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The Challenge of Effective Interventions
THE CHALLENGE OF EFFECTIVE INTERVENTIONS:
Alternative Paths to Minimizing Workplace Gender Bias

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The Interdisciplinary Turn
I've been invited to speak on what we have learned from social science research on gender and work regarding the kinds of workplace interventions that erode discriminatory barriers and facilitate the advancement of women. When I first started working in this area, more than three decades ago, there was hardly any interdisciplinary dialogue among scholars who study workplace gender bias. To organizational sociologists like me, the labor market economists (Gary Becker and his entourage of "new home economists") owned the null hypothesis: gender differences in workplace outcomes were due to market forces and the rational choices of men and women seeking to maximize household well being. Our job was to show that there was more to the story — organizational and social context matters. When we came across Rosabeth Moss Kanter’s Men and Women of the Corporation, published in 1977 but (times being what they were) not appearing on our syllabi for a couple of more years, we discovered that social cognition and stereotyping were useful concepts for understanding why sex ratios matter. But we didn’t venture any further into the field of psychology, and the feminist insights of Joan Acker about “gendered organizations” were still a decade away. Those were intellectually lonely days for organizational sociologists who cared about gender and work.

But times have changed. For interesting reasons that I won’t go into here, it was scholars at professional schools of law and business who facilitated genuine interdisciplinary dialogue (and even some authentic interdisciplinary research) on workplace gender and racial bias. Ironically, and to the great satisfaction of many of us, neoclassical economists have been marginalized (pun intended) in serious social science dialogue about workplace gender bias. And these days, organizational and management scholars follow the latest research on the neurological basis for implicit associations, while cognitive psychologists are remarkably up to date on studies of decoupled organizational systems and symbolic management. Symposia like this one are increasingly common and are important venues for developing new connections across disciplines, although this one is rather unique in its focus on offering lessons for practitioners. To date, it has been in the realm of discrimination litigation where the “real-world” implications of our scholarship have been played out most concretely. But when it comes to using our knowledge to provide a sound scientific basis to guide organizational interventions to minimize discrimination—not so much. With our voices largely absent from discourse about effective interventions, business journalists (and diversity consultants) are more than happy to speak for us. And when they do, they often create the misleading impression that workplace gender bias is easy to fix because (1) it’s all in our heads; and (2) time is on our side.

Isn’t It All in Our Heads?
Under the headline “Study Suggests Fix for Gender Bias on the Job” Wall Street Journal reporter Rachel Emma Silverman wrote:

“Researchers say they have found an effective fix for gender discrimination in promotion and job assignments. The solution: Consider several candidates for a position at the same time rather than individually.”

This spectacular overstatement of the conclusions of a sound (but unpublished) experimental study from Harvard’s Kennedy School (Bohnet, van Geen & Bazerman, 2012) is typical of what appears routinely in the business press. On the one hand, a few sentences are devoted to the way cognitive bias could operate here — when forced to explicitly compare individuals decision-makers are more likely to attend to specific qualifications rather than group stereotypes. On the other hand, the Journal’s coverage leaves the impression that combatting gender bias at work is simply a matter of countering unfortunate habits of the mind that can be easily remedied by either changing our thought processes or taking simple steps to modify the context so that stereotypes will not affect decisions.

But a careful reading of the research on cognitive bias and implicit associations shows that even minimizing the impact of unconscious bias is extremely difficult. In a forthcoming review paper on how to reduce implicit prejudice, Calvin Lai, Kelly Hoffman, and Brian Nosek (2013) reach the conclusion that “compared to the identification of mechanisms, much less is known about the effectiveness of interventions to reduce implicit prejudice.” Anthony Greenwald, Mahzarin Banaji, and others who did the pioneering work on the Implicit Association Test (IAT) at first believed that implicit stereotypical associations were deeply held and difficult to change. Subsequent work by their students seemed to suggest that simple exposure to counter-stereotypical associations (e.g. images of women in traditionally male occupations or African Americans in professional jobs) was sufficient to alter associations and significantly reduce unconscious bias. But as Banaji and Greenwald note in their new book Blinder: Hidden Biases of Good People (2013), they now recognize that those associations, while malleable, are “elastic.” Associations modified by exposure to counter-stereotypical ones “soon return to their earlier configuration” (p. 152; also see Lai et al., 2013).

In a way, Greenwald, Banaji, and their associates have been almost been too successful in making their science accessible to practitioners. At least that’s the way it seems to those of us who work at the intersection of organizations and social institutions. Journalists, advocates for equal employment opportunity, diversity consultants, and enlightened managers readily accept the idea that workplace bias is attributable to cognitive errors by well-intentioned people. But to many, the idea that workplace gender bias is embedded in organizations and social institutions is nearly unfathomable.

If the problem is in our heads, the intervention that is going to make sense to practitioners is one that changes people’s minds. Yet we have very good evidence that diversity training is rarely effective and often does more harm than good (Kalev, Dobbin & Kelly, 2006, Uhlmann & Cohen, 2007, Bendick & Nunes, 2012). And, in fact, the IAT researchers often advocate organizational interventions, ranging from completely removing race and gender from the decision-making process when feasible (as in blind orchestra auditions) to reducing subjectivity and discretion in the criteria for making decisions about hiring, promotion, job assignment etc. and establishing oversight and accountability for adhering to objective standards (Lai et al., 2013, Banaji & Greenwald, 2013).
Still, Isn’t Time On Our Side?

When it comes to gender discrimination, isn’t the momentum already in the right direction? Women now surpass men in college graduation rates, the gender gap in both employment and wages has declined dramatically since the 1960s, women have made substantial inroads into medicine, management, law, and other professions, and so on (Cotter, Hermse, & Vanneman, 2004). At all levels of schooling, girls and women are more engaged and perform better than boys and men (DiPrete & Buchmann, 2013). Young men who perceive that they are advantaged in the market for jobs that do not require a college degree under-invest in higher education compared to women, and as a result they should be unable to remain competitive relative to their female counterparts in a job market that increasingly demands the skills and credentials acquired at colleges and universities (DiPrete & Buchmann, 2013; Dwyer, Hodson & McCloud, 2013). Women’s increasing representation in professional and managerial jobs should be undermining stereotypes, signaling organizational commitment to gender equity, and creating powerful advocates and allies for women who aspire to join their ranks (Skaggs, Stainback & Duncan, 2012). So it would seem that there is a substantial tailwind on the path to workplace gender equity, created by these larger social and economic forces. Add to this our sophisticated understanding of the forces that create and sustain workplace gender bias, and one is tempted to conclude that devising and implementing effective interventions should be a relatively straightforward task: undo the bad stuff, do more of the good stuff, and let history run its course.

It Doesn’t Come Easy

It might look that easy to David Brooks, Hanna Rosin, and some folks over at the Manhattan Institute, but in reality? If only it were so easy. As Philip Cohen put it recently in his review of Liza Munday’s The Richer Sex and Hanna Rosin’s The End of Men, “ostensibly gender-neutral processes of economic transformation are not the sources of women’s progress they once were” (Cohen, 2013). Nowhere is this more apparent than in trends in occupational sex segregation. Progress toward gender integration, which proceeded at a rapid pace following passage of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, declined in the 1980s and stalled by the turn of the century (Cotter, Hermse, & Vanneman, 2012). As Cotter et al. and others have observed, the early gains came about mainly from the movement of women into middle-class occupations and to a lesser extent from the expansion of more integrated sectors and the shrinkage of segregated ones (especially manufacturing). In a way, those were the easy gains. Future significant gains will require some combination of movement of women into traditionally male blue-collar jobs and movement of men into traditionally female jobs, “neither of which had witnessed much occupational integration even during the heyday of the 1970s through 1980s” (Cotter et al., 2012, p. 33).

Under the optimistic scenario I sketched above we would expect occupational segregation by sex to decline steadily, to do so more or less uniformly across sectors of the economy, and to have similar trends for whites and nonwhites. But that’s not the case. For example, in their recent book Documenting Segregation, Kevin Stainback and Donald Tomaskovic-Devey (2012) show that for African Americans progress toward gender integration had stalled by the 1980s, and that between 1990 and 2005 occupational segregation between white and African American women increased in 43% of industrial categories. Clearly, something else is going on here.

Moreover, recent research shows that gender integration of high-level jobs does not automatically open opportunities for other women to advance to management ranks, again contrary to the logic laid out above. In a recent study of Fortune 1000 companies, Sheryl Skaggs, Kevin Stainback, and Phyllis Duncan (2012) examined whether women’s representation on corporate boards and in executive positions is associated with gains in women’s representation in management in companies’ establishments. They found that women’s representation in management at the establishment level is not affected by the presence of women among the parent company’s executives, but it is related to corporate board representation of women. Their results are consistent with another study by Stainback and Soyoung Kwon (2011), based on data from a national sample of organizations in South Korea. They found that greater representation of women in management was associated with lower occupational segregation by sex, but the representation of women among supervisors was associated with higher levels of segregation. The lesson seems to be that while numbers matter, hierarchy matters even more. It is only when women occupy positions of substantial power and influence in more than trivial numbers that they are able to shape the company’s overall stance toward gender equity in a way that results in meaningful progress.

So one of my bottom-line conclusions is that what creates and sustains gender bias in the workplace is not all in our heads, nor is it mostly about the cognitive errors of well-intentioned managers and supervisors who want to do the right thing if only we would give them the training that tells them what that might be. It is fundamentally about how we structure organizations and how we structure work (a point James Baron and I have been emphasizing for over three decades) and about the degree to which the everyday practice of hiring, assigning, developing, training, and promoting men and women is tightly or loosely coupled with what companies claim are their policies and practices regarding antidiscrimination and diversity.

But a lot of very good research published in the last ten years suggests that effective intervention is about more than just accountability structures and the organization of work. Drawing on this small but growing body of work on “organizational logics,” on my own research, and on the insights I’ve gained from participating in class action discrimination litigation, I’ve come to understand that it is also about something that might be called “management regimes” — bundles of practices, routines, understandings, and values that define how organizations approach their commitments and obligations to nondiscrimination and diversity.

Beyond Structure, Cognition, and “One Size Fits All” Interventions – Where is the Future for Effective Workplace Antidiscrimination Efforts?

I’ve already alluded to a point of convergence between the psychological “cognitivists” and the sociological “institutionalists” – what we might call the “formalist” intervention. It is the intervention of constraining subjectivity and discretion, establishing clear guidelines and criteria for making personnel decisions, and implementing structures that establish oversight and accountability for both the process used to make personnel decisions and for diversity outcomes. My first public writing on this approach to minimizing workplace bias was thirteen years ago (Bielby, 2000), back when notions of unconscious bias had barely spread out of disciplinary circles in psychology, and a few years before organizational sociologists who study gender inequality began embracing the “cognitive turn.” The important work done since then by the cognitive psychologists on implicit associations and by neo-institutional sociologists on decoupling and symbolic responses to legal environments provides an even firmer empirical foundation for the scientific concepts that provide the rationale for the formalist intervention.

Moreover, in the past decade the formalist intervention has come to be viewed as appropriate and legitimate in large segments of the business world and the human resources profession. Fifteen years ago, when in litigation contexts I would recommend this kind of intervention as a remedy for gender or race discrimination, the typical response would be something along the lines of “this harebrained scheme was dreamed up by the hippie ivory tower academic who wants to turn our company into the DMV.” Today, this collection of human resources practices is packaged as “talent management systems” and embraced by much of the corporate world as a nimble and efficient way of managing a workforce. Moreover, in more enlightened corporate circles it is also recognized as “best practice” for minimizing bias. The Complex Discrimination
Practice Group of the law firm Seyfarth and Shaw made a presentation to the firm's corporate clients a few days after the Supreme Court’s decision in the Dukes v. Wal-Mart class action gender discrimination case. The message of the group’s presentation was that even though the Court ruled that subjectivity and discretion undermine the class claims of the women working for the company, the exercise of subjective judgment in making personnel decisions needs to be done in the context of clear criteria, oversight, and accountability for diversity and equal employment opportunity. Seyfarth stressed that these practices were essential for minimizing discrimination and for motivating and retaining a talented, diverse workforce.

I’d like to think that corporate HR professionals and the attorneys who serve them are aware of and accept the social scientific underpinnings of these kinds of diversity and anti-discrimination interventions. To some extent this seems to be the case. For example, the Society for Human Resource Management has a panel developing diversity metrics, and their deliberations have included substantive input from psychologists, organizational sociologists, and labor economists (Bendick and Nunes, 2012). And the research by Kalev, Dobbins, and Kelly on the limits of diversity training, originally dismissed out of hand by professional diversity consultants, is now encouraging some practitioners to become knowledgeable about the relevant social science in order to reformulate the tools they offer to their corporate clients. But at least in part, probably in large part, it’s the same old story. Facing an uncertain and ambiguous landscape regarding what’s required under the law, uncertain about what’s acceptable to constituencies inside and outside the organization, and compelled to do something, companies simply adopt what others are doing in their industry and hope for the best. Or at least hope to stay out of trouble.

And while it may be reassuring to find some common ground between the psychological cognitivists and the sociological institutionalists, I am concerned that we risk generating a “one size fits all” consensus on effective intervention strategies that ignores very real differences across organizations and industries in what some scholars call “organizational logics” (Acker, 1990), “managerial regimes” (Vallas, 2003) or “cultural blueprints” (Baron, Hannan, Hsu, & Kocak, 2007). In the field of gender and work, the concept of organizational logic -- “the assumptions and practices that construct most contemporary work organizations” -- was introduced by Joan Acker (1990, p. 144) to make the argument that the facially gender-neutral rational-technical ethos of hierarchical organizations masks an organizational social order that is fundamentally gendered. Christine Williams and coauthors (Williams, Muller, & Kilanski, 2012) argue that a new logic is ascendant in the “new economy” in which formalization, standardization, and hierarchical control are replaced by collaboration, teamwork, decentralized decision-making, and networked social organization that has equally profound implications for how gender is built into organizational arrangements. This line of scholarship suggests that logics or blueprints shape how specific practices are understood, so that “the very same organizational practice can mean radically different things depending on the cultural setting” (Baron et al., 2007, p. 40).

This perspective on organizational employment systems suggests that the formalized intervention strategy for constraining subjectivity and establishing oversight and accountability will be more strongly resisted, more difficult to implement, and perhaps even less effective when fully implemented in some organizational contexts than in others. Whether or not one is in complete agreement with the characterization of Williams et al. about a large-scale transformation of the organization of work from a hierarchical to a collaborative/networked logic, it is undeniable that more and more large corporations are embracing “high commitment” management regimes that resist formalization and standardization of human resources practices and vehemently protect managerial discretion. This resistance to formalization naturally extends to interventions designed explicitly to address unlawful discrimination. Usually they are companies in new industries or ones that have introduced new management models into old industries (e.g. Apple in computing and software development, Home Depot and Wal-Mart in retailing). As such, they have no legacy of 20th century “industrial relations”-style employment systems with formalized elements like job descriptions, job postings, pay-grade salary systems and other formal guidelines for pay and promotion. They are also likely to be one step removed from the civil rights/equal employment opportunity/legal compliance origins of corporate antidiscrimination approaches that were invented, implemented, and diffused in the immediate post-Title VII era (Dobbin, 2009). There is little systematic research on this, but in my experience as a practitioner these are companies that tend to embrace a logic that views avoiding unlawful discrimination as a problem of risk management and something that is not integral (or even relevant) to the policies and practices that are put in place regarding “diversity” and “inclusion.” In short, we may have entered an era in which a growing number of companies are unlikely to implement formalistic intervention strategies absent external mandates to do so. Companies like these that nevertheless maintain strong centralized control over their operational activities and promote a culture that emphasizes uniformity in the execution of those activities – Wal-Mart is probably the best example – are likely to have an easier time and meet less resistance from lower-level managers in implementing effective formalistic antidiscrimination interventions than are companies that are highly decentralized and less rule-oriented in both their operational and management/human resources structures.

In the face of steep resistance, an alternative approach is to promote organizational interventions that are not explicitly linked to minimizing bias but which nonetheless have the impact of changing workplace structures, routines, and cultures in a way that promotes gender equity. For example, organizational sociologist Alexandra Kalev (2009; also see Bartlett, 2009) has shown that reorganizing work in a way that flattens authority hierarchies, weakens job boundaries, and promotes cross-functional teams is followed by gains in women’s representa- tion in a company’s management ranks. Although not the explicit goal of this kind of workplace intervention, it is likely to benefit women by increasing intergroup contact, making visible women’s competence and contributions in tasks otherwise stereotypically associated with “men’s work,” promoting a collaborative workplace culture that encourages internal motivation to pursue shared goals (including diversity goals) and opening up networking opportunities not otherwise available in more rigidly structured work contexts.

However, research on “high performance work systems” and “high-commitment human resource management” shows that the costs of moving to these kinds of organizational structures can be substantial, while the benefits to the organization can vary considerably depending on the company’s technology, market, and industrial environment. So, for example, while such restructuring might indeed have positive effects for diversity, it is probably futile to preach about the benefits of collaborative and high performance work systems to a labor-intensive company that competes in its marketplace primarily on cost. Finally, even when companies do embrace collaborative and team-based work structures, the consequences for employees go beyond diversity and are not always positive. They sometimes lead to an intensification of work and increased job stress, and they are often embraced as part of a union-avoidance strategy designed to undermine employees’ ability to pursue collective goals (Capelli and Neumark, 2001; Godard, 2004).

The recent experience at Best Buy Co., Inc. is perhaps a useful cautionary tale. Its highly-publicized Results Only Work Environment (ROWE) was introduced at corporate head- quarters in 2003 as an “adaptive cultural strategy” to change taken-for-granted understandings of “face time” as the implicit metric for judging employees’ productivity and commitment (Moen, Kelly, & Hill, 2011). Employees were allowed to organize work around their personal and home lives so long as they competently completed their work obligations. They would be judged by objective measures of performance rather than time spent in the office. ROWE was not framed as an intervention to accommodate the needs and interests of women and mothers, though it was viewed by the social scientists that evaluated the intervention as an attempt to “change the
masculinized ideal worker norm." According to both press accounts and academic studies, the intervention reduced turnover and job stress and enhanced productivity (Kelly, Ammons, Cher- mack, & Moen, 2010). In short, by all accounts the ROWE program was carefully designed to alter the cultural logic of the organization, and despite pockets of resistance and ambivalence it was viewed as mostly successful and as a model for other companies to follow. But after the company's business prospects dimmed dramatically this past year, the company abruptly put an end to ROWE, with a company spokesperson announcing: "In the context of a business transformation, it makes sense to consider not just what the results are but how the work gets done. It's 'all hands on deck' at Best Buy, and that means having employees in the office as much as possible to collaborate and connect on ways to improve our business" (quoted at money.CNN.com on March 5, 2013). While the sociologists who studied the Best Buy intervention saw it as just the opening salvo in a longer-term effort to institutionalize work-life balance as an alternative to the ideal worker norm, the lesson, at least for now, is something different. The Best Buy experience seems to show that even the most sophisticated interventions, based on nuanced understanding of gender differences and supported by the company, matter little when they clash with top management’s assessments of the bottom-line interests of owners and stockholders.

So my final bottom line is something like this. There is a consensus among psychologists and organizational sociologists about how habits of mind intersect with organizational policies, structures, and practices to create and sustain workplace gender bias. That consensus supports a formalist intervention strategy based on the idea of constraining discretion and establishing oversight and accountability for how personnel decisions are made and for their impact on gender and racial equity in the workplace. But that kind of intervention is easier to advocate, implement, and institutionalize in some organizational contexts than in others. To be successful in the long run requires understanding and taking on “organizational logics”—and here the scientific basis for what we advocate is much more limited. The best work on organizational logics as it relates to workplace gender equity is almost all case study based (like the Best Buy case study). For now the lesson is that “context matters” in a more profound way than many of us have been willing to acknowledge, and until we have a more complete understanding of organizational logics based on systematic, comparative empirical research across companies, our expectations for successful workplace gender equity interventions should be both modest and situationally grounded.

References

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O R G A N I Z A T I O N A L C H A N G E
