

Women from low socio-economic backgrounds see themselves as less talented, finds study

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Credit: Zen Chung from Pexels

Women from low socio-economic backgrounds consider themselves to be less talented than all other groups—even if they show the same

performance levels. This misconception contributes to the pronounced disadvantage in domains such as STEM subjects, where talent is seen as an important success factor.

Social psychologist Christina Bauer has now published these key findings from her [latest research](#) in the current issue of *Learning and Instruction* and suggests possible solutions to this problem.

Women and people from low socio-economic backgrounds are often seen as less talented, which can contribute to experiences of discrimination. "While a man with very good grades is more likely to be judged as a genius, women with the same achievements are more likely to be seen as hard-working, for example," explains Bauer.

People from families with a lower socio-economic status are also generally seen as less capable. Bauer and her colleague Veronika Job, both from the University of Vienna, have now investigated how this [social perception](#) affects the self-image of these people and how their life paths are subsequently influenced by it.

Bauer and Job conducted two studies with a total of 1,600 students in Germany and the U.S. Compared to all subgroups, they found that women from lower socio-economic backgrounds rated themselves as the least talented—even if they performed just as well in their studies as everyone else. "Our conclusion: Society's external image and social hierarchies also have a very strong influence on self-image," says Bauer.

This socialized distortion of self-perception is not without consequences. "Women therefore have less confidence in themselves, which reduces their chances of success and means that some industries and areas of society are very one-sidedly male-dominated and not very diverse," explains Bauer.

For example, women with a low socio-economic status feel less comfortable in areas where talent is expected, are less confident and therefore make less of a contribution. This applies, for example, to the STEM fields (mathematics, computer science, [natural sciences](#) and technology), jobs such as management consultancies, or even hobbies such as chess. "This view has far-reaching consequences for the chances of success of those affected in these areas," says Bauer.

Diligence principle instead of talent focus as a possible solution

The authors also suggest solution strategies. In a previously published experiment, Bauer was able to show that [women](#) with a lower socio-[economic status](#) do not consider themselves to be less hard-working. The current study shows, however, that they consider themselves to be less talented. One way to mitigate disadvantages would therefore be to give greater social recognition to the importance of qualities such as diligence and hard work rather than talent.

"This recognition can take place on different levels: How we talk about high achievers—instead of praising geniuses, and looking down on 'nerds,' appreciating people for their hard work. Or how we give feedback—constructive feedback that makes it clear how people can improve, rather than just praise or criticism without a development perspective," says Bauer.

Why this distorted self-image occurs will be the subject of further studies. "Stereotypes or different experiences with challenges, which are misinterpreted as a sign of a lack of talent, could play a role," says Bauer.

More information: Christina A. Bauer et al, Double disadvantage:

Female first-generation-students think of themselves as least talented, contributing to disproportionate disadvantage, *Learning and Instruction* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.learninstruc.2023.101865](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.learninstruc.2023.101865)

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