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CHALLENGING THE DISPARITIES DEFAULT

REFRAMING AND RECLAIMING WOMEN'S POWER (A RESEARCH REVIEW)

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This paper was produced as part of an ongoing effort by We Tell Our Selves to spearhead social science research into the effects of power framing of women's identities.

WE TELL OUR SELVES

We Tell Our Selves (WTOS) is a multidisciplinary effort to research, develop, and promote communication techniques that improve public perceptions and motivation around women's identities and power. WTOS challenges the "default to deficit" framing, and empowers communicators to create a new narrative that correctly defines women as powerful while acknowledging the systemic, cultural, contextual obstacles and disparities women still face. We Tell Our Selves is a force multiplier for individuals, organizations, and institutions seeking equity and justice for women of all identities.

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FOREWORD

This paper shares social science research to explain how the belief that women should have equal access to power may be undermined by the narratives and representations of women as disempowered. Drawing upon insights from “frame theory” as well as social psychological research on stereotyping, this paper posits that communication and advocacy work focused on increasing the role of women in politics and the workforce can run the risk of undermining progress toward gender equity. Specifically, those that lead with current disparities in power between men and women, and the obstacles women face to overcoming these disparities, may actually reinforce gender stereotypes. While information about disparities and obstacles is crucial to understanding the challenges, communication strategy using what can be termed “disparity” and “obstacles” framing is inconsistent with research about how our brains process information. Dominant narratives and stereotypes about women as disempowered are unlikely to be upended by information consistent with this narrative and current stereotypes. Instead, research suggests, our brains require “power framing”—counter-stereotypical, positive narratives about women in positions of power in politics and the workplace—for counter-stereotypical attitudes to take hold.

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INTRODUCTION

Social science research suggests that for women to have genuine access to power—in politics and the workforce—images and ideas of women in power have to be accessible in our brains. Yet, those of us who focus on gender equity rarely lead with such images. Paragraphs like the two below describe women ascending to power, in politics and the workforce:

According to a Pew Research Center American Trends Panel, 96% of Americans agree that it is important that women have equal rights in this country.¹ This view mirrors progress in women's political and economic participation. The 2018 midterm elections, for example, represented a watershed for women. The U.S. House of Representatives elected a record number of women, with at least 90 women on their way to Washington, D.C. and a record number of women were candidates for governor, U.S. House and U.S. Senate. A number of women achieved historic firsts. Democrats Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib became the first Muslim women elected to Congress. Republican Marsha Blackburn became Tennessee's first female Senator. Democrats Deb Haaland and Sharice Davids became the first Native American women elected to Congress. Republican Kristi Noem became South Dakota's first female governor.² A study entitled "The Electability Myth" by the NGO, Reflective Democracy, found that when women were on the ballot they were elected at the same rates as white men.³

The labor force reflects similarly notable progress. Over the past half century, women have strengthened their labor force participation, earned increased wages and made inroads into occupations that were previously dominated by men. From 2018 to 2019, the number of women CEOs of Fortune 500 companies increased by 37%.⁴ Women are having greater success in finance than any other period in history. When women entrepreneurs are supported, they have been found to produce a series of positive network effects that benefit the community, the local economy, and the entrepreneur ecosystem more generally.⁵

1 2017 PEW RESEARCH CENTER'S AMERICAN TRENDS PANEL WAVE 28 AUGUST & WAVE 29 SEPTEMBER COMBINED FINAL TOPLINE WAVE 28: August 8 – August 21, 2017 WAVE 29: September 14 – September 28, 2017 TOTAL N=4,5731 (<https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2017/10/18/wide-partisan-gaps-in-u-s-over-how-far-the-country-has-come-on-gender-equality/>)

2 <https://time.com/5323592/2018-elections-women-history-records/>

3 <https://wholeads.us/the-electability-myth/>

4 <https://fortune.com/2019/05/16/fortune-500-female-ceos/>

5 <https://money.usnews.com/investing/financial-advisors/articles/2019-08-15/how-women-are-creating-success-in-financial-services>

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The information above is based upon recent events—and yet for many reading the workforce paragraph (ourselves included), highlighting women's progress may seem premature. Much more change is needed before women are fully represented in the halls of power and have equal opportunity to thrive in the workforce.

When looked at through an intersectional lens—how women of color, trans and non-binary people are faring—the notion of progress appears much more suspect.

Because the current reality is so far from ideal, those working toward greater representation of women across race and ethnicity in politics and the workplace often lead our advocacy with information about the disparities—that is, the lack of equity—between women and men in power, compensation, status, and treatment.

Leading with and highlighting disparities between women and men (“disparities framing”) or focusing primarily on obstacles women face as a result of gender (“obstacles framing”) may undermine access to power for women rather than promote greater equity for women.

Those in the advocacy world often work from the presumption that highlighting disparities and obstacles is necessary to garner attention, build motivation for action, and ultimately, achieve greater progress. When the disparities resulting from legalities and the obstacles are blatant bias—such as what is currently experienced by those in the trans and non-binary communities—the fight for rights often does require explicitly naming what is necessary for equal rights under the law. With respect to trans and non-binary people, an additional set of challenges are present and advocacy groups are working to direct attention to those challenges.⁶

However, for cisgender women, *framing* communications with stories and images of the ways in which women are disempowered may impede, rather than advance, progress.

The role of framing—how we present information—has been the subject of interest for advocates in recent years⁷ because framing has been shown to shape perceptions, understandings, and motivation within the viewer (Kendall-Taylor, 2017). In other words, how we frame information has enormous power to determine how our brains process that information.⁸ Leading with and highlighting disparities between women and men (“disparities framing”) or focusing primarily on obstacles women face as a result of gender (“obstacles framing”) may undermine access to power for women rather than promote greater equity for women.

This argument may initially seem counter-intuitive, but will not surprise those who are seeking success in traditionally male dominated domains. In 2012,

6 <https://transequality.org/>

7 <https://www.theguardian.com/science/head-quarters/2017/jul/20/the-power-of-framing-its-not-what-you-say-its-how-you-say-it>

8 <https://perception.org/publications/telling-our-own-story/>

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Entrepreneur Sallie Krawcheck sought support to create a digital investment platform for women and approached several large banks for funding. As she tells the story, she presented the concept and demonstrated the need and a major market, but was met with a dubious audience. After one such meeting, the CEO of a bank said, “Well, don’t their husbands manage their money for them?” As Krawcheck explains this remark, “People have been socialized to view white men as leaders and everyone else as not.”⁹

This paper shares social science research to explain how the belief that women are entitled to equal rights is contradicted by the narratives and representations of women as disempowered and unlikely to succeed in accessing and exercising power.

It is not just men who are socialized to see women as disempowered—as was evident in the 2020 Democratic primary. Lisa Lerer wrote in the *New York Times* in January 2020:¹⁰ “In a CNN/SSRS poll released [January 22, 2020], only 9 percent of men say a woman could not win the presidency. Among women, that figure more than doubles, to 20 percent.”

Recognizing the importance of advocacy for gender equity, and the continued challenges in that realm, this paper shares social science research to explain how the belief that women are entitled to equal rights is contradicted by the narratives and representations of women as disempowered and

unlikely to succeed in accessing and exercising power. Ironically, these negative narratives and representations showing women struggling to achieve power are frequently written by those trying to highlight current inequalities in order to combat them.

Based upon this research, we offer “power framing” as an alternative. Power framing would involve highlighting women across race and ethnicity effectively exercising power, rather than defaulting to disparities or obstacles framing. Power framing does not mean ignoring obstacles or disparities—rather, it suggests *sequencing* information differently. A power frame provides the brain with currently counter-stereotypical representations of women in power—and then may follow with the impediments to this positive exercise of power and the steps necessary to overcome those impediments.

9 <https://money.usnews.com/investing/financial-advisors/articles/2019-08-15/how-women-are-creating-success-in-financial-services>

10 <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/22/us/politics/hillary-clinton-elizabeth-warren.html>

NARRATIVE FRAMING

Given how our brains work, the goal of challenging stereotypes does not alter the fact that the constant repetition of narratives about disempowered women feeds into the dominant narrative of women as disempowered. Well-intentioned attempts to challenge negative stereotypes, in other words, may inadvertently perpetuate those stereotypes. As described below, a body of research has developed that suggests that to counter such stigma requires constant repetition of positive narratives about women in positions of power—in politics and the workplace—for counter-stereotypical attitudes to take hold.

The social science research about the cognitive impact of gender stereotypes is supplemented by a growing focus on framing of content. Recently, there has been increasing discussion of the difference between “asset” versus “deficit” framing when addressing issues of inequality and injustice.¹¹ In the context of race, Traban Shorters, among others, advocates the use of *asset* framing (**language that recognizes areas of success and potential for stigmatized groups**), as opposed to *deficit* framing (a lens that focuses on the limitations of such groups, or how they are falling short).¹² For instance, rather than reiterating the “achievement gap” between black students and white students, we can lead with black students’ interest in academics, highlight counter-stereotype narratives, and focus on actions needed to support their academic journeys. Research suggests that writings about stigmatized groups that emphasize all that they lack, as a way to address injustice and inequity in our society, **is unlikely to achieve sought after results**. Instead, writing should recognize the strengths and potential of marginalized groups.¹³

In the context of gender—particularly when the focus is not specifically on women of color—advocacy groups and others seeking gender equity are less likely to use “deficit” framing to explain gender inequalities. In some instances, deficit framing may still occur as, for example, when women are simply encouraged to “lean in” or otherwise alter our *own* behavior as a means of solving for structural barriers to opportunity. More often, though, the default frame is either to emphasize numerical differences between men and women in power (“disparity framing”) or to highlight obstacles women experience to achieving power (“obstacles framing”).

11 <https://perception.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/HisStory-Narrative-Toolkit.pdf>

12 <https://www.comnetwork.org/resources/asset-framing-the-other-side-of-the-story/>

13 <https://perception.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/HisStory-Narrative-Toolkit.pdf>

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We are not suggesting that disparities or obstacles should be ignored or underplayed; they are critical to understand the changes that need to be made to achieve equity goals. Rather, the question is whether these framing approaches risk undermining the possibilities for change because they are cognitively processed through dominant narratives about women as disempowered and encumbered by obstacles.

In other words, when the primary narrative strategy is to highlight disparities between men and women in politics and the workforce, the images of men in positions of power and women on the outside are reinforced. If our leading

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narrative strategy is to continually emphasize obstacles to women's empowerment, the images of the communities of women of varying races and ethnicities continue to be primarily associated with those obstacles.

We recognize that the research focused on framing specifically linked to women and power is nascent and also that audiences are not monolithic. To make a contribution to this gap in understanding, the Perception Institute and the Free Radicals Project of the Tides Center are, as this paper is being written, initiating a research study led by social psychologists to evaluate how different audiences respond to various forms of power

framing with respect to women, as well as the effects of disparity and obstacles framing. This study will also assess whether some forms of emphasizing disparities may be effective in catalyzing concern and action with particular audiences.

The research we present below, however, provides powerful support that narratives and framing that provide positive associations of women *with* power will be necessary for women to *achieve* power—particularly in contexts where the decision-makers include those for whom women's empowerment is not itself a primary goal. Salient portions of the electorate (those who hold strongly antiquated views on gender are unlikely to be moved by framing alone) and decision-makers in the workforce will always include a significant percentage of people who generally support equality for women but whose stereotypical views of women will need to change for further progress to occur. Moreover, female audiences may be demotivated, rather than activated, by narratives that reinforce disparities in and obstacles to our exercise of power.

As we describe below, the research suggests that when people envision a state of being, it has greater potential to be realized. Positive associations of women exercising power and leadership across lines of difference need to be available and accessible images in our brains.

I. GENDER AS A SCHEMA: HOW OUR BRAINS CONSTRUCT CATEGORIES

“Gender schemas... simplify the world around us, but they also reproduce problematic discrimination.”

— Soraya Chemaly, *Rage Becomes Her: The Power of Women's Anger*

In order to understand the role that narratives and frames play in how women and power are perceived, it is crucial to understand how our brains create categories for information—including the ways that we form thoughts about people. This process of categorizing is an adaptive cognitive function that is necessary because our brains encounter an enormous amount of stimuli every moment of every day. Without categorizing these stimuli, our brains would be overloaded. So we have adapted to process stimuli through the use of categories (“schemas”) and automatic associations between concepts that share related characteristics (Tajfel & Forgas, 1981). This automatic ordering is a critical human function that makes processing information more efficient and guides our reactions and behaviors in relation to our environment. While schemas are not completely static (think of our world in contrast even to fifty-years ago), they are quite durable and challenging to alter.¹⁴

The construction of categories for people provides the foundation for everyday social interaction. Distinguishing between “adults” and “children,” for example, is necessary to know how to respond to particular behaviors appropriately—and who requires care and attention to different degrees. Our brain’s schema for different groups of people tend to include both stereotypes (traits and attributes) and attitudes (warmth or coldness), both of which are context-specific and may differ by culture (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). For example, in most cultures, people tend to hold positive attitudes (warm feelings) toward those seen as “elders,” but cultures may vary with respect to stereotypes about them. In many cultures, those who are older are associated with wisdom, while in the United States, the stereotype of incompetence is widely held (Dionigi, 2015).¹⁵

Gender is a primary identity category in virtually every culture—and in our brains. We note that gender is not synonymous with “sex” (categorizing people as “female” or “male” based upon physical traits such as chromosomes, genitals, and hormones). By contrast, “gender” is the division of people into “female” or “male” categories based upon the *behaviors* associated with the sex categories in a given culture.¹⁶ The notion that gender is a social category with different modes of expression—and therefore is distinct from sex—is becoming more commonly recognized (Pew Research Center, 2019). Yet gender continues to be the first

14 <https://perception.org/publications/science-of-equality-vol-1/>

15 <https://www.hindawi.com/journals/jger/2015/954027/>

16 For a more detailed discussion, see Coday, Godsil, McGill-Johnson (2019). What Are We Up Against? An Intersectional Examination of Stereotypes Associated With Gender (A Research Review) <https://www.storyatscale.org/reports/research-review>

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social category children learn, at around age three, which is earlier than race for many children (Rogers & Meltzoff, 2017).

While it has often been presumed that gender categories include a set of inherent traits and characteristics beyond biological sex differences, recent studies in neuroscience show that our brains, across lines of gender, are more similar than different (e.g., Hyde, 2014; Joel et al., 2015; Fine, 2013). This neuroscience has not altered how most men and women in the United States continue to associate each gender with a particular set of traits and characteristics.¹⁷ People are generally expected to conform to these associations in the roles we enter and the behaviors

We are mindful that social science research focused on “gender” stereotypes in the United States tends to have as a default white, cisgender women, which does not reflect the experience of the majority of women.

we engage in—and those who act counter to these associations are often subject to social disadvantages (Ellemers, 2018).

Importantly for this paper, the traits that have regularly been associated with leadership in politics and business are linked to men (Fiske et al., 2002). These include agency “(which generally refers to self-directed behavior and is associated with traits such as adventurousness and self-reliance), competence, general aptitude or ability, and a “masculinized” orientation focused on exerting independence and distinc-

tiveness (p. 5 Coday, Godsil, McGill Johnson). Women tend to be associated with “communality (concern for others and associated with traits such as social sensitivity and cooperativeness [Abele, 2003]) and a “feminized” orientation focused on maintaining social harmony and interconnectedness (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007).¹⁸

We are mindful that social science research focused on “gender” stereotypes in the United States tends to have as a default white, cisgender women, which does not reflect the experience of the majority of women. Research on intersectionality focuses on the compounding of marginalized identities, particularly those faced by women across lines of race and ethnicity (Crenshaw, 1989). There are pervasive, harmful stereotypes about women of color that are rarely disrupted in popular media and virtually absent from critical analysis in social science research. Stereotypic characterizations of Black women, for example, include the neutered, exceedingly jovial “mammy” who appeases whiteness and is responsible for the care of children across race and generation, the “jezebel” who is sexually licentious and has exaggerated curves, and the “sapphire” who is ascribed masculine traits and is angry, and nagging—especially in relation to men (Adams-Bass et al., 2014; Bogle, 2001; Rosenthal and Lobel, 2016). Stereotypical portrayals of Latinx women

¹⁷ Id.

¹⁸ Coday, Godsil, McGill-Johnson (2019).

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include hypersexual and attitudinal, devoutly religious, and family oriented (McLaughlin et al. 2018). Asian women are stereotyped as passive, academically inclined, or are similarly fetishized (Chou and Feagin, 2015). Native/Indigenous women, for whom there is a dearth of representation in dominant culture altogether, are stereotypically represented as spiritually intune with nature or through a narrative of victimhood (Coday et al. 2020). Many of these depictions have deep roots in history and remain entrenched through residential and educational segregation.¹⁹ As is evident from this synthesis, the stereotypes often linked to white women—communal, accommodating—are quite distinct from the varied stereotypes ascribed to women of different races and ethnicities.

It must also be noted that the experiences of transgender women, as well as gender non-confirming and non-binary people, have not been sufficiently included in academic research related to gender. Given that the number of Americans who identify as trans and non binary is increasing (Johns et al. 2019), we urge academic researchers to expand their research to be inclusive of these identities.

All of these negative stereotypes harm women to differing degrees—and all are contrary to the underlying presumptions of competence accorded to white, middle class, cisgender men. According to Fiske and colleagues' (2002) stereotype content model, competence is conferred upon members of a dominant group (i.e., white, middle class cisgender men) because they are perceived as high status. The next section discusses how narratives—the stories we tell about gender—can both determine and reinforce those perceptions.

II. PERPETUATION OF GENDER STEREOTYPES: DIVISION OF LABOR AND STORIES

“Narrative is radical, creating us at the very moment it is being created.” – Toni Morrison, 1993 Nobel Lecture.

Storytellers and philosophers throughout history have understood that stories (narratives) determine how we see others and understand ourselves (Bauman, 2017). Contemporary neuroscience is beginning to suggest the biological basis of how our brains interpret narratives (Armstrong, 2019)—but across disciplines, a strong consensus has emerged that our brains are designed to learn from narratives. Through stories, we make sense of the world, other people, and ourselves (Armstrong, 2019).

The stories we tell are often informed by the things that we see. Because it is still often the case that men and women engage in different work, play, and roles

¹⁹ Id.

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in the home, we develop beliefs about their respective attributes—particularly their personality traits (Eagly, Wood, & Diekmann, 2000; Murdock & Provost, 1973; Wood & Eagly, 2010). This process of inferring traits from people's activities is known as **correspondence bias**—in other words, the idea that people are what they do (Gilbert, 1998). If a woman is taking care of children, the thinking might go, she must be nurturing and communal. Then, after observing just one member of a group, it's very easy to generalize the traits of an entire group of people (Wood et al., 2010). When we perceive one woman as nurturing and communal, we have no trouble assuming other women possess the same traits. Correspondence bias also leads us to link traits back to functions: for instance, women are nurturing and communal, thus better suited for caring for children than making financial decisions for a business. The end result is that we assume, and expect, men and women to exhibit particular characteristics and behaviors, which further distinguish their gender roles.

The regularity of seeing men in leadership roles and women as nurturers in both family and society has translated into very strong gendered schema in the brain. This remains true even among younger generations of Americans. Studies show that between 1994 and 2014, the percentage of high school seniors who believed that the ideal family structure was one in which a man was the primary earner and a woman was responsible for the care and keeping of the home *increased* by 16% (Coontz & Rutter, 2017).

These are young people who endorse, at rates of 90 percent or higher, the idea that men and women should be treated equally at work—yet this research is showing a trend toward greater traditionalism at home. This has been called “egalitarian essentialism” and combines a commitment to equality of opportunity with the belief that men and women will “typically choose different opportunities because men are ‘inherently’ better suited to some roles and women to others” (Coontz & Rutter, 2017).

Associating gender with particular traits undermines the “equality of opportunity” commitment most Americans proclaim²⁰ because these implicit associations distort how women are seen in contrast to men. For example, in an article about Elizabeth Warren's candidacy, she was described as sounding “apologetic, accommodationist” and “struggling to be likable,” underscoring how even the most powerful women are linked to stereotypes that are inconsistent with power.²¹

20 2017 PEW RESEARCH CENTER'S AMERICAN TRENDS PANEL WAVE 28 AUGUST & WAVE 29 SEPTEMBER COMBINED FINAL TOPLINE WAVE 28: August 8 – August 21, 2017 WAVE 29: September 14 – September 28, 2017 TOTAL N=4,5731 (<https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2017/10/18/wide-partisan-gaps-in-u-s-over-how-far-the-country-has-come-on-gender-equality/>)

21 <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2020/03/12/elizabeth-warren-in-the-trap/>

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In a set of laboratory studies, outcomes show that women continue to be associated with stereotypical characteristics that are inconsistent with power and success:

- ◆ Female students are seen as less talented than male students in all areas of science (Leslie et al., 2015) even when they have higher grades than their male counterparts (Grunspan et al., 2016).
- ◆ Identical architectural drawings are evaluated more favorably if the architect's name is male rather than female (Proudfoot et al., 2015). The associations researchers find to be salient are agency, innovation, and out-of-the-box thinking (Proudfoot et al., 2015).

A different set of studies show that despite the positive bias toward men that allows for greater access to power, men's association with the public realm and absence from the private realm harms them as well.

- ◆ Men are under-represented in occupational and family roles translating into gender stereotypes that implicitly prevent their interest and inclusion in such roles (Croft et al., 2015).
- ◆ In a meta-analysis surveying nearly 20,000 research participants, men who were prompted to be self-reliant and exert power over women showed negative social functioning and impaired mental health, including depression, loneliness, and substance abuse (Wong et al., 2017).

So, research is showing that both women and men are harmed by current gender constructs. Counter-stereotypical stories have the potential to help us all see a different path.

And yet the power of stories to alter stereotypes may be undermined by the difficulty storytellers may have in avoiding them and the atavistic fears they reflect. Perhaps surprisingly, even when narratives are intentionally constructed to challenge existing stereotypes, they often reflect the stereotypes. A vivid example of this phenomenon is the short-lived television series, *The Commander in Chief*, starring Geena Davis. Airing on ABC for a single season in 2005–2006, *Commander in Chief* was the first television series to seriously consider a female president of the United States. This show with Geena Davis (playing President Mackenzie Allen, referred to as “Mac”) was written intentionally to depict a woman in the highest office—and yet an analysis by Michele Adams shows that Mac ended up being portrayed as “a heroic, moral-capital worthy leader in the political sphere and a gender-stereotypical, guilt-driven working mother/wife in the domestic sphere (Adams, 2011).” For example, in one episode Mac's children are mobbed by reporters on their first day of school and when Mac sees the scene replayed on television, she immediately interrupts her handling of a national crisis to respond. Male politicians generally derive moral capital from family, yet for Mac, being family-engaged translates into her attempts to continue to act as a traditional wife and mother and does not “enhance her persona as a strong,

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responsible leader, but in fact undercuts it by painting Mac with a gender stereotypical brush of dependency and subordination (Adams, 2011). When the stories mirror rather than challenge stereotypes, the power of the stereotypes grows.

An alternative exists—but clearly will be challenging to achieve. Stories that counter existing stereotypes may expand the traits associated with the schema of “women.” Additionally, stories that involve leadership effectively exercised

When the stories mirror rather than challenge stereotypes, the power of the stereotypes grows.

with traits currently associated with women (e.g. communal) may expand how leadership is understood. Stories and varying representation of women of differing races and ethnicities that expand the attributes associated with these categories will be a necessary predicate to increased gender equity.

In addition to stories, a great deal of the information disseminated about women is through reports, analyses, and other didactic forms of communication. The next section addresses the standard “frames” typically utilized and explores the research suggesting that these frames may also contribute to the perpetuation of stereotypes.

III. FRAMING: THE RISKS OF THE DISPARITY AND OBSTACLE DEFAULT

“Frames are organizing principles that are socially shared and persistent over time, and that work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world.”—Michael Carter

Communication strategy necessarily involves choices about information to include and leave out, as well as the sequence in which the information is presented.

“Framing” is a term that has long been used to describe “the process in which some aspects of reality are selected, and given greater emphasis or importance.” (Entman, 1993). Journalists—and now bloggers and Twitter influencers—engage in framing by making decisions about what will and what will not become news (Gamson and Modigliani, 1987).

Not surprisingly, how information is framed shapes how it is perceived, understood, and whether it motivates action (Kendall-Taylor, 2017). As a result, intentional “framing” —“the strategic presentation of information that cues predictable responses”²²—has emerged as a means by which advocates can more effectively engage with the public on a wide array of issues.

Those writing about women, who are arguing for gender equality and an increase in access to power reasonably, tend to frame narratives about women

22 <https://www.intechopen.com/books/child-and-adolescent-mental-health/can-frames-make-change-using-communications-science-to-translate-the-science-of-child-mental-health>

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within the current reality: women—particularly women of color—are grossly under-represented in positions of power, both in politics and the workforce, and face significant obstacles as they seek access to power. The challenge is that the “disparities” or “obstacles” frame (i.e. beginning with these realities)—in article after article, report after report—may have the effect of contributing to their perpetuation because of how our brains process this information.

Social psychologists have long recognized that when we have repeated exposure to stimuli over time, we tend to form more positive impressions (Eidelman & Crandall, 2012 citing Bornstein, 1989; Harrison, 1977; Zajonc, 1968). The

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“mere exposure” effect—that mere exposure increases positive regard—holds true for a wide variety of stimuli from words, shapes, music, faces, and doughnuts—impressions have been shown to become more favorable with simple, reinforced exposure.

A related phenomenon is the so-called “truth effect”: repeated exposure to statements increases their perceived veracity (Hasher, Goldstein, & Toppino, 1977; for a review, see Dechêne, Stahl, Hansen, & Wänke, 2010). As Eidelman and Crandall (2012) explain: “The repeated presentation of unfamiliar but plausible statements causes these statements to be seen as more true.” This effect has been

found to be effective for a broad array of topics, including people, politics, history, art, geography, religion, science, and marketing (Eidelman & Crandall, 2012).

What follows from these two phenomena - the mere exposure and truth effects - is that the repeated associations and representations of under-represented and obstacle-laden women runs the risk of continuing to normalize this status quo. This would be consistent with what Eidelman and Crandall posit as another process that maintains the status quo: existence bias—people assuming that a particular status is good simply because it exists (Eidelman, Crandall, & Pattershall, 2009). This idea in social psychology builds on philosopher David Hume’s (1739/1992) observation that people tend to conflate matters of fact (what is) with prescription (what ought to be), a process often referred to as the naturalistic fallacy (e.g., Friedrich, Kierniesky, & Cardon, 1989).

Existence bias can be triggered by having people *envision* a state of being. Essentially, when people imagine an outcome, it seems more likely to occur. Drawing on that notion, during the 2008 Democratic primary, for example, Eidelman and Crandall (2012) engaged in an experiment in which they randomly assigned participants to imagine vividly that either then Senator Obama or Senator Clinton won the nomination and to conceptualize the likelihood as what they termed a “future status quo.” The researchers predicted that imagining an outcome

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would also make it seem *better* to participants. Their prediction proved accurate: imagining either candidate winning the primary increased participants' estimate of the likelihood that candidate winning, and also that this victory was both good and right. Holding an image of Obama or Clinton winning made those victories seem more likely, and this in turn increased people's sense that Obama or Clinton winning the nomination was a good thing.

... this research suggests that our brains will process that information as "truth" and as in some sense a "good thing." Men in power and women out of power - if not countered by an alternative narrative - runs the risk of seeming both true and right.

So, if we are regularly presented with framing that emphasizes men in power and women as marginalized, as well as women facing daunting obstacles both to achieving power and being successful once they have achieved power, this research suggests that our brains will process that information as "truth" and as in some sense a "good thing."

Men in power and women out of power - if not countered by an alternative narrative - runs the risk of seeming both true and right.

IV. POWER FRAMING: EXPANDING OUR GENDER STORIES

Power framing does not mean ignoring obstacles or disparities - rather, it suggests highlighting and sequencing information differently. Of course, there is a risk that sharing only positive frames will create a false narrative that gender equity has already been achieved (Bauman, 2017). This is a challenge that can be seen in the LGBTQ rights advocacy arena, where an over-focus on the achievement of marriage equality invisibilizes the ongoing physical threat of violence that many people in the LGBTQ still experience. Importantly, power framing is just that: framing. It is not a "positive only" message. It is about sequencing information in a way that leads with assets, counters stereotypes, reinforces the possibility of equity, and yet still names would include information about the challenges that are currently undermining genuine equity in the political and work spaces. As we've noted, the goal of power framing is for communicators to frame information that highlight women across race and ethnicity effectively exercising power rather than defaulting to disparities or obstacles framing.

Understanding how narratives and framing affect audiences allows us to think about how communicators can avoid the unintended consequences that may result from disparity and obstacles framing. Instead, we can use frames that are consistent with counter-stereotypes and achieving gender equity goals.

In other words, in order to achieve power, **our brains need to have a schema or category of individuals and communities exercising power—not only schema of us as embattled.** We need images, stories, and information about women, non-binary, and transgender people of all races, ethnicities, and class

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statuses exercising power and displaying their authentic and complexly lived realities.

Utilizing the “repeat exposure effect,” content creators in the advocacy world or elsewhere can repeatedly expose people to images and information about women active in political and leadership spaces, exercising power effectively, with positive outcomes. The research suggests that repeat exposure will lead to more favorable responses to the *idea* of women in positions of power and leadership, and more positive impressions of women seeking power and leadership (Eidelman & Crandall 2012).

Similarly, the “truth effect” would suggest that rather than repeatedly presenting information about women as under-represented, disempowered, and beset by obstacles, content creators would be effective in repeatedly providing information about women who are effectively exercising power in politics and the workplace. Regular exposure to information about women engaged in leadership will be more readily experienced as “true”—in place of the perceived “truth” that women are unelectable and unsuccessful in positions of power.

V. POWER FRAMING IN ACTION

The concern we raise is that research suggests that deficit and disparities-influenced thinking and communication poses internal and external risks for the gender equity movement. Externally, the desire to generate moral urgency by means of overemphasizing disparities in outcomes may serve to reinforce stereotypes; internally, deficit-informed stereotypes lead to direct mental and

Our argument is that if we do not begin to reimagine affirmatively-framed routes to and effects of women's power, we can't reasonably expect to get to a place of gender equality in terms of power.

emotional harm for women across lines of identity difference. Some would argue that if we don't lead with the harms and obstacles that women—particularly women of color—are experiencing, we are sugar coating truth and failing to engage in the reality of the current allocation of power and resources. Though we raise the question of whether it isn't also true and real that women—and, frankly, women of color in particular—are exercising power and engaged in leadership in a wide variety of contexts. Our argument

is that if we do not begin to reimagine affirmatively-framed routes to and effects of women's power, we can't reasonably expect to get to a place of gender equality in terms of power.

We also posit that power framing can take different forms depending on the audience. For a radical audience, power framing has been occurring by writers like Brittney Cooper and Rebecca Traister who are among those doing the work

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of advocating for women to reimagine anger as a source of power to enact equity. In her book, *Eloquent Rage: A Black Feminist Discovers Her Superpower*, Cooper makes the case for women, specifically Black women, to step into their power by means of anger—a subversion of the “angry black woman” stereotype trope that in some contexts serves to cap or constrain women’s potential to be upwardly mobile. She writes:

Black women have the right to be mad as hell. We have been dreaming of freedom and carving out spaces for liberation since we arrived on these shores. There is no other group, save Indigenous women, that knows and understands more fully the soul of the American body politic than Black women, whose reproductive and social labor have made the world what it is. This is not mere propaganda. Black women know what it means to love ourselves in a world that hates us. We know what it means to do a whole lot with very little, to “make a dollar out of fifteen cents,” as it were. We know what it means to snatch dignity from the jaws of power and come out standing. We know what it means to face horrific violence and trauma from both our communities and our nation-state and carry on anyway. But we also scream, and cry, and hurt, and mourn, and struggle. We get heartbroken, our feelings get stepped on, our dreams get crushed. We get angry, and we express that anger. We know what it means to feel invisible.

Throughout the book, Cooper utilizes personal narrative and poignant analysis to explain that anger, which she at times describes as “rage,” is a “superpower” because of the convergence of her many identities. Cooper’s perception of rage as a personal superpower to be harnessed subverts the aforementioned frame of black women as angry, which has historically served to invalidate people who are both black and female. In a 2018 opinion piece published in response to Christine Blasey Ford’s testimony to the Senate Judiciary Committee as part of Brett Kavanaugh’s Supreme Court Confirmation Hearing, Rebecca Traister similarly advocated not only for women’s right to the full gamut of emotion, but also to leverage anger as a means of supporting each other across lines of racial difference in the face of oppression. In a sense, Traister posits that anger is an opportunity for coalition building among women and should be used to foster collective power (“Fury is a Political Weapon And Women Need to Wield It,” 2018).

Both writers claim frames that have previously distanced women at the intersection of various identities from power can in fact serve as potential catalysts—to interrupt stereotypic associations that have historically been made and, in Traister’s case, to architect a call to action predicated upon a collective use of anger as power. Through their work, they counter stereotypes about women and power, which is opportune for people across all groups.

CONCLUSION

Women exercise power every day in all domains. Does this mean that women are fully represented in the halls of power and our economy? No. This disjuncture between our aspirations and present day circumstances frequently leads to the disparity and obstacle default in content created about women. We posit that

We posit that "power framing" is a necessary corrective if we are going to move forward rather than confirm the status quo.

"power framing" is a necessary corrective if we are going to move forward rather than confirm the status quo. Power framing will take different forms depending upon the audience. In some instances, it will be representations of women in a variety of leadership positions to frame our reports, analyses, and other written communications.

For other audiences, a power frame will look like rage as a vehicle for catalyzing visions of power. Ultimately, our task is to vividly imagine women, all kinds of women, engaged in collective work directed at solving the immense challenges that face us, from climate change to economic inequality. The societies we co-create are the futures our children will inherit.

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While information about disparities and obstacles is crucial to understanding the challenges, communication strategy using what can be termed “disparity” and “obstacles” framing is inconsistent with research about how our brains process information. Dominant narratives and stereotypes about women as disempowered are unlikely to be upended by information consistent with this narrative and current stereotypes. Instead, research suggests, our brains require “power framing”—counter-stereotypical, positive narratives about women in positions of power in politics and the workplace—for counter-stereotypical attitudes to take hold.

– from the Foreword



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