

DRAFT: WOMEN AS MEMBERS OF WORK ORGANIZATIONS

Barbara Reskin

Research studies, statistics, and your presence attest to continuing barriers to gender equality at work. Although women have made unprecedented headway in the last 30 years, for many of us it has been like pushing a boulder uphill, with progress costing women enormous personal effort, and outcomes not commensurate with that effort. And the people at the top remain disproportionately male.

But work organizations (hereafter “firms”) vary in the challenges and opportunities they provide for female and minority employees. This variation along with basic research has made it possible for social scientists to increasingly understand what kinds of employment practices are good and bad for equal opportunity at work. It is this topic—how and why employment practices affect women’s opportunity—that I will focus on.

From this discussion I will draw three conclusions:

1. Differential responses to female and male workers are pervasive because they stem from *automatic, nonconscious* cognitive distortions or biases
2. Employers can prevent these automatic biases responses from adversely affecting women workers or members of other stereotyped groups
3. Typically, it takes external incentives to prompt employers to implement mechanisms that check biases

I. Social Cognition Processes and Gatekeepers’ Responses to Women and Men

Let’s begin with an important source of women’s barriers to success. At times it’s a sexist or hostile coworker or supervisor. But far more important are unconscious stereotypes that distort how we view and sometimes how we treat others. I’m not talking about stereotyping that

stems from our conscious beliefs, such as assuming that someone with a youthful or unsophisticated appearance lacks savvy about the world. I'm talking about *automatic* stereotyping which occurs *outside our conscious awareness* and involves stereotypes that we consciously reject as false.

The propensity to automatic stereotyping is universal. Like conscious stereotypes, unconscious stereotypes link attributes and behaviors to group membership. The specific content of both conscious and unconscious stereotypes originates in cultural understandings of groups of people. This content draws heavily on media representations with which we come into regular contact. Living in a society teaches us all the stereotypes associated with various groups. All of us could describe the stereotype of a welfare mother, for example, even though many of us would reject the stereotype as untrue. While we can readily modify or reject our conscious stereotypes, our unconscious stereotypes are tenacious; they reside in our unconscious minds like viruses, distorting how we see and understand the people around us.

[Illustrate former point through a brief group exercise borrowed from the work of Professor Mahzarin Banaji.]

We automatically pursue, prefer, and remember “evidence” that support our stereotypes (including untrue “evidence”), and ignore, discount, and forget facts that challenge them. Because we are cognitively predisposed toward interpretations of behavior that fit our stereotypes and resistant to inconsistent evidence, their inaccuracy does not weaken unconscious stereotypes. Indeed, we prefer information that accentuates the differences between categories, probably because it *seems* diagnostic (Fiske 1998:386).

What's more, stereotyping is cognitively efficient. We process information stereotype-confirming information faster than inconsistent information.

Anything that limits our attentional resources—complex tasks, multiple demands, time pressure—increases our likelihood of stereotyping. For example, research subjects in a sentence-completion task obeyed an instruction to avoid sexist statements when they had plenty of time. Under time pressure, their statements were more sexist than those of a control group.

Because stereotypes often replace relevant information about individuals in decision makers' minds, automatic sex stereotyping enhances men's opportunities, while limiting those of women. For example, automatic (as well as conscious) sex stereotypes affect the roles that managers and administrators assign to women and men, the feedback they give them, how they evaluate behavior, and to what they attribute women's and men's respective successes and failures. Stereotypes of women are especially problematic for women in jobs that are customarily male because they conflict with stereotypes about the ideal incumbent (implicitly a male). For instance, outside the retail sector, sales people are stereotyped as competitive, while sex stereotypes both describe women as cooperative and proscribe cooperation. The proscriptive aspect of sex stereotype helps explain why high-level women find themselves playing "*Wives of the Organization*" (Huff 1991). The sex stereotype of men *as well as* the stereotype of the chief executive call for—or at least permit—indifference to an overwrought subordinate. But the female sex stereotype expects women to be nurturing. That gatekeepers evaluate subordinates by *both* their conformity to sex stereotypes and their conformity to occupational stereotypes, women in traditionally-male lines of work are caught in a can't-win situation.

A second automatic cognitive process is the classification of people we encounter as *either* like ourselves (part of our ingroup) *or* differ from us and toward whom we feel no special tie (the *outgroup*). The attributes on which our minds can automatically assign others to ingroup and

outgroup can be both tangential and trivial—i.e., the shirts we’re wearing are the same color. And we do this within microseconds of encountering people.

Along with this categorization are a set of cognitive errors that favor ingroup members over outgroup members who behave identically. Social psychologists call the phenomenon *ingroup favoritism*. It comprises several *automatic* cognitive errors. We evaluate ingroup members more favorably, trust them more, attribute to them positive attributes, ignore or explain away their failings, give them the benefit of the doubt. In other words, when we think we’re evaluating others objectively, our perceptions are distorted in ways systematically biased in favor of ingroup members. Although our ingroup *may* include persons of the other sex (coworkers in your unit which is being outsourced), gender often dictates whether we view others as “we” or “they”.

From the one difference that distinguishes our ingroup from the outgroup, we extrapolate, assuming that in many respects ingroup members resemble us and outgroup members differ from us.

Moreover, some evidence suggests that we see outgroup members as particularly homogeneous (“they all look alike”) or confuse them, e.g., misattributing a remark to a different Asian woman than the one who said it.

Of particular importance, we automatically prefer ingroup members—even on groups constructed on arbitrary and inconsequential bases. We are more comfortable with them, feel more obligated and loyal to them, trust them, impute positive traits to them while systematically forgetting their negative ones, are predisposed to cooperate with them, and favor them when distributing rewards. Sometimes members of powerful ingroups are caught off guard and admit their ingroup preference. For example, a female CEO described to a researcher asking her

previous boss for a promotion: “. . . he just looked at me, flabbergasted.” His astonishment apparently prompted candor (and perhaps insight), because he explained, “The guy I’ve got up there now has been my running partner and it’s taken me two years to get him to that position” (Davies-Netzley 1998:348).

While we do not automatically discriminate against outgroup members when allocating negative outcomes, although we may depersonalize them. More seriously, their otherness can make them invisible. So when candidates are selected for career-advancing opportunities, women often fail to come to mind. Thus, the president of financial institution told a researcher, “We talked about having a woman [on the bank’s board] in the past but had been unable to settle on someone who we thought could make a major contribution” (Davies-Netzley 1998:344). [If time/space, add example of “blue-skying” by team charged with developing a short list for vice presidency from lawsuit depositions.]

To the extent that white men predominate high-level decisionmaking, ingroup preference is likely to favor whites, men, and especially white men. Automatic ingroup favoritism hurts women primarily because to most decision makers, women are outsiders.

I don’t have time to discuss why our unconscious minds are so perverse, but according to cognitive psychologists, automatic ingroup favoritism and stereotyping are among the cognitive shortcuts permit us to function in environments in which we’re deluged with stimuli.

Nonetheless, given the nature of sex stereotypes and given men’s monopoly over gatekeeping positions, these automatic processes systematically disadvantage women at work—and they do so without any active sexism.

Because these propensities are unconscious, it is very difficult even for well-meaning people to detect them, much less to check them. This means that unequal treatment is predictable and it is pervasive.

In sum, automatic categorization, ingroup preference and stereotyping are cognitively efficient. Their efficiency frees up cognitive resources for other purposes, making these propensities adaptive. Nonetheless, they adversely affect personnel outcomes for women and men of color, white women, and members of other disparaged groups by distorting our perceptions and biasing our evaluations of others' behavior.

The short-run effects of these cognitive biases are often minor: being excluded, blamed or denied credit for a contribution. But over time, micro acts of discrimination lead members of preferred groups to accumulate advantages and members of disparaged groups to accumulate disadvantages. Over time they produce disparities that are as consequential as intentional, overt acts of discrimination.

II: Organizational Practices that Check the Exclusionary Effects of Automatic Cognitive Errors

It is almost impossible to suppress automatic stereotyping or the impulse to favor ingroup members. Given their pervasiveness, we can expect both processes to limit women's career opportunities. But when the laws of nature or of the mind lead to predictable, unwanted outcomes, we often take preventative steps. I think of this as implement pre-emptive structures. We require seat belts because the predictable consequences of an impact in a rapidly moving motor vehicle are serious injury or death. The analogue to seatbelts in the workplace can prevent the predictable consequences of automatic (or conscious) sex—and race—biases.

My favorite example of a preventive structure comes from a study by economists Claudia Goldin and Cecilia Rouse. They report that until the 1970s, women were virtually absent from major symphony orchestras. Symphonies used auditions to select musicians, and the judges could both hear and see the candidates. Those selected were virtually always male. We can't know how much of this was due to sex differences in talent, to anti-female bias in this traditionally male sphere, or to judges' conscious or unconscious stereotypes of ingroup favoritism. But as major symphonies began preventing judges from knowing auditioners' sex—by putting them behind a screen—the women began to win some of the auditions. It did so, presumably by curbing intentional discrimination and by precluding discriminatory effects of any nonconscious stereotypes and male favoritism.

In this instance, the personnel practice was a physical structure that kept hid performers' sex from evaluators. This technique has limited applicability in employment settings, but it does suggest points of intervention. Prior to using blind auditions, judges had complete discretion in their choices, so their assessment reflected their assessment of the candidate and anything else that crossed their minds. Although they were expert musicians, their judgments were not constrained by pre-specified criteria; they were unapologetically subjective. Moreover, judges (especially those who were outsiders) were not held accountable for their decisions.

Discretion is an important reward for managers. It ensures autonomy, allows decision makers to control the amount of effort they expend, and provides an opportunity to do favors for or pay back colleagues. While management texts assume that managers' decisions are rational (Baron 1984:56), discretion opens the way for unconscious and conscious biases and favoritism to influence decisions in ways that are unfair to outsiders. Employment decisions that are based

on unstructured observations are especially vulnerable to cognitive biases (Fiske, Bersoff, Borgida, Deaux, and Heilman 1991).

How can firms reduce this bias? Whether automatic stereotyping creates an uneven playing field depends considerably on whether decision makers have reliable and relevant information that they need for personnel decisions. When such information is not available, our stereotypes automatically fill in the blanks. For customarily-male jobs, this works to women's disadvantage. So providing decision makers with relevant information about persons they are assessing reduces the impact of stereotypes. For this to work, firms must distribute to *all* decision makers *standardized* information on *all* relevant criteria for *all* candidates.¹ (Note that this is what Home Depot's restructured and now computerized application process does.)

Subordinates are less likely to stereotype higher-status persons than the reverse, because subordinates need to accurately assess the people who control their work environment. Employers can reduce the effects of stereotyping by increasing superordinates' dependence on subordinates. Basing bonuses on subordinates' assessments or 360-degree evaluation can have this effect because supervisors whose evaluation or income depends on their subordinates' evaluations have an incentive to see subordinates as individuals rather than as members of a group.

Indeed, any form of interdependence across persons at different levels of the hierarchy increases mutual knowledge, thus reducing the impact of stereotypes. Unfortunately, the

¹ What constitutes job-relevant information must be determined through systematic job analysis (Bielby 2000, 124).

beneficial effect of interdependence lasts only as long as interdependence lasts. And short-term contact or interdependence has no long run deterrent effect on stereotyping.

Finally, time pressure, juggling too many tasks, and information-overload all take their toll on cognitive accuracy by exacerbating the effects of stereotypes on judgments and memory. To reduce the biasing effects of automatic cognitions, it is essential to allow sufficient time for personnel decision.

The key to preventing such automatic biases from giving rise to unintended micro acts of discrimination lies in curbing decision makers' discretion by requiring specific procedures for distributing opportunities.² Consider the case of Home Depot (for a detailed account, see Sturm 2001). Home Depot began as a close-knit, predominantly-male company that retained its informal employment practices as it grew.³ Although Home Depot is hardly exceptional in its

² Importantly, reducing discretion can curb intentional, animus-based discrimination.

³ As Bielby (1997) wrote in his report as an expert witness for the plaintiffs,

There are no written guidelines for making decisions about promotions to department supervisor positions, and the company does not provide training to Store Managers and Assistant Managers on how to select employees for promotion. While Standard Operating Procedures specify the process to be followed in making promotions into salaried assistant manager and store manager positions, they do not specify the criteria to be used in making promotion decisions. Promotion opportunities in existing stores are not posted, and there is no formal procedure for making vacancies known or requesting a promotion. In making decisions about promotion to department supervisor, there is no requirement that the person under consideration meet any minimum rating or recent performance evaluations, or that written performance reviews are consulted at all in

reliance on informal networks to fill jobs and in the segregative consequences of that reliance (Marsden and Gorman 2001), its segregated workforce and barriers to managerial jobs for women led to a discrimination lawsuit. As a result of the consent decree that settled the suit, Home Depot restructured its personnel practices, completely revamping its human resource system. It developed minimum qualifications for each position¹ and installed computer or telephones kiosks in every store through which applicants could indicate job preferences and qualifications. Applicants automatically became part of the pool for any position that matched their preferences and qualifications; when managers posted openings, the computer automatically listed all qualified applicants. Home Depot also standardized interviews to ensure that managers asked all job candidates the same questions. In curtailing managers' discretion, these practices reduced the likelihood that they would unconsciously or consciously favor their buddies or make assignments based on stereotypes.

Home Depot responded to problems associated with unchecked managerial discretion the same way firms have for decades: through bureaucratization (Edwards 1979) or "formalization". Formalization involves posting all openings, written job descriptions, clear pre-specified criteria, as well as complete, relevant, and timely information for all candidates. In a study of a representative sample of American work organizations, I found that formalization enhanced women's access to managerial jobs (Reskin and McBrier 1999). A second study (Guthrie and Roth 1999) that surveyed over 700 medium- and large-scale organizations confirmed that more formalized personnel practices (i.e., written job descriptions, a rules-and-procedures manual, making the decision. Nor is there any requirement to record the reasons why an employee is or is not selected for promotion.

performance evaluation, salary classification, job ladders, etc.) in private-sector firms were associated with increased odds that the CEO would be a woman.

Accountability

Reducing discretion by formalizing personnel practices is not enough, however. As Sturm (2001, 161) observed, “Some form of pressure had to be built into . . . to assure that, once identified, problems were . . . addressed.” “[A]ccountability,” she added, “is the key to the long term viability of these problem-solving systems.” Sturm’s conclusion from three case studies corroborates what cognitive psychology has taught us: Organizations can reduce the biasing effects of stereotyping, ingroup preference, and other cognitive distortions on evaluative judgments by holding decision makers accountable for the criteria they use, the accuracy of the information upon which they base their decisions, the procedures by which they reach their decisions, and the consequences of their decisions for race and gender equality (Salancik and Pfeffer 1978; Konrad and Linnehan 1995; Tetlock and Lerner 1999).⁴

Being informed—before being exposed to the information on which they will base their judgment—that one is going to be held accountable for one’s judgments reduces *both* the expression of biases and the way we encode information (Tetlock 1992; Pendry and Macrae 1996). Experimental subjects who were recommending whom to hire as teaching assistants and who had been told that the decision-making process would be public were less likely to recommend candidates of their race and sex than were those who thought their decisions would be kept secret, presumably because only the latter feared some form of accountability (Salancik and Pfeffer 1978).

⁴ See Sessa (1992) on Xerox’s successful use of accountability.

Accountability is effective in part because it can alter nonconscious cognitive processes. Telling decision makers that they are going to be held accountable for their judgments, before giving them the information on which they must will base their evaluations—not only reduces the expression of biases, it alters the way they encode information.

Of course, the transparency of decisionmaking is necessary for accountability. Home Depot's computer system provided data to store managers on individual managers' hiring decisions so regional managers could monitor compliance and deal with managers accordingly (Sturm 2001, 157). Deloitte & Touche's initiative to address problems faced by its female workers mandated reviews in which the managing partner at each branch listed all assignments and their desirability by workers' sex, and tied performance to compensation (Sturm 2001, 138-39). These examples illustrate both the need for maintaining and circulating data on rewards and opportunities by group membership and for accountability to entail genuine consequences for decision makers (Heilman 1995).

Accountability alone is not a panacea. In the first place, according to experimental research, knowing one is going be accountable does not seem to matter when decision makers are under time pressure. Moreover, for accountability to be effective, there must be tangible negative consequences. Consider Home Depot again. The computer system I described provided data to store managers on individual managers' hiring decisions so HD could monitor compliance and deal with managers accordingly.

One strategy to check exclusionary effects of ingroup favoritism is construct other bases for ingroups. Although people often based ingroup membership on sex, this is not inevitable. Organizations can exploit our readiness to categorize others on virtually any attribute by encouraging categorization on attributes that are unrelated to sex (in some contexts, this used to

be Mac versus IBM, now it's theoreticians versus empiricists). Employers can foster *recategorization* based on teams, projects, or divisions. According to Bodenhausen and her colleagues (1998, 316), when competing bases of categorization are available, stereotypes associated with the successful category are activated, and those associated with the "losing" category are suppressed. So seeing a photograph of Chinese woman activated research subjects' stereotypes about women, while inhibiting their stereotypes about Asians; but subjects shown a picture of the same woman eating noodles with chopsticks triggered stereotypes about Asians, while suppressing sex stereotypes (Bodenhausen et al. 1998, 317).

Cooperation in a division of labor ("positive interdependence") fosters decategorization of project or teammates. And structured competition among teams, divisions, etc. encourages us to see the members of our team as individuals because we need to know where their strengths lie, so it also it reduces stereotyping.

Sex-Conscious Personnel Practices

The organizational practices discussed above are sex- and race-*neutral* ways to check discriminatory effects of automatic stereotyping and ingroup favoritism. A more effective way to forestall women's exclusion from organizations' higher reaches is sex-conscious affirmative action.⁵ Its impact does not depend on minimizing the effects of cognitive biases; instead it makes gender a legitimate selection factor. Gender-conscious recruitment practices include targeted recruiting from traditionally female pools, and identifying and mentoring women who are potential candidates for mobility. Gender-conscious employment practices explicitly treat the sex as a "plus factor" in deciding among qualified candidates for positions in which women

⁵ Sex-conscious affirmative action is legal only to remedy admitted past exclusionary treatment.

are underrepresented. Such practices are most effective for increasing the representation of members of excluded groups (Konrad and Linneman 1995).

III. Prompting Organizations to Implement Safeguarding Structures

Firms rarely design their personnel practices to reduce gatekeepers' unconscious biases. Few are aware of these biases, much less their discriminatory effects. Moreover, inertia is a powerful barrier to organizational change, especially when current personnel practices pass muster in the regulatory community.

Of course, the *raison d'être* of public- and private-sector work organizations is to produce a service or product. And private-sector firms are in business to maximize profit. Simultaneously, organizational actors work to achieve career goals. Most organizational leaders see to maximizing their own personal earnings, influence, and prestige. Therefore, topping the agenda of most organizational leaders are organizational performance—as measured by output and profits—and building their careers. Secondary goals are next on the agenda: pushing ideas that you believe in; developing new talent, rewarding your friends and getting along with—or punishing—your enemies. Thus, even when an organization's leaders strongly value fairness or are personally committed to supporting women and minorities, these goals tend to be low on the agenda—as evidenced by women's continued underrepresentation in the highest echelons.

In addition, power and status bring their own disabilities. Members of any group that is born into an advantaged status (whites, men, Kennedys, Bushes) have difficulty seeing the role of their privileged status for whatever successes they achieve (DiTomaso 2000). Virtually universally, they exaggerate the importance of what is readily apparent to them: their own efforts. Because much truly hard work goes on in private, few members of these privileged

groups recognize similar levels of work by others. (And our stereotypes about these groups and segregation from them help the privileged classes hold on to their illusions.) So members of privileged groups can't see the impact of privilege in their lives (Davies-Netzley 1998:343-44).

A serendipitous finding in an experiment on the effects of being chosen for a leadership role based on affirmative action or ability illustrates this astigmatism. The experimenter gave male and female undergraduates at the University of California a leadership test, but then told some students that they had been chosen to be leaders based entirely on the need to achieve gender balance. To make sure that this group recognized that they had been selected entirely on the basis of their sex, the experimenters made a big show of tearing up and discarding these students' leadership tests. In the debriefing interview that follows an experiment, students in the experimental group that had been told they were selected solely because of their sex were asked why they were picked as leaders. The female subjects repeated what they had been told. But several male subjects said they had been selected based on their leadership ability (Major ...)

In short, we cannot rely on attitudes, attitude change, whether the current CEO has daughters, or diversity training to eliminate exclusionary barriers. This means that unless the elimination of exclusionary barriers has a direct connection to the bottom line for a firm or for its leaders' careers, they are unlikely to move it high enough on the priority list for any meaningful action. Only when exclusionary barriers are likely to substantially threaten a firm's profitability or economic standing, are leaders likely to effectively implement the kinds of personnel practices I have described.

Typically the kinds of threats that prompt action come from outside the firm. And usually they come from regulatory agencies or lawsuits. For example, after the California Personnel Board remonstrated with state agencies to integrate all jobs, but threatened budget cuts *only* for

agencies that failed to increase women's and minorities' presence in specific targeted job, the targeted jobs became more integrated. The nontargeted jobs became more segregated (Baron, Mittman, and Newman 1991). Laws, courts, and lawsuits are all consequential—even for who is running the organization. According to a study of the factors associated with a firm's CEO was female, the more laws a state had supporting EEO, the more likely a corporation's CEO would be female (Guthrie and Roth 1999:529). Even more intriguing, corporations in the 2nd and 3rd circuits of the federal court of appeals—circuits that have tended to be the most progressive—were substantially more likely to have female CEOs than corporations in other circuits (pp. 529-30). The researchers also found that if the CEO moved up from inside the organization, women were more likely to hold that position. Although the regulatory agency charged with enforcing the primary federal law against discrimination—the EEOC—has been starved of resources, class-action private lawsuits filed under Title VII not only get the attention of corporate leaders, the culmination of these suits (which typically settle before going to court) often include the modification of personnel practices (Sturm 2001).

For firms holding federal contracts, the presidential executive orders requiring affirmative action recognize—after two decades of experience with voluntary plans—that the prospect of sanctions is essential to motivate employers to get serious about ending exclusionary practices. So the Office for Federal Contract Compliance Programs has the authority under the executive order to withhold federal contracts from employers that do not take rudimentary steps toward inclusiveness. Although the likelihood of losing a federal contract is minuscule, nonetheless the

occupational composition of federal contractors looks more like America than that of noncontractors.⁶

Few organizations have incentives to reform their personnel policies to check the exclusionary effects of nonconscious bias. Whether they implement safeguards to prevent these outcomes, depends largely on the threat of external coercive pressure.⁷ Although this is a lamentable state of affairs, external pressure does produce organizational change.

Conclusions

Cognitive biases and ingroup favoritism link more or less desirable outcomes to sex through “countless small acts by a changing cast of characters . . . that incrementally and consistently limit the employment prospects of one group of workers compared with those of another” (Nelson and Bridges 1999:241-43). The cumulative results of nonconscious cognitive errors that lead decisionmakers to deny women challenging assignments, exclude them from work-related social functions, forget their achievements when brainstorming the names of candidates for a promotion are as consequential as intentional discrimination. However, victims typically ignore or do not even notice instances of ingroup favoritism or stereotyping; it takes being laid off or denied a promotion to precipitate a discrimination complaint. But by then accumulated

⁶ Threat of widespread consumer boycott or adverse publicity (as experienced by Texaco and Denny’s for blatant race discrimination) can also prompt action.

⁷ Although in the past in some industries such as publishing, internal pressure did the trick.

disadvantages to women and accumulative advantage to men can make the latter objectively better qualified (Krieger 1998:1326).⁸

The conclusion that regulatory agencies should require firms to curb the consequences of automatic cognitive biases is likely to be controversial. (It surely will not fly in today's regulatory environment.) Precedents exist, however, for mandating interventions to prevent what is otherwise a clear risk to society's fundamental values. For example, laws against statutory rape, laws specifying an age of consent, legal decisions on sexual harassment all aim to protect the vulnerable from assumed psychic states in members of more powerful groups.

In sum, the automaticity of the cognitive errors I have discussed leads to countless micro-acts of exclusion or discrimination, putting barriers in women's path to the top. That many of these originate in automatic cognitive processes rather than conscious antipathy does not mitigate their impact. Fortunately, personnel reform can prevent their adversely affecting women. Unfortunately, organizations rarely implement genuine reform without the external pressures. Our challenge is to encourage such pressures. Doing so makes the workplace better for everyone.

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⁸ In fact, since persons from different groups are no longer "similarly situated", the victim of discrimination can not argue differential treatment of similarly situated persons.