

When women sell themselves short on team projects

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Working on a team is always a challenge, but a new study highlights a particular challenge to women: how much they credit themselves in a joint success. Women will devalue their contributions when working with men but not with other women, according to the new research. The study suggests yet another reason why women still tend to be under-represented at the highest echelons of many organizations.

Michelle Haynes of the University of Massachusetts, Lowell, had examined how other people evaluate [men and women](#) working together. She decided to build on that [work](#) to look at how women view themselves on teams after herself reading glowing group feedback for a conference submission she co-authored.

"As I was reading this extraordinary review, I thought: 'Wow! Those other co-contributors must have really written something amazing for us to have gotten this kind of feedback.' And then it hit me like a ton of bricks: I do this too," she says. She did not recognize her own positive contribution to the team endeavor.

Haynes and colleagues then set out to design an experiment to examine how women evaluate their own contributions to collaborative work outcomes, particularly when working with men on tasks that are considered to be "masculine." She says: "If you get an A on a paper, it is pretty clear who deserves the credit for that A. But if the A is the product of a group effort, how does the credit get distributed?"

In a series of four experiments, published today in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, Haynes' team asked participants to work remotely with another person on tasks traditionally associated with a male role: acting as a managing supervisor at an investment company; in actuality, there was no other teammate. Under various conditions, they received feedback about their team's performance.

When given positive group feedback, the female participants gave more credit to their male teammates and took less credit themselves. They would only credit themselves with success in the task when working with a male if their individual role in the task was clear.

The study also found that women did not undervalue their contributions when their teammates were female. "This finding is critical because it debunks the notion that what we found is simply a function of women being modest in groups," Haynes says. "Rather, it underscores how the expectations women hold of themselves, and those they work with, influence how they process group feedback. Furthermore, it reveals that gender continues to play a role in how individuals derive these performance expectations."

These findings contribute to a body of work about how stereotypes affect women in the workplace. Past work in this area has generally focused on how an individual's work is evaluated – for example studies have shown that the same resume will be evaluated more favorably if it has a male versus female name attached to it. But other research has found that consistently stellar individual performance is often enough to overcome the influence of stereotypes in evaluations of a woman's competence.

"But our work focuses on group outcomes, which are not inherently diagnostic of individual contribution," Haynes says. "What we have found is that sometimes outcomes and performance – no matter how

stellar – are not enough to trump the biasing effects of stereotypes, particularly when the nature of individual contribution is unclear."

"This is one of many factors, among a great many, that may hinder women's earning power and career progress," she adds. If women view their own contributions less favorably than they regard the contribution of their male co-workers, it is "likely to impact how women view their efficacy at work and the degree to which they are likely to vie for competitive projects and promotions."

More information: The study, "It Had to Be You (Not Me)! Women's Attributional Rationalization of Their Contribution to Successful Joint Work Outcomes" by Michelle C. Haynes and Madeline E. Heilman, was published online on May 7, 2013, and is forthcoming in print in July 2013 in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, a journal of the Society for Personality and Social Psychology (SPSP).

psp.sagepub.com/content/early/.../146167213486358.full

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