

New study explores gender bias in academic hiring

October 20 2015, by Melissa Osgood

When all else is equal between highly qualified candidates for entry-level faculty positions, professors in academic science overwhelmingly prefer women over men, Cornell researchers previously found in national experiments. But would this pro-female bias be strong enough to elevate slightly less impressive women above more accomplished male candidates?

In their follow-up study, Cornell social scientists Stephen J. Ceci and Wendy M. Williams found that women's hiring edge disappeared when pitted against slightly more accomplished men for [faculty positions](#) in engineering, economics, psychology and biology. Published as "Women Have Substantial Advantage in STEM Faculty Hiring, Except When Competing Against More Accomplished Men" in the open-access journal *Frontiers in Psychology* (Oct. 20), the article reveals limits on pro-women hiring attitudes in these cases. The authors note that "[faculty](#) apparently view quality as the most important determinant of hiring rankings" when top candidates go head to head.

In experiments, Ceci and Williams created hiring scenarios, asking 252 tenured faculty members from a national sample of colleges and universities to choose among three standout finalists for a tenure-track assistant professor position. In one hypothetical situation, faculty evaluated two equally impressive male candidates - rated 9.5 out of 10 on an objective scale based on job talk, interview, recommendation letters and publication record - and a third woman rated 9.3. In a second scenario, genders were reversed, with two top-tier women and a slightly

less impressive man vying for the job. Ceci and Williams presented the choice between the top two candidates as a counterbalanced competition between different personalities, hiding the study's true purpose to measure gender bias in hiring.

In nearly every case, faculty preferred candidates with a 9.5 rating over those with a 9.3. Fewer than 5 percent opted for the less accomplished candidate, showing a preference for the highest-rated person regardless of candidate gender.

"These findings should help dispel concerns that affirmative hiring practices result in inferior women being hired over superior men," Ceci and Williams wrote. However, they warn that their results might not hold under conditions where applicants are not as stellar.

Furthermore, the authors acknowledge remaining barriers to women for gaining entry into academic STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) fields.

But, they wrote, once women succeed in completing doctorates and applying for faculty positions, hiring is biased in their favor, as shown by real-world [hiring](#) audits as well as experimental evidence.

Ceci and Williams also wrote that their findings may dishearten scholars who believe affirmative action doesn't go far enough - that gender and racial minority candidates should win the job even when they are slightly less accomplished than traditional applicants. "Those who have lobbied for more women to be hired in fields in which they are underrepresented, such as engineering and economics, may find our results dismaying," they said.

Still, the authors, human development professors in Cornell's College of Human Ecology, believe the findings of this study and their previous

research bode well for women's opportunities in academic STEM fields.

"Sex biases might reduce the number of [women](#) entering training for the professorial pipeline, but our results indicate that when a woman emerges from her training as a strong candidate, she is no longer handicapped in being offered the job," Ceci and Williams conclude.

Provided by Cornell University

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