



# The (Continuous) Nature of Perceived Gender Counter-Stereotype: A Threshold Model of Gender Stereotype Maintenance

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## Abstract

People often expect men and women to look, act, and think like typical members of their gender groups. When men and women deviate from gender-stereotypical expectations across various domains, people tend to denigrate them, compared to those who follow stereotypical expectations. This derogatory attitude—termed the *backlash effect*—has been well supported by psychological research. However, previous studies on the backlash effect have often neglected the fact that men and women can be counter-stereotypical of their gender groups, to varying degrees. This research tried to address this continuous nature of counter-stereotypical characteristics in various domains using six experiments to evaluate individual responses to gendered facial cues, behaviors, and psychological traits. We conducted three studies, with two experiments per study. Most importantly, this research proposed a threshold model of gender stereotype maintenance to explain people's evaluations of gender-counter-stereotypical targets across various domains. The threshold model suggested that appraisal for a target with balanced gender-stereotypical and gender-counter-stereotypical characteristics tends to be more positive than for a target who strictly adheres to gender stereotypes or gender-counter-stereotypical characteristics. The results of all three studies supported the threshold model, which demonstrated a curvilinear pattern of participants' appraisals and targets' gender-counter-stereotypical degrees. The threshold model of stereotype maintenance has enriched the traditional stereotype maintenance theory and enlightened the development of a more effective impression management strategy. Moreover, it provided more ecological validity that treated gender counter-stereotype as a continuum rather than a binary variable.

**Keywords** Gender perception · Gender role · Gender identity · Counter-stereotypes · Backlash effects

## Introduction

When men and women are not gender-stereotypical—for example, when women are too assertive and agentic (Heilman & Okimoto, 2007) or men are too modest and self-effacing (Moss-Racusin, Phelan, & Rudman, 2010)—perceivers have been shown to dislike them much more than they may have otherwise (for reviews, see Eagly & Karau, 2002; Rudman & Phelan, 2008). Based on the motivation to maintain one's

cognitive mindset (i.e., stereotype), this is often referred to as the *backlash effect* and can have consequences for the targets of such perceptions (Rudman, 1998; Rudman & Fairchild, 2004). For example, perceivers often regard women who demonstrate high levels of agency (i.e., highly determination or ambitious) as interpersonally deficient (Rudman & Glick, 1999), insufficiently nice (Brescoll, Dawson, & Uhlmann, 2010), and less likable than women who exhibit communal traits (i.e., very considerate and taking care of others; Brescoll, Dawson, & Uhlmann, 2010; Heilman, Wallen, Fuchs, & Tamkins, 2004). Put simply, perceivers tend to believe that men and women should fit the stereotypes assigned to their genders (Fiske & Stevens, 1993; Zuo & Liu, 2006). When men and women deviate from these gendered expectations—either by presenting a gender counter-stereotype (GCS) traits or by engaging GCS behaviors—they often pay a penalty (Moss-Racusin, 2014; Rudman, Moss-Racusin, Glick, & Phelan, 2012a). For example, fathers who bring up babies at home are more negatively evaluated than traditional fathers (Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2005),

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