



## Gender bias in employment contexts: A closer examination of the role incongruity principle<sup>☆</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

This research extends the role incongruity analysis of employment-related gender bias by investigating the role of dispositional and situational antecedents, specifically political ideology and the salience of cues to the traditional female gender role. The prediction that conservatives would show an anti-female candidate bias and liberals would show a pro-female bias when the traditional female gender role is salient was tested across three experimental studies. In Study 1, 126 participants evaluated a male or a female job applicant with thoughts of the traditional female gender role activated or not. Results showed that when the gender role is salient, political ideology moderates evaluations of the female candidates such that conservatives evaluate her negatively and liberals evaluate her positively. Study 2 (89 participants) replicated this effect and showed that this political ideology-based bias does not occur when the non-traditional female gender role is made salient. Study 2 also demonstrated that the observed effects are not driven by liberals' and conservatives' differing perceptions regarding the female applicant's qualifications for the job. Finally, Study 3 (159 participants) both replicated the political ideology-based evaluation bias for female candidates and demonstrated that this bias is mediated by conservatives' and liberals' attitudes toward the roles of women in society.

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### Introduction

Gender bias in workplace evaluations and hiring decisions is subtle yet pervasive (Heilman & Eagly, 2008). The prejudice experienced by women in employment contexts often stems from gender stereotypes and the perceived mismatch between these gender-based expectations and perceptions of what is required to effectively fulfill the job role (Eagly, 2004). Previous workplace discrimination research has highlighted the gender requirements of the job or the gendered aspects of the applicants to demonstrate the bias at the intersection of inconsistent beliefs regarding group member attributes and social role requirements. The present research extends this work by testing the prediction that situational cues that serve to highlight the mismatch, or incongruity, between gender roles and workplace roles will result in gender-biased responses. Specifically, this research examines whether biased responses can be elicited by situational cues making the traditional female gender role salient during employment-related decision-making episodes. Additionally, this research tests the proposition that reactions to the perceived incongruity between gender stereotypes and role requirements can vary as a function of the perceiver. Namely, people who believe in and support the status quo are more likely to be motivated to defend it than those who are more likely

to advocate for social change. The extent to which individuals reject or support tradition and the status quo is a fundamental dimension in the distinction between liberals and conservatives (Jost, Nosek, & Gosling, 2008). Thus, this current research examines the role of political ideology in moderating employment decisions when the traditional female gender role is salient.

### Workplace gender prejudice and gender roles

Ample empirical evidence has demonstrated the gender bias that can permeate employment and workplace decisions (Heilman & Eagly, 2008). The present research situates workplace gender prejudice within Eagly's (2004) inclusive framework for prejudice. Expanding upon the lack-of-fit model and role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman, 2001; Heilman & Eagly, 2008), this understanding of prejudice conceptualizes it as a "negative attitudinal shift that is elicited at the interface between individual beliefs and a social structure composed of social roles" (p. 45). Prejudice is viewed as emerging in particular social contexts, when stereotypic beliefs about members of a particular social group are viewed as being incongruent with a social role. Thus, workplace-related gender bias stems from the mismatch between gender stereotypes and the characteristics deemed crucial for success in the workplace.

Gender roles are consensually shared beliefs about what women and men usually do, the descriptive component, and what they should do, the prescriptive component (Eagly, 1987). Historically, women have held lower status positions and they are more likely to work in

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the home rather than participating as part of the paid workforce like men have conventionally done. According to social role theory (Eagly, 1987; Eagly, Wood, & Diekmann, 2000), the gendered division of labor gives rise to gender stereotypes; by viewing women and men in particular roles, requiring particular behaviors, people begin to associate traits commonly linked to those behaviors to the person engaging in the behavior. Men's traditional participation in the paid labor force has resulted in them being stereotypically viewed as possessing agentic characteristics that emphasize confidence, self-reliance, and dominance. Likewise, women's greater involvement in domestic responsibilities and care-related employment has given rise to the stereotype that women possess communal characteristics that highlight a concern for others (Broverman, Vogel, Broverman, Clarkson, & Rosenkrantz, 1972; Deaux & Kite, 1993; Eagly et al., 2000; Williams & Best, 1990).

Workplace discrimination can disadvantage both women and men when applying for jobs stereotypically associated with the other sex (Heilman & Wallen, 2010; Riach & Rich, 2002). Women can face discrimination when they are seen as violating normative prescriptions (Cialdini & Trost, 1998) by applying for male-typed positions, including leadership positions (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Hoyt, 2010), or by behaving in stereotypically agentic ways (Heilman & Okimoto, 2007; Rudman & Glick, 1999, 2001). That is, workplace prejudice against women ensues from the incongruity between the female gender role and associated stereotypes and the perceived workplace role requirements (Eagly, 2004). These gender biases play a particularly detrimental role in employment related decision-making processes in part because the generally unstructured nature of those decisions allows for biased decisions without accountability (Powell & Graves, 2003). Oftentimes hiring criteria are not specific and detailed; this facilitates gender discrimination in hiring by enabling the biased construction of these criteria (Uhlmann & Cohen, 2005).

The present research extends upon this theoretical perspective on workplace-related gender prejudice in two ways. This role incongruity perspective focuses on the important role of context, acknowledging that prejudice is elicited when individuals attempt to enter a social role for which they are stereotypically mismatched. Previous research examining workplace gender discrimination focuses on how the gendered requirements of the job (Eagly, Makhijani, & Klonsky, 1992; Lyness & Heilman, 2006; Swim, Borgida, & Maruyama, 1989) or the gender stereotypicality of the applicant, exacerbated by factors such as applicant attractiveness or parenthood (Heilman & Okimoto, 2008; Heilman & Stopeck, 1985; Ridgeway & Correll, 2004), can evince the bias residing at the intersection of inconsistent beliefs regarding group member attributes and social role requirements. The first way the present research extends this framework is by maintaining and testing the prediction that situational cues can also serve to highlight the mismatch, or incongruity, between gender role and job role expectations resulting in enhanced bias. Specifically, this research tests the impact of situational cues making the traditional female gender role salient on responses to female and male job applicants.

The traditional gender division of labor, such that women do the majority of housework and caregiving and men serve as the primary economic providers, has weakened but still persists particularly as it pertains to domestic labor. Although men are more likely than women to be the provider, women's participation in the paid labor force has increased dramatically over the past few decades with women representing over 47% of the paid workforce (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010). However, the traditional gender roles regarding domestic work persists to a much greater degree. Men's participation in taking care of the children and household chores has increased significantly in recent years (Galinsky, Aumann, & Bond, 2008), however, women continue to do the majority, but not all, of the unpaid labor (Belkin, 2008; Craig, 2006; Pailhe & Solaz, 2006; Stevens, Kiger, & Riley, 2001). Indeed, "the primary responsibility for children is still culturally assigned to mothers rather than fathers" (Ridgeway & Correll,

2004, p. 687). Thus, after returning home from their first shift in paid employment outside of the home many women are burdened by a 'second shift' of domestic work (Artis & Pavalko, 2003; Hochschild & Machung, 1989; Milkie, Raley, & Bianchi, 2009). The gendered division of domestic labor is pervasive and situational cues that trigger thoughts of domesticity are likely to enhance the perceived incongruity between women and the workplace. This in turn will likely bias employment decisions regarding women. Importantly, these biased responses are likely moderated by an important predisposition of the decision makers relating to the extent to which they support or reject the gender role status quo: their political ideology.

### Political ideology

The present work also seeks to extend the role incongruity principle of prejudice by incorporating the role of the perceiver in these processes. Although the degree of inconsistency can vary as a function of the stereotypes, the role requirements, and the activation of those beliefs, it can also vary as a function of the perceiver. That is, certain individuals may be more or less inclined to validate and try to uphold the alignment between these beliefs. In particular, people who believe in and support the status quo are more likely to be motivated to defend the status quo than those who advocate for social change. The extent to which people support or reject the status quo is a fundamental dimension of political ideology (Jost et al., 2008). Political ideology is a powerful set of beliefs predicting a wide variety of attitudes, behaviors, and decisions (Jost et al., 2008; Jost, Federico, & Napier, 2009). According to Denzau and North (1994, p. 4) "ideologies are the shared framework of mental models that groups of individuals possess that provide both an interpretation of the environment and a prescription as to how that environment should be structured." Although there are other models (for a review, see Jost et al., 2009), political ideology has long been thought to exist on a single left–right dimension ranging from liberal to conservative (Bobbio, 1996). Liberals and conservatives are thought to differ on two core dimensions: the extent to which they advocate for social change or prefer stability and resist change, and the extent to which they reject or accept inequality (Jost et al., 2008). Other characteristics associated with liberalism include progress and flexibility whereas other characteristics such as tradition and order are associated with conservatism.

Ample evidence shows that conservatives are more likely to support tradition, order, and the status quo in comparison to liberals who are more likely to support social change (Kerlinger, 1984). For example, in regards to traditional gender roles, liberals are significantly more likely to hold positive attitudes toward feminists whereas conservatives are more likely to endorse traditional attitudes toward family and gender roles (Jost et al., 2008; Lye & Waldron, 1997). Moreover, conservatives are more likely than liberals to endorse and defend system-justifying ideologies and policy attitudes that serve to justify and bolster the existing social order and maintain that the current social arrangements are fair and desirable (Glaser, 2005; Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004). This preference regarding maintaining or changing the status quo has even been demonstrated in implicit attitudes with the largest difference emerging between liberals' preference for feminism and conservatives' penchant for traditional values (Jost et al., 2008). In addition to being more enthusiastic about the traditional roles of women and men in society – at both the explicit and implicit levels – conservatives are also more likely than liberals to stereotype and show prejudice against a variety of low-status and stigmatized social groups including women (Crandall, 1994; Eisenman, 1991; Federico & Sidanius, 2002; Sidanius, Pratto, & Bobo, 1996).

Thus, liberal and conservative decision makers are likely to respond dissimilarly when the female gender role is both made salient and relevant in the employment context. When role incongruities are highlighted, conservatives, who are more likely than liberals to uphold these traditional roles, are likely to show anti-female bias. However,

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