

## BREAKING THE BIAS HABIT<sup>®</sup>

### A WORKSHOP TO PROMOTE GENDER EQUITY

## Case Study #1: Reader's Theater - Dr. Janet Williamson

This case study is based on actual experiences of women faculty with offers and retention packages, and is compiled from conversations about their choices to accept new positions.

Three assistant professors from a large department at a public research university are walking back to their offices after a faculty meeting. They are discussing an announcement made during the meeting that a senior faculty member, Dr. Janet Williamson, will be leaving the department for a position at an Ivy-League institution.

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Roger: Wow, I can't believe we lost Janet! Still, it's obvious that she took the position because it's a better university. Who could resist an offer from a place like that?

Jennifer: I'm really surprised that she's leaving. She still has kids in school—why would she move now? Not to mention her husband...do you think she lined up a job for him too? Maybe he's the one who wanted to move, and Janet was the trailing spouse? Janet is such a devoted mother; this really is a shocking announcement.

Brian: I wonder who will get her lab space, and the named professorship? Her leaving frees up resources for the rest of us. She wasn't really well-respected in the department, you know. She was removed from the Research Center leadership council, and she was the main driver of the original proposal! It's just as well that she's going.

Jennifer: Well, maybe she left because she wasn't sufficiently respected. She was pretty isolated; maybe being removed from the Center was the last straw. I'll bet a lot of the senior faculty in this department didn't take too well to her very direct leadership style. It's too bad; she's an exemplary scientist and has accomplished some wonderful things. She is well-respected nationally and I hope our department's ranking doesn't go down because of this. She's going to take a lot of grant money with her.

Brian: You are right about her leadership style being too direct. I've even heard some people call her "abrasive."

Roger: The dean keeps saying how hard we tried to keep her, but I heard that Janet's retention offer was really low—insultingly low for someone of her stature—and that it came very late, after she and her husband had made a second visit. I was surprised that there wasn't any action earlier because it was common knowledge that she was being aggressively recruited, even though she wasn't really looking to leave. Maybe we really didn't try hard enough to keep her?

Jennifer: Well, I'm going to miss her. She's been a big help to me personally. The women students in our department tend to flock to the two of us, and she's given me some excellent

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career advice and mentorship. She even read over and edited my first grant application on a weekend! I'm not sure it would have been funded if it weren't for her efforts. She was a role model to me—especially the way she always spoke her mind in meetings and stood up for herself. I suppose that some might see that as abrasive, but sometimes that's what you have to do to get your ideas heard, especially if you're a woman.

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### Questions for discussion:

You have just learned about the following three concepts: **Expectancy Bias**, **Prescriptive Gender Norms**, and **Role Incongruity**. Consider **Expectancy Bias** first:

1. How might expectancy bias have influenced these junior faculty members' reactions to learning about Janet's departure?
2. How might expectancy bias have influenced the department's or the dean's retention offer?
3. Have you seen or heard of similar cases or discussions in your workplace?

Now consider **Prescriptive Gender Norms** and **Role Incongruity**. These two concepts are closely related because prescribed gender norms for women are often at odds with the roles they must play in leadership positions.

1. How might prescribed gender norms and role incongruity have influenced Janet's position in the department?
2. How might prescribed gender norms and role incongruity have influenced her retention offer?
3. What challenges might junior women faculty face when negotiating the potential impact of prescriptive gender norms and role incongruity? Do senior women face similar or different challenges?

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## Case Study #2: Reader's Theater - Dr. Sandra Thompson

The National Institutes of Health issued a program announcement seeking grant proposals to support scientists willing to “engage in high-risk, high-impact biomedical research that is likely to lead to technological breakthroughs.” One criterion for review assessed whether applicants had the potential for scientific leadership. After a rigorous review process, finalists were selected to be interviewed by a panel of seven distinguished reviewers. A single recipient was selected for this prestigious \$2 million award.

Assistant Professor Sandra Thompson, one of the finalists, is discussing the interview experience with some of her colleagues during lunch at a national conference.

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Dr. Sandra Thompson: I was surprised by how nervous I was! Walking down that hallway, I passed by all these photographs of the accomplished men whose work had made such an impact! I admit I was a bit intimidated. The assistant who showed me into the interview room was extremely nice, though; her reassuring smile helped calm me before I entered. Everyone, especially the one woman on the panel, seemed very interested in my research and I was able to answer all their questions—but I didn't feel completely at ease and I suppose it showed. Since you won the award, you probably didn't feel that way, did you Dan?

Dr. Daniel Sorenson: I guess I was a little more nervous than I usually am before I present my research, but I found those photographs reassuring, especially since my postdoc mentor was one of them. Once I was in the room, and could discuss my work, I really relaxed because the conversation flowed so easily. The panelists were really interested in the interdisciplinary nature of my newest ideas. Sure enough, my reviews indicated that the interdisciplinary nature of my work was the reason for my selection.

Dr. Melissa George: You're kidding! I can't believe it! I went through this whole thing last year, and I got slammed in my reviews for being *too* interdisciplinary. My review comments noted that my research was too diffuse and thus not appropriate for the disciplinary focus of this award! The award criteria didn't change between last year and this year....maybe I would have had a better chance if I had applied this year instead!

Dr. Sandra Thompson: This is not to take away from your achievement Dan—your work is extraordinary and I'm really happy for you—still, since our career achievements have been largely parallel, I wonder if I would have done better last year while Melissa would have done better this year. We'll never know, though...

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**Questions for discussion:**

1. We have just learned about three concepts—**Reconstructing Credentials**, **Stereotype Priming**, and **Stereotype Threat**—and how these can inadvertently lead to gender bias in decision-making. Discuss the case with these concepts in mind.
  - a. How might gender stereotype priming be influencing the interview panel?
  - b. How might stereotype threat be influencing Dr. Thompson?
  - c. To what extent might reconstructing credentials be involved in the award decision?
2. How might you alter the program announcement, the environment of the interview, or the review process to mitigate the impact of gender stereotypes?

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### Lexicon of Bias Literacy

These six terms help identify and label cognitive processes that promote gender bias.

1. Expectancy Bias<sup>1</sup> - This refers to bias in analysis or judgment caused by expecting an individual in a social category to behave in accordance with the group stereotype. People occupy various *social categories* on the basis of skin color, clothing, speech style, or other signs or indications of group membership.
  2. Prescriptive Gender Norms<sup>2</sup> - Unconscious assumptions about behaviors viewed as typically male or female in the abstract are referred to as prescriptive gender norms. Male prescriptive behavioral norms are called “agentic” and include being strong, assertive, independent, willing to take risks, ambitious, and dominant. Female prescriptive behavioral norms are called “communal” and include being weak, supportive, nurturing, and dependent. Men or women who violate prescriptive gender norms may pay penalties in evaluation. For example, men who adopt behaviors that align with female prescriptive gender norms may be described with pejorative adjectives such as “effeminate” or “wimpy;” whereas, women who adopt behaviors that align with male prescriptive gender norms may be described with pejorative descriptors such as “bossy” or “domineering.”
  3. Role Congruity or Incongruity<sup>3</sup> - High authority or leadership roles are assumed to require stereotypical male traits such that role congruity exists for men in these positions. Women working toward leadership can be doubly disadvantaged: first, because these positions are viewed as requiring stereotypical male skills which women are assumed less likely to possess (role *incongruity*), and secondly, because women who demonstrate highly competent agentic behaviors in these positions are viewed as suffering from a communality deficit.
  4. Reconstructing Credentials<sup>4</sup> - Although this may be inadvertent, Reconstructing Credentials allows evaluators to adjust the value of an individual’s credentials such that a male applicant will be recommended for a male sex-typed job (e.g., police chief) and a female applicant will be recommended for the female sex-typed job (e.g., women’s studies professor).
  5. Stereotype Priming<sup>5</sup> - This refers to the exposure of an individual to information that reinforces male or female stereotypes before that individual engages in some task. This exposure influences the individual’s subsequent behavior to be more in line with gender stereotypes (e.g., after male gender priming evaluators rate a male as more stereotypically masculine; women are less likely to self-select a leadership vs. subordinate role following female gender priming<sup>6</sup>).
  6. Stereotype Threat<sup>7</sup> - This is the term given to the consistently observed phenomenon whereby being a member of a group about which a negative stereotype exists causes that person to underperform relative to his/her ability--thus confirming the stereotype.
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