

Economic Policy
Why men get all the credit when they work with women
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By Jeff Guo
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Janet Yellen, Chair of the Federal Reserve, is married to Georgetown economist George Akerlof. In economist power couples, the women often get slighted by the press. (Daniel Aker/Bloomberg)



When Princeton professor Angus Deaton co-authored a buzzed-about report this month on dying middle-aged whites, many journalists munged the order of the names. They mentioned Deaton first, as if it were mainly his paper, and not an equal collaboration with his wife.

There we go again.

Her name is Anne Case, and her name [came first on the study](#). She's a widely-respected professor of economics and public affairs at Princeton. But apparently, Case's sterling credentials are no match for our unconscious biases.

The press might be forgiven for fixating on Angus Deaton, who won a Nobel Prize last month. But, as economist Justin Wolfers [pointed out](#) on Wednesday, the media has a nasty habit of treating female economists like second-class citizens. He noted several recent examples of journalists leaving women's names as an afterthought.

Academics can be very sensitive about who receives credit for joint papers. In economics, there's a convention that names on a paper go alphabetically, and collaborators contribute roughly the same amount of work. So, "Anne Case and Angus Deaton," not the other way around. To switch the names would be unusual; it would imply that Deaton did the lion's share of the work.

Wolfers blames gender stereotypes for spurring these (likely accidental) slights. "Close your eyes for a moment, and picture an economist," he [writes](#). "Odds are you pictured a man."

But the bias is not just a failing of the press; economists themselves seem to systematically undervalue women's contributions to group work.

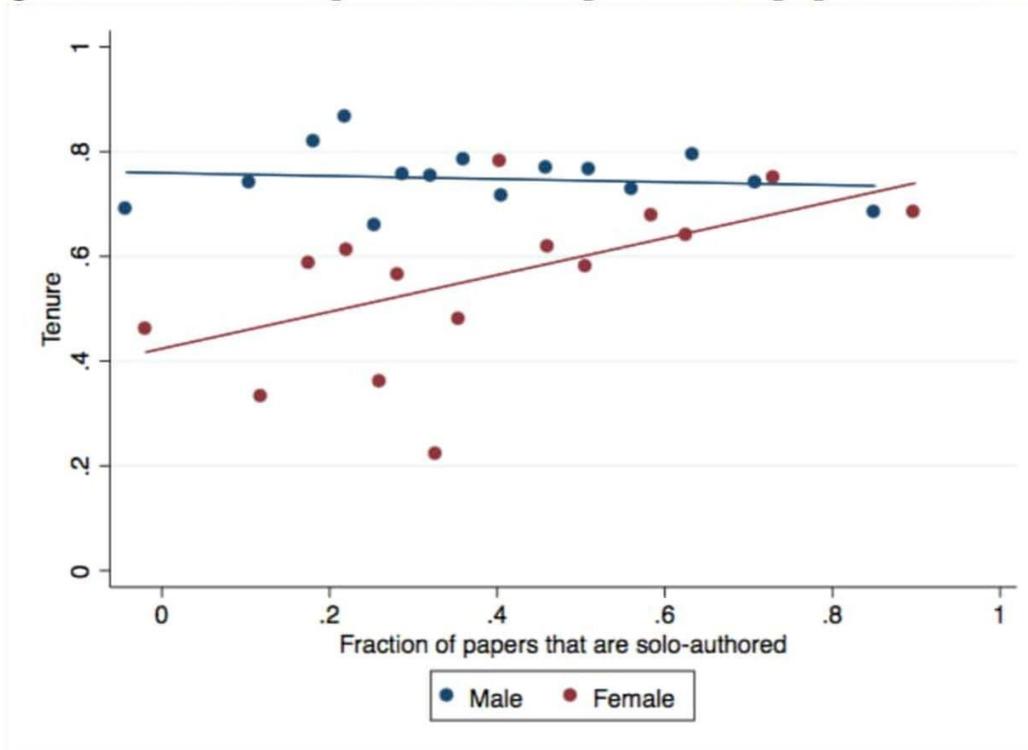
Heather Sarsons, a PhD candidate in economics at Harvard, recently compiled four decades of records on over 500 tenure decisions at the top 30 economics schools in the nation. During the tenure process at a university, young professors race to do as much research as possible to prove they deserve a permanent position on the faculty. The number of papers they publish in journals is one important measure of their performance.

According to Sarson's preliminary results, it doesn't affect a male economist's chances at tenure if he publishes papers on his own, or with collaborators. But female economists are punished if they co-author.

"When it's not clear who did the work, or who had the idea behind something, men seem to get more credit," Sarsons says.

In this chart from her paper, she shows that male economists get tenure about 75 percent of the time, regardless of whether they wrote most of their papers in groups, or solo. But women who co-author most of their papers only get tenure about 50 percent of the time. In contrast, women who solo-author most of their papers get tenure at about the same rate as men.

Figure 1: Relationship between composition of papers and tenure



"While an additional coauthored paper increases the probability of receiving tenure," Sarsons writes in the paper, "it helps a man more than it helps a woman."

As further evidence that men are receiving credit for women's contributions, Sarsons shows that the penalty for co-authorship only exists when women work with men. When women work on a paper exclusively with other women, that penalty disappears. When men and women collaborate, however, men seem to soak up all the credit from the women.

One simple way to clear up any misunderstandings is to order the names according to who did the most work. That's the convention in most fields, including sociology, which Sarsons also analyzed for her study. The work is still in progress, but so far, Sarsons finds that there is no co-authorship penalty for women in sociology. It's possible that sociology, which has many more women than economics, is simply less biased. But it's also likely no coincidence that sociology papers clearly indicate who gets more credit.

In economics papers, the ambiguity about credit that seems to offer fertile ground for unconscious (or conscious) bias -- sometimes with less provocative implications. This has led to another weird phenomenon — economists with names that are earlier in the alphabet tend to be [over-represented](#) at top economics departments, and they are more likely to win prestigious prizes, according to economists Liran Einav and Leeat Yariv. At the top 5 economics departments, having a name one letter closer to the start of the alphabet makes you one percent more likely to get tenure.

By dint of orthography, these early-alphabet names are the ones most likely to be listed first on a paper. Even though being the first author is meaningless in economics, there do exist some benefits. It's the first author whose name shows up in indexes and bibliographies. In the interest of brevity, journalists often mention a paper by the name of the first author only. Einav and Yariv point out that the pattern of alphabetical advantage doesn't exist in psychology, where authors are listed by size of their contributions.

Bias, in other words, shows up in the darnedest places. But economics is particularly notorious among the social sciences for being less than hospitable to women. From the very start, women are less likely to major in economics, which may have something to do with the way the subject is taught. "It's something systemic to the field," Harvard economist Claudia Goldin [said to](#) the Richmond Fed's magazine in 2013. Women are subsequently [less likely](#) to get tenure, and less likely to get promoted to full professor.

Sarsons's research may explain some of the disparities in economics by pointing out another way that women may be discriminated against. The idea is broader than that, though. Whenever women work in groups with men, it's possible that their contributions might be discounted.

The funny thing is that research shows women make groupwork [a lot more efficient](#), in part because they're on average better at reading people's emotions. Women also [tend to prefer](#) working collaboratively. Yet, for all their contributions to the team, experiments [also show](#) that women are less likely to and claim their rightful share of the credit, particularly when their teammates are men.

Economics offers a real-world example of what happens when it's unclear who gets credit for what. People assume — and women seem to lose out.

Right now, Sarsons is surveying female economists to find out if they have personally noticed this phenomenon, and if they have become wary of working with men as a result. In her own paper, Sarsons seems to have taken the lesson to heart.

"This paper is intentionally solo-authored," she writes in a footnote.

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Jeff Guo was a reporter covering economics, domestic policy and everything empirical. He left The Washington Post in April 2017.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2015/11/13/why-men-get-all-the-credit-when-they-work-with-women/?wpisrc=nl_wonk&wpmm=1