

GOING BEYOND THE GILDED CAGE

TO UNDERSTAND BETTER HOW GENDER STEREOTYPES MIGHT IMPACT ON MARKET RESEARCHERS' CAREERS, WOMEN IN RESEARCH (WIRE) LOOKED AT NONCONSCIOUS GENDER PERCEPTIONS. **ELINA HALONEN** SHARES THE FINDINGS

A father and son are in a horrible car crash that kills the dad. The son is rushed to the hospital and just as he's about to go under the knife, the surgeon says: 'I can't operate – that boy is my son!'

An old riddle such as this is a good example of the impact gender schemas can have on our thinking. Most people are puzzled by it, and suggest wildly creative options instead of the most obvious one: that the surgeon is a female and the boy's mother.

One particular area where these stereotypes come into play is career choice, progression and recruitment. Everyone likes to think of themselves as enlightened, but we all store a range of belief patterns in our minds. We learn these schemas in childhood because they help us generalise and explain life, even though they do not necessarily reflect our personal values.

Despite what many think, gender stereotypes do not just affect women: when the riddle was changed, most people struggled to imagine that a nurse could be a man. The perceptions we have of each gender in a career context include many small things that can hold both men and women back – but only if we are not aware of them.

To find out what perceptions market researchers might have,

Women in Research (WIRE) and the Market Research Society (MRS) asked the Irrational Agency to explore nonconscious gender perceptions in the market research industry through a wide-scale experiment. Before we reveal the findings, why should we care about these stereotypes?

WE CAN'T HELP BUT BE PREJUDICED

The truth is that we are all cognitive misers, who like to preserve mental energy and processing capacity, and only spend it when we really have to. All human thought is a trade-off between speed and accuracy. While we mostly accept that we have fast and slow ways of thinking about brands, we can also apply it to how we perceive people.

In the first stage, our automatic, effortless System 1 uses heuristics and other mental shortcuts to grasp the essence of whatever we are presented with. Unfortunately, research suggests that we don't even need to believe in a stereotype for it to affect our thinking. The second stage of perceiving people – in which we correct and suppress our prejudices – takes much more effort, so falls into the realm of System 2, which the cognitive miser would prefer to avoid altogether.

Just as we can't help but make snap judgments about brands and products, we automatically make snap judgments about people – whether we like it or not. We can't stop ourselves from being influenced by stereotypes, even if we want to; they are our way of making sense of the world. Thinking that we are immune from stereotyping only makes us more likely to fall prey to it, so our best chance is to accept it. But before that, we need to be aware of the prejudices we have.

To dig into nonconscious beliefs and perceptions, we designed a three-stage experimental study that was distributed to the MRS membership. The approach was unusual: whereas a standard survey would follow MRS guidelines, giving respondents an option not to express their opinion, we deliberately wanted to force a System 1 response, by using a series of time-pressured choices to dig right into the nonconscious beliefs. With some studies suggesting that recruiters spend as little as six seconds looking at a CV before making an initial decision, quick first impressions really count. We also reviewed academic and mainstream articles on gender equality to put together hypotheses, and adapted examples into a market research industry context.

In the first stage, we wanted to replicate the Heidi/Howard case study from Harvard Business School, which found that people will rate a person's CV differently



depending on their gender – even though both were rated equally competent, the woman was perceived as more aggressive and less likeable than the man. We deliberately asked explicit rating questions, expecting respondents to second-guess the purpose of the survey, aiming to tap their rational System 2 responses. Predictably, the female candidates were rated more positively, which is either very good news for women in market research, or evidence that we like to give the impression of being unprejudiced, and overcompensate for it when put under the spotlight. Luckily, we also had nonconscious measurement tools that can read beyond rationalised answers and tap into unconscious beliefs and feelings.

A lot has been written recently about the likeability-competence dilemma women face – apparently we can either choose to be liked or competent, but not both. Similarly, the language used to describe people has received attention: some have suggested that women are described as bossy where men are simply assertive; and that women can also sometimes undermine themselves with the words they use.

When we asked which words are most complimentary in a performance review, we

discovered that the ideal market researcher would be clear-thinking, creative, organised, have initiative and be analytical. However, gender differences appeared: women appreciate ambition, taking the initiative and being independent and self-confident much more than men, who value a decisive, enterprising, serious approach. But which gender are these traits associated with?

When we looked at both the perceived tone of the word (positive/negative), and the gender it was most associated with, we found that the positive male stereotype is analytical, enterprising, confident, decisive, logical, self-confident and rational, whereas a positive female stereotype is more clear-thinking, creative, organised, takes the initiative and curious.

Women are also seen as inventive and realistic, as well as more tactful and friendly – in general, more positive words are associated with women than men, with the most negative attributes being sensitive and emotional. On the flipside, less positively described men might be called ambitious, assertive, direct and serious –

but also bossy, abrasive and arrogant.

Overall, men have more balanced views when it comes to either gender, while women have much stronger gender associations for traits. Contrary to much of the mainstream media reporting, market research appears to rate women rather highly.

However, gender perceptions can be much more subtle and complex than just specific traits – often, certain behaviours are more credible for one gender than another. Stereotypes are often thought of as simply discriminatory, but going against a stereotype can also damage people's perceptions of you; for example, research has shown that being perceived as creative will diminish a leader's perceived effectiveness because the stereotypes are seen as contradictory.

SO WHAT QUALITIES DO WE VALUE WHEN HIRING NEW PEOPLE?

When we asked which descriptions in a recruitment agency cover letter would make it more likely that someone would be invited for an interview, the most valuable things employers are looking for are: an ability to manage complex projects; being down to earth and smart; the ability to combine techniques and approaches; and a creative and passionate researcher with a track record of developing business.

As stereotypes often reflect patterns we have observed in real life, men are more likely to be seen as leaning towards quantitative – and women towards qualitative – methods. However, men are also more likely to be seen as strong on statistics and growing businesses, and women as creative, passionate and versatile researchers, as well as being organised and skilled in project management.

'Softer' people skills – such as being friendly and approachable – are firmly female territory, as is

► appreciating a work-life balance and the societal impact of their work, while men and women each see their own gender as being more down to earth and smart.

While this sounds fairly positive for everyone, a deeper look at the data reveals that even women are more likely to see assertiveness and ambition as male qualities – as well as seeing men as more likely to have grown a business and been promoted quicker. So while women are perceived to own many of the qualities we value in researchers, business acumen is still a male trait – even if you ask women. Making things worse, women are also much more likely than men to see a desire for a work-life balance as a typically female behaviour.

It's clear that market researchers are a very enlightened bunch when it comes to gender perceptions and – unlike in many industries – qualities associated with women are valued.

While this is great news for diversity, we shouldn't lull ourselves into a false sense of security that gender equality is not a challenge for us; both men and women put themselves – and each other – in clear boxes. These perceptions can make us miss existing talent inside our companies, as well as when we are recruiting for new people.

Nonconscious stereotypes can indeed be valuable guides in navigating a complex world, but we should not let ourselves become blinkered. ■

Elina Halonen is co-founder & partner, **The Irrational Agency**. Further details of the research methodology can be found at www.theirrationalagency.com/wire-mrs

Women in Research (WiRE)

is a global, non-profit for women in the greater marketing intelligence industry.
www.womeninresearch.com

THE JOB MARKET

CAREER DEVELOPMENT NOW AND THEN

As the Market Research Society celebrates its 70th birthday, Sinead Hasson takes a look at how career development has changed.



The problem with writing about career development 70 years ago is that I'm far too young to hark back to 1945. My time in market research (swallows hard) dates back to 1996, which, for this piece, is – I think – quite far enough, thank you very much.

Twenty years ago, market research agencies were after people skilled in classic qual and quant methodologies, who could efficiently execute a research brief, usually for others to interpret. Such methods could, by and large, be learned academically and applied vocally, giving junior researchers a fairly linear and well-defined career path to pursue. Back then, 'insight' was rarely mentioned. Field-based research was the mainstay, which required mobilising teams to get out there and engage face to face with consumers.

Today, demands on researchers are more complex and more strategic, needing the career-minded to adopt a vastly different outlook. The digital revolution has enabled a whole new level of data collection, community engagement and analysis, fuelling global demand for research services, and giving market researchers the chance to reinvent their profession. It has worked, too. The value of market research has been recognised and elevated in the wider business. As a result, more is being asked of the function than ever before – something that has immeasurably broadened the career options for market research professionals.

But options can also breed confusion; not everyone responds well to a blank piece of paper. Entrepreneurial researchers are flourishing, bravely exploring the digital landscape and jockeying with digital marketers, advertisers, creatives and communications professionals to carve out their value-niche in today's hyper-connected world.

“Take comfort in the fact that nothing can replace experience... get noticed, roll with the tech and don't rob yourself of opportunities by failing to get stuck in”

Social media, particularly LinkedIn, plays a huge part in today's career development. A strong, vocal and articulate presence online demonstrates your digital skills, which is essential for anyone focusing on big data, online insight or social media analytics. And let's not forget that the 'techies' are also here, building their strategic influence and threatening traditional market research with data mining, predictive analytics and machine-learning techniques.

Change is today's constant. What's in today is out tomorrow. As clouds of available research data billow to unimaginable proportions, and automated robots threaten traditional methods, today's smart researchers will conclude that they have little choice but to climb aboard the bullet train and embrace change as the new normal.

Luckily for me, we don't need to go back 70 years to discover market research's biggest transformation, which has occurred in the past 20. What is important now is that we, as researchers, continue to question our existence and justify our commercial value, because a slew of new competitors – all of whom have a seat at our client's table – are doing this already. Take comfort from the fact that nothing can replace experience – and remember that knowledge is power. Get yourself noticed, roll with the tech and don't rob yourself of opportunities by failing to get stuck in, because yesterday's market research is different from today's, which will be different again from tomorrow's. Count yourself lucky – this is no backwater profession.

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