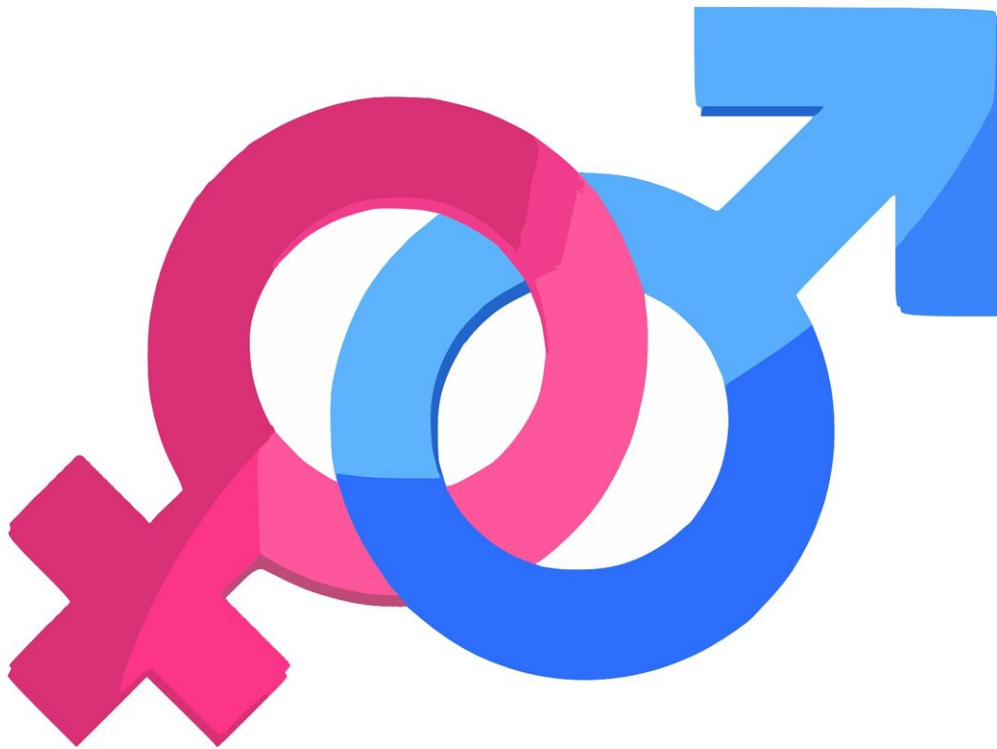


Examining gender and pathways to social hierarchy through the lens of social cognition

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Russian President Vladimir Putin and pop star Taylor Swift have something in common as two of the world's "most powerful" people, according to Forbes. But while Putin rose to power as the leader of the world's largest country, Swift amassed status and wealth as a wildly popular singer and performer.

These two paths to prominence—through power and status—are deeply tied to gender stereotypes that shape how society views them, according to new research [published](#) in the journal *Psychological Science*. While men are more typically linked to power, or having control over valuable resources, women are more often associated with status, defined as being respected by others.

"We noticed there seemed to be a fundamental difference between Forbes' list of powerful people and its separate list of powerful women, and we wanted to find out whether this was indicative of broadly held gendered associations," says lead researcher Charlotte Townsend, Ph.D. 24, who began the project as a doctoral student and is now a postdoc at Cornell University.

"We found deeply held stereotypes in how we recognize leaders—whether they are leading a company or running for president."

Household names

Just five of the 75 people on Forbes' last "World's Most Powerful People" list are women, while 99 women—plus a plastic doll, with the recent addition of Barbie—appear on the separate "World's Most Powerful Women" list.

Townsend, working with Berkeley Haas Professor Laura Kray and Sonya Mishra, Ph.D., an assistant professor at Dartmouth's Tuck School of Business, used Forbes' lists to test how men and women are viewed

differently in terms of power and status, and to examine the implications of these stereotypes.

In one experiment, the undergraduate student participants rated men on the Forbes list higher in power but lower in status compared to the women, while they rated the women higher in status than the men. What's more, the men were more likely to be recognized if they were perceived as powerful, while the women were more likely to be recognized if they were viewed as having high status.

"The most powerful men tend to be household names, while for women it's those with the most status," says Kray. "We pay more attention to high-status women like Taylor Swift and high-power men like Jeff Bezos, and less attention to high-power women like General Motors CEO Mary Barra."

In the experiments, the researchers measured power using statements about authority and control (e.g. supervising subordinates, administering discipline or rewards), while status was measured using statements about whether the person was admired, respected, and sought out for their opinions.

The studies were done in 2020 and 2022, and used Forbes' 2018 "Most Powerful People" list and 2019 "Most Powerful Women" list. (Note: Forbes stopped updating its "Most Powerful People" list in 2018 but continues to update its "Most Powerful Women" list).

Public attention

The researchers then collected data on media mentions and social media followers for the Forbes' list members that had been rated high in power or status. The analysis found it was the "powerful" men who garnered more media mentions and social media followers, while "powerful"

women had fewer. Conversely, the women rated as "high status" had more media mentions and social media followers compared with high-status men.

The fact that society gives more attention to powerful men and high-status women "aligns with past research finding that people are more likely to notice and recall information that confirms their stereotypes," says Mishra. "These mental shortcuts reduce our cognitive load as perceivers."

Deeply ingrained biases

To test whether gender stereotypes around power and status persist with people who aren't household names, the researchers selected photos of lesser-known people from *Fortune*'s "40 Under 40 Finance List." They used an Implicit Association Test (IAT) to measure unconscious biases with another group of undergraduates, and again found strong associations between men and power, and women and status—supporting the idea that these [gender stereotypes](#) are deeply ingrained.

The study also confirmed that participants viewed men as having more societal power and status overall, even though women were more strongly associated with status.

Self-perceptions

A final experiment tested how men and women view themselves. (The study samples included too few participants who identified as neither a man nor a woman for a separate analysis.)

They found that women, in particular, tended to associate themselves more with status than with power. When asked directly about

themselves, women reported feeling less powerful than men, but more status-oriented.

Yet when asked about what they wanted, both men and women reported similar desires for power and status.

So, while women might not necessarily be shying away from power, they might be aware of the backlash they'd incur from wanting power, the researchers suggest. Townsend noted that they have preliminary findings for a follow-up paper showing that women expect less backlash for seeking status than power.

Backlash

This builds on prior research on how women's fears of backlash shape their behavior, such as highlighting their accomplishments in an interview. Another recent study by Mishra and Kray found that women who are seen as going after power are more likely to face a backlash than those viewed as seeking status in addition to seeking power.

"Power-seeking women experience backlash because they are seen to violate feminine stereotypes," Mishra says. Although women might have more leadership opportunities today compared to 20 years ago, seeking and possessing power still convey more masculine stereotypes than feminine stereotypes.

It will be interesting to see how this phenomenon plays out in the 2024 [presidential election](#), the researchers note, since Vice President Kamala Harris became the [presidential candidate](#) somewhat by default after President Joe Biden stepped aside. This could be an advantage.

"It could be that Harris is perceived as less power-hungry, and as a result, she might encounter less backlash compared with a candidate like

Hillary Clinton, who campaigned heavily for her candidacy," Mishra suggested.

And while both power and status are important in social hierarchies, they come with different expectations. Social status tends to be more fragile than power, and more easily taken away, says Kray. And those with status are more often expected to be fair and kind, which can limit their ability to use their rank effectively, and limit them to roles with less control over resources, she adds.

"Unfortunately, this further entrenches the stereotype that women's power must be limited to being highly respected while men's power encompasses tangible control over resources," Kray says.

The researchers note that the study involved mainly college students and U.S. adults, so may not be applicable to everyone. But what's clear is that achieving full gender equality will require continuing examination of—and challenges to—these deeply held stereotypes.

More information: Charlotte H. Townsend et al, Not All Powerful People Are Created Equal: An Examination of Gender and Pathways to Social Hierarchy Through the Lens of Social Cognition, *Psychological Science* (2024). [DOI: 10.1177/09567976241260251](https://doi.org/10.1177/09567976241260251)

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