

Women are told more white lies in evaluations than men: study

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So-called "white lies"—telling a spouse you like their sub-par cooking, or praising a friend's unflattering haircut—serve a purpose. But they can cause problems in the workplace, where honest feedback, even when it's

negative, is important.

Women are more likely to be given inaccurate performance feedback, according to new research by Lily Jampol, Ph.D. '14, and Vivian Zayas, associate professor of psychology in the College of Arts and Sciences, published in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*.

In their paper, "Gendered White Lies: Women Are Given Inflated Performance Feedback Compared to Men," Zayas and Jampol find that underperforming women are given less truthful but kinder performance feedback compared to equally underperforming men.

White lies are told to preserve relationships, avoid harming the other person or to present one's self in a positive light, among other reasons, Jampol said. Though they often reflect benign intentions, in some contexts they can be problematic.

"Given that developmental performance feedback is a ubiquitous and important process in most workplaces and of many people's working lives, access to fair and accurate feedback should be available to anyone needing improvement, regardless of his or her social group," the authors wrote. "Here we have exposed one factor that may, to a certain degree, impede this access—being a woman."

The study adds to a robust body of research showing gender differences in performance evaluations. Previous research has shown, for example, that women are described more warmly and with more positive words than men in narrative performance reviews, while being evaluated more negatively on more objective, quantitative measures of performance. Women are praised for their work while being allocated fewer resources than men. Women also report receiving less negative feedback from managers.

The primary aim of this new study, Zayas said, was "to provide [empirical evidence](#) that there is a greater propensity to positively distort information, or tell white lies, to [women](#) during person-to-person feedback."

The researchers used two studies to test this hypothesis.

In the first, which measured participants' perceptions of another person's actions, participants read a hypothetical manager's assessment of an employee's poor performance. Then they read what feedback the manager chose to give directly to the employee. Participants were randomly assigned to read different feedback statements, ranging from truthful feedback, which was the harshest, to the least truthful statement, which was also the nicest.

Study participants were asked to guess the employee's gender based on the feedback the manager had chosen to give.

"Participants overwhelmingly guessed that an underperforming employee who had been told a white lie—the least truthful, but the nicest feedback—was a woman," said Jampol, a diversity, equity and inclusion strategist at ReadySet, a consulting firm in Oakland, California. "This finding suggests that participants believe that this is a likely occurrence in giving feedback."

The second study examined whether the participants themselves were more likely to tell white lies to an underperforming woman, compared with a man.

For the second study, the researchers asked participants to grade two poorly written essays, with the writers identified solely by their initials, AB or SB; their genders were not known. Given that participants did not know the gender of the writers and the evaluation was done privately,

their grades represent how they truly evaluated the essay.

After submitting their grades, study participants were asked to provide feedback directly to each writer over chat, so that the writer could improve. At this point, the writers' names (Andrew or Sarah) were revealed, revealing that one was a man, the other a woman. Participants submitted a grade to each writer, as well as substantive comments to improve their essays.

Participants were more likely to tell [white lies](#) to the woman writer, inflating Sarah's grades nearly a full letter grade higher than from their initial private evaluation. They also gave her more positive comments than they gave Andrew. In contrast, the man's in-person [feedback](#) was statistically indistinguishable from the participants' undisclosed evaluations of his work.

The studies reveal a potential obstacle to equality, Jampol and Zayas said.

More information: Lily Jampol et al. Gendered White Lies: Women Are Given Inflated Performance Feedback Compared With Men, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* (2020). [DOI: 10.1177/0146167220916622](#)

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