How gender interacts with other social identities to shape bias

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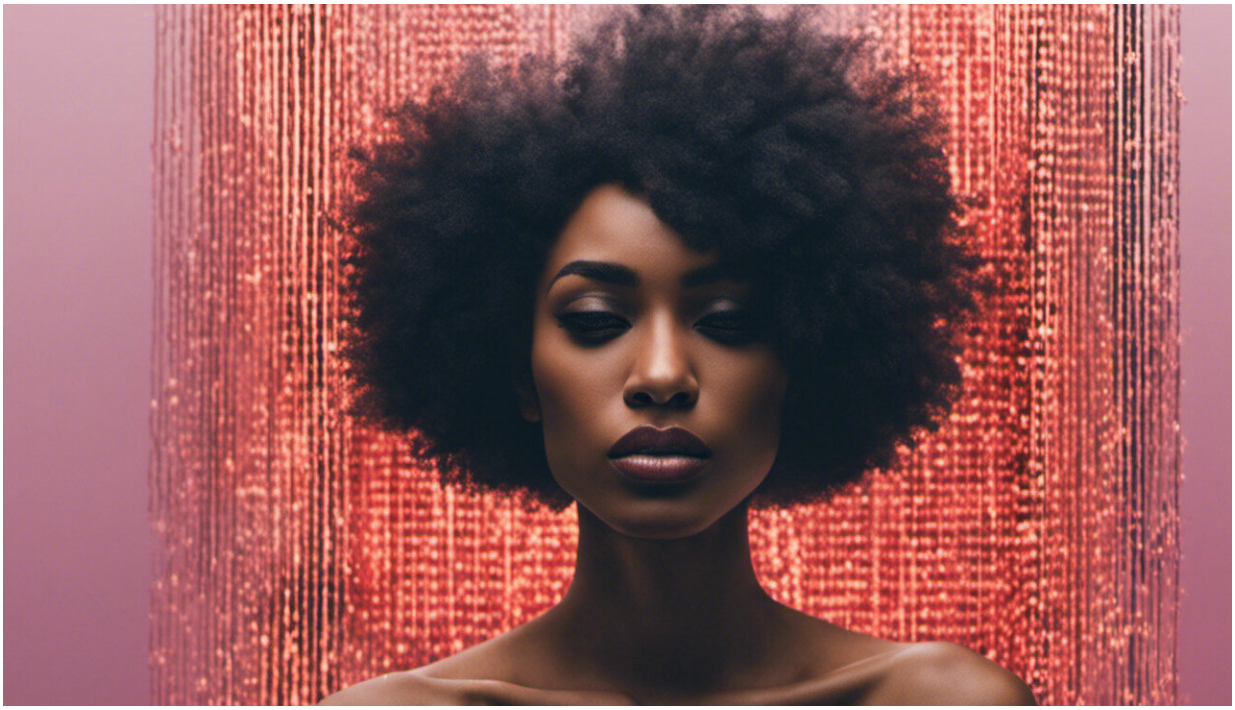

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Actress Patricia Arquette's comments at the 2015 Oscars award night drew criticism for implicitly framing gender equality as an issue for straight white women. She insisted that, "It's time for all the women in America and all the men that love women and all the gay people and all the people of color that we've all fought for to fight for us now."

Among other concerns, critics argued she overlooked the unique challenges faced by queer women, women of color and other women at the intersection of multiple minority groups. This sentiment reflects a growing movement within feminist circles to understand how people simultaneously face bias along multiple identity dimensions such as gender, race, and sexual orientation – an idea called intersectionality.

Social psychologists have recently joined in this movement, but have also reframed the discussion. The politics on intersectionality can "resemble a score-keeping contest between battle-weary warriors," argued social psychologists Valerie Purdie-Vaughns and Richard Eibach in an influential 2008 review article. "The warriors display ever deeper and more gruesome battle scars in a game of one-upmanship."

Setting aside these "oppression Olympics," intersectionality is a fertile area for scientific research, argued Rutgers University psychologist Diana Sanchez at the Society for Personality and Social Psychology (SPSP) conference last week. At this academic gathering, intersectionality was a major topic at a daylong session about gender.

Here are three lines of research illustrating how gender interacts with other social identities to shape bias in often surprising ways. People of multiple minority groups face both distinct advantages and disadvantages. Biases based on gender and race do not always simply pile up to create double disadvantages, for instance.

When stereotypes can both help and hurt black women leaders

Women are often viewed negatively for exhibiting traditionally masculine behavior. Assertive female leaders are disliked, while assertive male leaders gain respect, for instance. However, could this

distaste for assertive female leaders vary by race?

Unlike white women, black women are often stereotyped as being assertive, confident and not feminine. These masculine traits are not only expected for black women but also *allowed*, at least in leadership roles, according to research presented at the SPSP conference.

Robert Livingston, lecturer of public policy at Harvard University, presented an experiment about how 84 nonblack participants responded to a corporate executive described as either "tough, determined" or "caring, committed." The race and gender of the fictitious leader were also varied across conditions.

Both white female and black male leaders were rated more negatively when described as tough rather than caring. In contrast, black women faced no such penalty for behaving assertively and were instead rated similarly to white men. Livingston concluded black women "were able to show dominance, assertiveness, agency without the same penalty that either white women or black men suffered."

He suggested that white women get knocked for being "tough, determined" because they are expected to be warm and caring. Black men are penalized because they are feared by others and activate other stereotypes such as being dangerous. In contrast, black women are expected to be assertive and confident, unlike white women, and they're not feared in the same way as black men, Livingston suggested.

Livingston, however, emphasized that these evaluations are complex and likely depend on context. In a follow-up experiment led by Duke University associate professor of management and organizations Ashleigh Rosette, black female leaders were evaluated especially harshly if their corporation had performed poorly during the past five months. Under those conditions, black women were rated more negatively than

white women or black men for the exact same business scenario.

If you are a black woman, you can be an assertive leader as long as you don't make any mistakes, Livingston argued. "But the first time you make a mistake, your competence is called into question well before the white woman or the black man."

When multiple minority identities render groups invisible

Individuals of multiple minority groups may be overlooked and marginalized for not being prototypical of their respective groups, argued Rebecca Mohr, doctoral psychology student at Columbia University. For instance, white women are seen as prototypical of "women." Black men are seen as prototypical of "black people." But black women are seen as neither prototypical of "black people" nor "women," Mohr argued based on prior research.

Racial minority women can therefore be rendered metaphorically invisible. Along with Columbia Associate Professor of Psychology Valerie Purdie-Vaughns, Mohr tested whether racial minority women are featured in mass media less frequently than more prototypical others.

In a currently unpublished study, the researchers analyzed covers of *Time* magazine published from 1980 to 2008. They chose *Time* because it's one of the longest-running U.S. publications and is published weekly, offering a large archive of covers. It's also a general interest magazine, meaning that people on the covers should presumably "appeal to a wide swath of Americans," Mohr pointed out.

The study found that racial minority women were underrepresented when racial minorities were on the cover of *Time*. For instance, women

were only 20 percent of the covers that featured racial minorities. Conversely, when women were on the cover, racial minority women were underrepresented relative to their share of the U.S. population.

Mohr suggested that these results reflect the broader invisibility of racial minority women in American society. For instance, even though three black queer women started the Black Lives Matter movement, most media attention has focused on black men killed by police. In contrast, black women killed by police such as Meagan Hockaday, Tanisha Anderson and Rekia Boyd are invisible, critics argue.

How gender gaps in STEM participation vary by race

Gender gaps in pursing natural science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields surprisingly sometimes vary by race, noted Laurie O'Brien, associate professor of psychology at Tulane University. Women of color in STEM may sometimes face "double jeopardy" because of both racial bias and gender bias in some contexts such as gaining influence over others in academic departments.

However, "double jeopardy" is not the full story, O'Brien argued in her SPSP talk. For instance, when entering college, black women are more likely than white women to intend to major in STEM. Her research shows that black women hold weaker gender-STEM stereotypes than white women, helping explain that difference.

O'Brien also pointed to research by psychologists Monica Biernat and Amanda Sesko about bias favoring male computer engineers. This bias was found only when undergraduates evaluated fictitious white, but not black, employees. Black women were instead evaluated similarly compared to white men.

In one large nationally representative experiment, gender bias in STEM

even *reversed* by race and ethnicity. STEM faculty responded less often to emails from white female than white male prospective graduate students. However, STEM faculty consistently responded *more* often to Hispanic women than Hispanic men.

O'Brien emphasized these data are complex. For instance, even though black women start out in college more interested in STEM than white women, black women may face unique barriers such as race-based stereotypes to completing college with a STEM degree. In her current research, O'Brien studies how the effects of interventions to bring girls into STEM may vary by race.

Thinking beyond 'double jeopardy'

This research on intersectionality challenges the simple narrative that prejudices such as sexism and racism always combine to create "double jeopardy." For instance, racial minority women can be rendered "invisible." But this invisibility may also protect them in some cases by making them less prototypical targets of common forms of bias.

This research is still in its early stages. For instance, more studies are needed to test how evaluations of black female leaders found in small laboratory experiments generalize to real world settings. Attendees at the SPSP conference also emphasized the need to develop theoretical frameworks that can help explain the nuanced results. The emerging data show that gender can interact with other social identities to shape perceptions and evaluations in complex and often surprising ways.

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