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The Upshot

When Teamwork Doesn't Work for Women

Economic View

By JUSTIN WOLFERS JAN. 8, 2016

Economics remains a stubbornly male-dominated profession, a fact that members of the profession have struggled to understand.

After all, if the marketplace of ideas is meant to ensure that the best ideas thrive, then this imbalance should arise only if men have better ideas than women. That implication infuriates many female economists. Now new evidence suggests that the underrepresentation of women reflects a systemic bias in that marketplace: a failure to give women full credit for collaborative work done with men.

At least that is the conclusion of research by Heather Sarsons, a brilliant young economist currently completing her dissertation at Harvard. And it is a pattern that may explain why women struggle to get ahead in other professions involving teamwork.

Ms. Sarsons compiled data on the publication records of young economists recruited by top universities in the United States over the last 40 years. The career path for economists — as in most academic fields — is largely organized around tenure. It is called "publish or perish," because once young economists are hired, they have seven years to be either promoted and offered a job for life or fired. Her findings are documented in a working paper, "Gender Differences in Recognition for Group Work," that has generated a lot of buzz among economists.

While women in the field publish as much as men, they are twice as likely to perish. And this higher rate for women being denied tenure persists even after accounting for differences in tenure rates across universities, the different subfields of economics that women work in, the quality of their publications and other influences that may have changed over time.

But Ms. Sarsons discovered one group of female economists who enjoyed the same career success as men: those who work alone. Specifically, she says that "women who solo author everything have roughly the same chance of receiving tenure as a man." So any gender differences must be because of the differential treatment of men and women who work collaboratively.

Here is where it gets interesting. When an economist writes a paper on her own, there is no question about who deserves the credit. Each additional solo research paper raises the probability of getting tenure by about 8 or 9 percent, she calculated. The career benefit from publishing a solo paper is about the same for women as it is for men. But unlike women, men also get just as much credit for collaborative research, and there is no statistical difference in the career prospects of authors of individually written papers and those of papers written as part of a research team.

Unfortunately for women, research done with a co-author counts far less. When women write with co-authors, the benefit to their career prospects is much less than half that accorded to men. This really matters, because most economic research is done with co-authors.

The story seems to be that when Janet writes with George, her colleagues infer that George deserves the credit. That might be a reasonable inference if women were more likely to join research collaborations as the junior partner, but in fact Ms. Sarsons finds that they are less likely to do this.

Digging deeper, Ms. Sarsons assessed how credit was attributed for work done in different types of research teams. Men get about the same degree of credit for research with a co-author, whether it is written with other men, other women or both. (The exact numbers vary a little, but in a way that may just reflect statistical noise.)

It couldn't be more different for women. When women write with men, their tenure prospects don't improve at all. That is, women get essentially zero credit for the collaborative work with men. Papers written by women in collaboration with both a male and female co-author yield partial credit. It is only when women write with other women that they are given full credit. These differences are statistically significant.

The numbers tell a compelling story of men getting the credit, whenever there is any ambiguity about who deserves credit for work performed in teams.

And this is a very big deal: The bias that Ms. Sarsons documents is so large that it may account on its own for another statistic: Female economists are twice as likely to be denied tenure as their male colleagues.

This rather extraordinary finding resonates with my own experience. My most frequent collaborator has been a woman (Betsey Stevenson, an associate professor at the Ford School of Public Policy at the University of Michigan, who is also my romantic partner). For years, I've benefited from colleagues giving me the "big half" of the credit for our joint work. In some cases, they have been explicit about this. But I know what they don't: That work was a true partnership, the result of countless late nights crunching numbers. And their misattribution occurred despite the fact that we were working in a traditionally feminized field, assessing changes in family life.

Many female economists have shared with me their experiences of research being taken less seriously simply because it was written by a woman. The great economic historian Deirdre McCloskey, a distinguished professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago, has a unique perspective on all of this, having spent the first half of her career as the male economist Donald McCloskey. Today, she reports that it is quite common for her colleagues not to acknowledge a point she has made until it is reinforced by another male economist. That rarely happened when she was Donald.

Interestingly, Ms. Sarsons has performed a parallel analysis of the field of sociology. In contrast to economics, there are no discernible differences in how men and women are given credit for joint work. One possible reason for this happier finding is that sociologists explicitly describe who deserves the most credit in a collaboration, by listing that person as the first author. This explicit attribution eliminates the need to make inferences, reducing the scope for sexist judgments. By contrast, economists list authors alphabetically, and the ensuing ambiguity may give greater space for sexist stereotypes to express themselves. Another possibility is that sociologists, many more of whom are women, are simply less sexist than economists.

In a recent column, I documented the tendency of the news media to attribute credit to male economists over their female co-authors. It now appears that the same bias arises when economists assess one another's work.

As for Ms. Sarsons, a young economist who will have to navigate this thicket, she is taking her own advice. Her paper begins by saying, "This paper is intentionally solo-authored." It is the only way to be sure that she gets credit for this very important work.

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