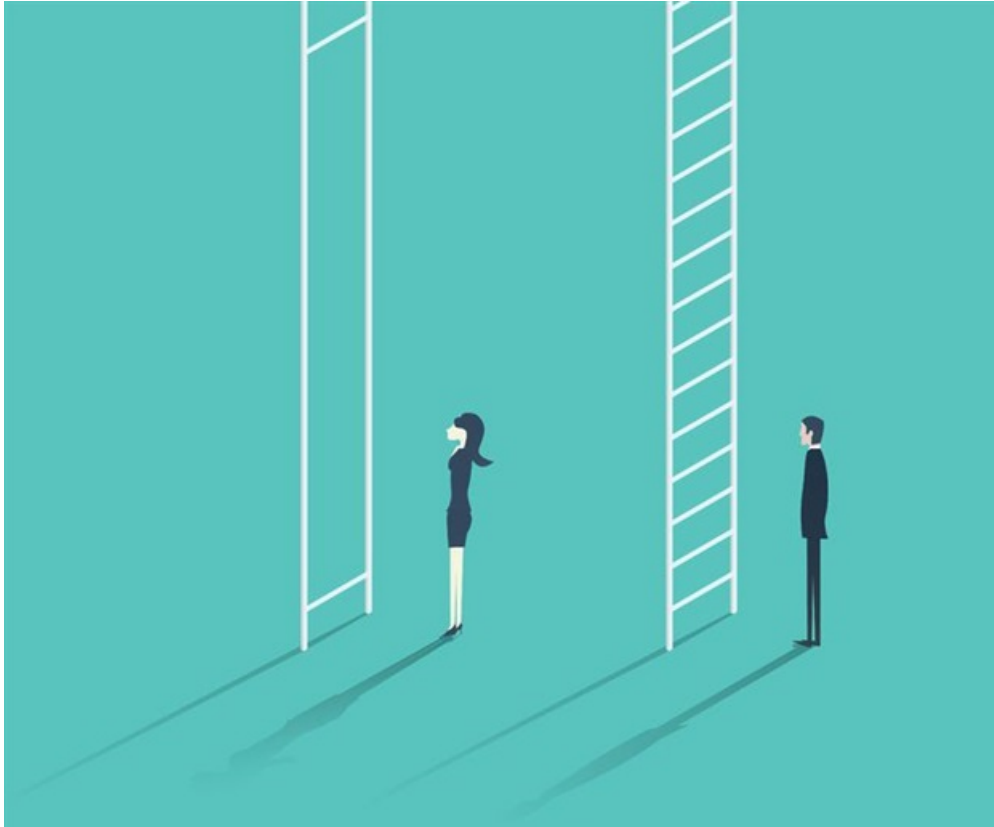


# People who see men and women as fundamentally different are more likely to accept workplace discrimination

By [Cordelia Fine](#) and [Nick Haslam](#)

28 Aug 2018

How should people who care about gender equality in the workplace argue their case? The most popular approach is to make the "business case" argument: that greater inclusion of women enhances profits and performance.



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Unfortunately, the business case argument often draws on a “gender essentialist” view. [This holds](#) that women are fundamentally, immutably and naturally different from men. The inclusion of women benefits the organisation, it suggests, because women bring uniquely female skills and perspectives that complement those of men.

[One company](#) that provides gender diversity leadership training programmes, for example, recommends “learning how to recognise, value, and leverage” the “naturally occurring characteristics that distinguish men and women”.

Our research, published in the journal [PLOS ONE](#), points to some concerning workplace impacts of this inaccurate view of the sexes.

## Mars and Venus

The “men are from Mars, women are from Venus” view of the sexes is [undermined](#) by decades of behavioural science.

Yes, there will be average differences between 100 female board directors and 100 male ones. But these differences don’t add up to create [neat categories](#) of men who think like *this* and women who think like *that*.

We simply can't predict how an individual director will think or lead, based on their sex.

Previous studies [have shown](#) that people who think in essentialist, “interplanetary” ways about gender tend to hold [attitudes](#), [perceptions](#) and [preferences](#) that reinforce the gender status quo. Our research took these investigations in new directions, and our findings have implications for workplace dynamics.

## What did we find?

Led by Danish researcher Lea Skewes, our study began by developing and validating a new measure for assessing gender-essentialist thinking. Our scale captures people's beliefs that gender characteristics are biologically determined, fundamentally dissimilar, fixed, and powerfully predictive of behaviour.

We trialled this new scale in large, nationally representative samples of about 1,800 people in Australia and Denmark.

In both countries, gender essentialists were less supportive of gender equality than non-essentialists. They were less in favour of egalitarian roles in relationships, parenting, work and education.

They were also more supportive of discriminatory workplace practices, and more likely to perceive contemporary workplaces as non-discriminatory.

Interestingly, Australian men thought in a more essentialist way about gender than Australian women, but Danish men and women did not differ.

In both countries, gender essentialism was associated with anti-egalitarian gender attitudes and beliefs, independently of political orientation and general acceptance of social hierarchy.

In other words, gender essentialists don't oppose gender equality simply because they are conservative or generically anti-egalitarian.



## Disobeying gender norms

We also investigated whether gender essentialists would react negatively towards women and men who don't conform to gender norms.

This reaction is known as the “[backlash effect](#)”. We anticipated that people who see gender categories as natural and deep-seated would be especially critical of others who violate gendered expectations.

Sure enough, gender essentialists were especially prone to show backlash. They were more likely than non-essentialists to be outraged by a female political candidate who was described as power-seeking, for example, and by a male candidate who was not.

These results point to the value of research into whether gender-essentialist beliefs are implicated in other forms of gender bias. For example, are gender essentialists particularly [unsympathetic](#) to working fathers who ask for flexible or part-time work? These kinds of questions warrant further investigation.

## What are the implications?

Our findings raise some important questions for human resources practitioners working to reduce gender-based discrimination in organisations. Are programmes that promote the essentialist view that women and men have fundamentally different and complementary skills impeding rather than improving workplace equality? Might programmes that challenge inaccurate gender-essentialist beliefs be more effective than unconscious bias training programmes?

Finally, our findings point to the need for care and accuracy in how arguments for promoting women's leadership are made. Arguing that women have uniquely empathic or collaborative leadership styles could have counterproductive effects on gender attitudes.

We can discuss the benefits of including previously excluded perspectives and experiences without attributing those different standpoints to a timeless, universal womanly essence.

We can recognise gender balance changes group dynamics by altering group norms, not by a simplistic “just add woman” model. Simply dropping female workers into an organisation with a non-inclusive culture will not transform it by pink magic.

And we don’t have to fall back on gender essentialism to argue that institutions led primarily by a homogeneous group will tend to neglect the interests, concerns and needs of other groups.

This article was originally published on [The Conversation](#). Read the [original article](#).

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