

# Double standard

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A **double standard** is the application of different sets of principles for situations that are, in principle, the same,<sup>[1]</sup> and is often used to describe advantage that is given to one party over another.<sup>[2]</sup> A double-standard arises when two or more people, circumstances, or events are treated differently even though they should be treated the same way.<sup>[3]</sup> Margaret Eichler, author of *The Double Standard: A Feminist Critique of Feminist Social Science*, explains that a double standard “implies that two things which are the same are measured by different standards”.<sup>[4]</sup>

Applying different principles to similar-looking situations may or may not indicate a double standard. In order to distinguish between the application of a double-standard and the valid application of different standards towards circumstances that only *appear* to be the same, several factors must be examined. One is the sameness of those circumstances - what are the parallels between those circumstances, and in what ways do they differ?. Another is the philosophy or belief system informing which principles should be applied to those circumstances. Different standards can be applied to situations that appear similar based on a qualifying truth or fact that, upon closer examination, renders those situations distinct (i.e. a physical reality, a moral obligation etc.). However, if similar-looking situations have been treated according to different principles and there is no truth, fact or principle that distinguishes those situations, then a double standard has been applied.

If correctly identified, a double standard is viewed negatively as it usually indicates the presence of hypocritical, biased and/or unfair attitudes leading to unjust behaviors.

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## Examples and common issues

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### Gender

The role that gender plays in determining people's moral, social, political, and legal contexts has been long-debated and often controversial. Some believe that differences in the way men and women are perceived and treated is a function of social and environmental norms, thus indicating a double standard. One frequently discussed issue concerns the claim that a double standard exists in society's judgment of women's and men's sexual conduct. Research has found that casual sexual activity is regarded as more acceptable for men than for women.<sup>[5]</sup> Other research contends that women are held to stricter standards of competency than men, as shown

in studies involving the completion of perceptual tasks.<sup>[6]</sup> According to some, double standards between men and women can potentially exist with regards to dating, cohabitation, virginity, marriage/remarriage, sexual abuse/assault/harassment, domestic violence, and singleness.

## The Law

A double standard may arise if two or more groups who have equal rights under the law are given different degrees or legal protection or representation. Such double standards are seen as unjustified because they violate a basic maxim of modern legal jurisprudence to which many countries claim to adhere - that all parties should stand equal before the law. A double standard can therefore be described as a biased or morally unfair application of that maxim. Where judges and leaders are expected to be impartial (such as in a court of law), they are expected to apply the same standards to all people regardless of their own subjective biases or favoritism based on social class, rank, ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation, age, or other distinctions.

## Politics

A double standard arises in politics when the treatment of the same political matters between two or more parties (such as the response to a public crisis or the allocation of funding) is handled differently. This could occur because of the nature of political relationships between those tasked with these matters, the degree of reward or power that stands to be gained/lost, or the personal biases/prejudices of politicians. Double standard policies can include situations when the assessment of the same phenomenon, process or event in the international relations depends on character of the relations of the estimating parties with assessment objects. At identical filling of action of one country get support and a justification, and other – is condemned and punished.

The following phrase became an example of policy of double standards: "One man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter",<sup>[7]</sup> entered into use by the British writer Gerald Seymour in his work *Harry's Game* in 1975.

## Ethnicity

Double standards exist when people are preferred or rejected on the basis of their ethnicity in situations in which ethnicity is not a relevant or justifiable factor for discrimination (as might be the case for a cultural performance or ethnic ceremony).

Ironically, the intentional efforts of some people to counteract racism and ethnic double standards can sometimes be interpreted by others as actually perpetuating racism and double standards among ethnic groups. Writing for The American Conservative, Rob Dreher recounts the true story of Coleman Hughes, a black student at Columbia University, who was given an opportunity to play in a backup band for Grammy-award-winning pop artist, Rihanna, at the 2016 MTV Video Music Awards Show. According to Hughes, several of his friends were also invited, however, one of them was fired and replaced because his white Hispanic background did not suit the all-black aesthetic that Rihanna's team had chosen for her show. The team had decided that all performers on stage were to be black, aside from Rihanna's regular guitar player.<sup>[8]</sup>

Hughes was uncertain about whether he believed this action was unethical, given that the show was racially themed to begin with. He observed what he believed to be a double standard in the entertainment industry, saying, "if a black musician had been fired in order to achieve an all-white aesthetic — it would have made front page headlines. It would have been seen as an unambiguous moral infraction." Hughes's observations highlight the difficulty many people have in distinguishing between the exclusion of one ethnic group in order to celebrate another, and the exclusion of an ethnic group as the exercise of racism or a double standard. In the same article, another incident was discussed in which New York Times columnist Bari Weiss, a young Jewish woman, was

heavily criticized for tweeting, "Immigrants: They get the job done," in a positive reference to Mirai Nagasu, a Japanese-American Olympic ice skater, who Weiss was trying to honor. The public debate about ethnicity and double standards remains controversial and, by all appearances, will continue to be a subject of public debate.

## Causes and explanations

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Double standards are believed to develop in people's minds for a multitude of possible reasons including: finding an excuse for oneself, emotions clouding judgement, twisting facts to support beliefs such as confirmation biases, cognitive biases, attraction biases, prejudices, or the desire to be right. Human beings have a tendency to evaluate the actions of the people they interact with based on who did them.

In a study conducted in 2000, Dr. Martha Foschi observed the application of double standards in group competency tests. She concluded that status characteristics, such as gender, ethnicity and socioeconomic class, can provide a basis for the formation of double standards in which stricter standards are applied to people who are perceived to be in a "lower" status. Dr. Foschi also noted the ways in double standards can form based on other socially valued attributes such as beauty, morality, and mental health.<sup>[9]</sup>

Dr. Tristan Botelho and Dr. Mabel Abraham, Assistant Professors at the Yale School of Management and Columbia Business School, studied the effect that gender has on the way people rank others in the financial market setting. Their research showed that average-quality men were given the benefit of the doubt more than average-quality women, who were more often "penalized" in people's judgments. Botelho and Abraham also proved that women and men are similarly risk-loving, contrary to popular belief. Altogether, their research showed that double standards (at least in the financial market setting) do exist with regards to gender. They encourage the adoption of controls to eliminate gender bias in application, hiring, and evaluation processes within organizations. Examples of such controls include using only initials on applications so that applicants' genders are not apparent, or auditioning musicians from behind a screen so that their skills, and not their gender, influence their acceptance or rejection into orchestras.<sup>[10]</sup> Practices like these are, according to Botelho and Abraham, already being implemented in a number of organizations.

## See also

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- Discrimination
- Double bind
- Doublethink
- Golden rule/ethic of reciprocity
- Hypocrisy
- *Quod licet Iovi, non licet bovi*
- Psychological projection
- Reciprocity (social and political philosophy)

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