



Mean Girls



Paper: “Female Tokens in High-Prestige Work Groups: Catalysts or Inhibitors of Group Diversification?” **Author:** Michelle M. Duguid, Assistant Professor of Organizational Behavior, Olin Business School, Washington University in St. Louis **Published:** *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes Journal*, Vol. 116, No. 1, pages 104–115, September 2011

New research about the way women feel about their female colleagues in the workplace may come as a shock to those who thought male chauvinists were the only ones preventing more women from attaining the upper rungs of the corporate ladder.

According to Michelle Duguid's findings, when a woman is the only female member (referred to as the "token* female") of a high-prestige work group and is asked to vote on another candidate for the group, she is much more likely to choose a male candidate than a female one. The research further suggests that this is likely because the token female feels her value within the group is threatened by the possible female entrant and what the newcomer's credentials represent.

Lone women in higher-status groups may actually perceive other women candidates for their group as a dual threat, according to the new research.

Competitive threat: Another highly qualified woman could prove to be more valuable and potentially overshadow the existing female member of the group.

Collective threat: If the newcomer is less qualified than the incumbent female member of the group, her poor performance could be seen as validating negative stereotypes.

As a result, women in high-prestige work groups may avoid inviting other women into their groups.

"They [the token females] feel like they have a lot at stake, from status, pay, and position," Duguid says.

Women in high-prestige work groups may also be concerned about appearing to favor other women, Duguid suggests in a related paper. But if the favored woman is highly qualified, it gives the existing female member a pedigree she can cite to explain her preference, validating the favoritism.

"Organizational leaders really need to recognize these potential threats," Duguid warns, "as they could have a significant impact on the interaction between female group members, which could ultimately affect performance."

To counteract these biases, Duguid suggests creating external, demographically diverse search committees to integrate high-status groups. She also recommends programs to counteract the negative effects of so few women at upper levels of corporate management and to foster a greater sense of belonging among females in their high-prestige groups.

In sharp contrast, Duguid finds women in low-status groups support each other and feel less threat from their counterparts.

Encouraging or facilitating women's identification with their demographic group may be instrumental in helping them to manage their relationships at work and to develop constructive alliances and mentoring relationships with other women. This proactive approach may not only facilitate further group integration, Duguid concludes, but it may be crucial to organizations' ability to realize the potential benefits associated with diversity.

Duguid's research makes clear that in order for women in high-status roles to be able to support and encourage other women to join them, salient fears and reservations concerning female peers must be understood on a much deeper level and ultimately overcome.

Who's Guarding the Glass Ceiling?



- Results from one of Duguid's studies show that token women who are in the numerical minority of a high-prestige group are the least likely to choose another woman with similar qualifications to join the group.
- When women make up the majority of a high-prestige group they are much more willing to select other qualified women to join their group.
- Women who are in the gender minority or majority of low-prestige groups are very likely to select other qualified women to join their group.

* Tokens are members of a demographic category that is significantly underrepresented in a work group