Undergraduates (70 women, 45 men) read one of four company brochures and answered questions about their impressions of the company.

Brochure (see handout)

All brochures emphasized importance of and commitment to diversity, but varied on two dimensions:

- Target of professional development program: women vs. all employees
- Gender representation (Domain): male-dominated vs. gender-neutral

Measures

Perceptions of company/program (1=strongly disagree, 6=strongly agree)

- Appeal/Belonging (I feel like I would fit in at a company like this; 7 items, $\alpha=.89$)
- Program (I am happy to see they offer a development program; 8 items, $\alpha=.91$)
- Inclusion (I think the company strives to create inclusive environment; 4 item, $\alpha=.84$)

Perceptions of gender bias (1=strongly disagree, 6=strongly agree)

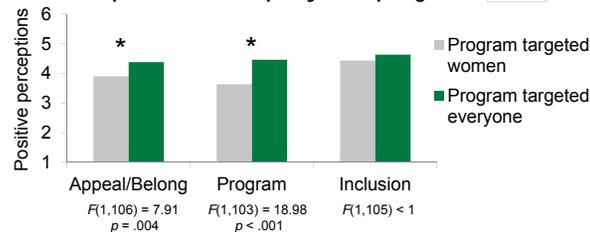
- Concerns of stigma (I feel like I would have to prove myself; 8 items, $\alpha=.82$)
- Negative stereotypes about women (It's possible the company might hold stereotypic views of women; 6 items, $\alpha=.93$)
- Unfair female advantage (I think company unfairly excludes men; 3 item, $\alpha=.85$)

STUDY 1: RESULTS

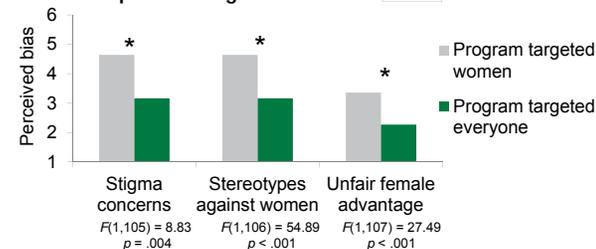
DVs were each submitted to a 2 x 2 x 2 ANOVA:

Program Target: women, everyone; Domain: male-dom, neutral; Gender: women, men

H1a: Perceptions of company and program * $p < .02$



H1b: Perceptions of gender bias * $p < .02$



H2: Did domain moderate results?

No, Domain (male-dominated vs. gender-neutral) did not interact with Program Target for any of the DVs. We also checked whether participant gender moderated results - it did not.

STUDY 2: METHOD

In Study 1, the women-targeted program was portrayed as initiated by upper management. Some programs, however, are initiated by employees as grassroots efforts. Would women-targeted programs be perceived less negatively if initiated by women employees rather than top management?

Participants & Procedure

Undergraduates (81 women, 81 men) read one of three company brochures and answered the same questions as Study 1.

Brochure (see handout)

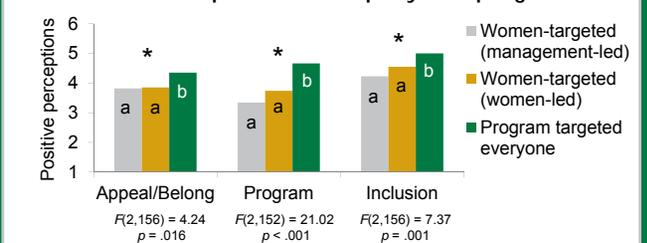
Same brochures as Study 1, but kept gender representation constant (male-dominated). Added condition to portray women-targeted program as initiated and led by women employees.

STUDY 2: RESULTS

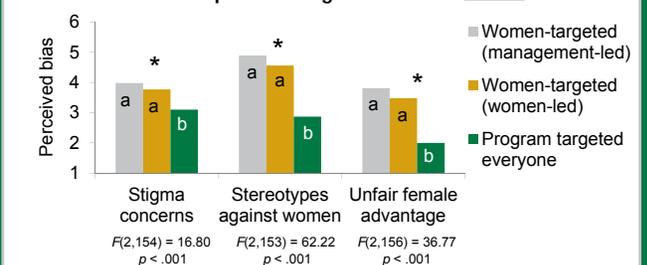
DVs were each submitted to a 3 x 2 ANOVA:

Program Target: women (management-led), women (women-led), everyone
Participant Gender: women, men

H1a & H3: Perceptions of company and program * $p < .02$



H1b & H3: Perceptions of gender bias * $p < .02$



Note. Bars with different subscripts significantly differ, $p < .05$. Gender did not moderate results, except for Unfair Fem. Adv. (see presenter)

CONCLUSIONS

Women-targeted programs, although beneficial, may have unintended consequences by making contexts appear stereotypic, threatening, and biased. In addition, women-targeted programs were perceived as giving women an unfair advantage, which may negatively impact how men evaluate and interact with women who take advantage of these programs. Future research should investigate this possibility. Together results suggest that, to maintain positive perceptions, development programs should be offered to all employees.