From individual to organizational bias: A norm-critical proposition for unconscious bias intervention in organizations

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Abstract

It is generally accepted in organization and management studies that individuals are implicitly biased, and that biased behavior has organizational consequences for diversity, equality, and inclusion. Existing bias interventions are found not to lead to significant changes in terms of eliminating individual bias, reducing discrimination, or increasing the numbers of underrepresented minorities in organizations. This article links the absence of positive change to a lack of engagement with the structural-organizational contexts, processes, and practices that reproduce bias. We identify three concrete shortcomings in the literature: that interventions are: 1) largely ignorant of broader societal power structures; 2) detached from specific organizational contexts; and 3) decoupled from concrete organizational action. By combining insights from unconscious bias research with norm critique and design thinking, we develop a proposition for a new intervention model that forgoes the individualization of unconscious bias and extends to a structural understanding of bias as embedded in organizational norms. The article draws on data from an action research project that included a workshop series developed and organized in three Scandinavian countries over one year. The data provide the basis for an empirically grounded conceptualization of the organizational bias intervention advanced by the authors.

KEYWORDS: Unconscious bias, implicit bias, norm critique, organizational diversity, action research, design thinking

Introduction

Research on unconscious/implicit bias[1] has taken us a long way in terms of grasping otherwise tacit and intangible aspects of organizational life. It is generally accepted among organization and management scholars that individuals are biased (Marvel 2016; Murray 2016; Noon 2018) and that their biases, which work unconsciously without people being aware of them, may contradict and thus counteract espoused values and beliefs (Muhr 2019). Beyond influencing individual attitudes, biases also affect organizational behavior and outcomes with regard to diversity, equality, and inclusion (Brief et al. 2000; Chamorro-Premuzic 2019; Ellemers 2014). Critical scholarship has long argued that biases are woven into the fabric of organizations, thus rendering them gendered, raced, classed, etc. (Acker 2006; Ahonen et al. 2013; Ashcraft 2013; Christensen and Muhr 2019; Cohen and El-Sawad 2007; Janssens and Zanoni 2014; Nkomo and Hoobler 2014). However, its relative success in bringing to the forefront such unconscious processes of organizing is also where the existing literature begins to fall short.

Since unconscious biases operate outside people's awareness, a common means of intervention is to *raise awareness*, for example through training or testing, to let people know of their own biased attitudes and behavior. The Implicit Association Test (IAT) is probably the best known and academically most disputed example thereof due to its common use in several hundred research papers published since the introduction of the test in 1998 (Blanton et al. 2009; Steffens 2004). However, raising awareness as a means of intervention is criticized by some for being not enough (Applebaum 2019) and the *least* effective method if the aim is to prevent discrimination caused by bias and increase the number of underrepresented minorities in organizations (Emerson 2017; Kalev, Dobbin and Kelly 2006). While several studies report short-term bias reductions from educating people about bias and teaching individual strategies for overcoming it (Girod et al. 2016), a general concern is that such effects wear off over time and, relatedly, that diversity training in the form of awareness-raising can be pointless since "knowing about bias does not automatically result in changes in behavior by managers and employees" (Noon 2018, 198). In other words, an approach addressing awareness through knowledge alone is inadequate for fostering progressive organizational change (Dobbin and Kalev 2018).

Unconscious bias training thus seems insufficient for eliminating bias if it is based on the common assumption that knowing about bias will automatically lead to acting differently (Noon 2018), not least because the emphasis on individual agency presupposes that people are both willing and motivated to act and that they have the capacity to do so (Correll 2017). Crucial to our argument in this article is that a narrow focus on individually held biases comes at the cost of exploring the level of structural-organizational contexts, processes, and practices that play a part in activating and reproducing bias. For example, an influential study by Devine et al. (2012)—later replicated by Forscher et al. (2017)—approaches unconscious bias as being akin to personal (bad) habits that can be broken. Yet individuals are not isolated islands; habitual, discriminatory behavior is institutionalized and embedded in organizational processes, practices, and routines (Acker 2006; Correll 2017; Holck 2018). We argue therefore that the existing literature points to three limitations due to interventions being largely: 1) ignorant of broader societal power structures; 2) detached from specific organizational contexts; and 3) decoupled from concrete organizational action.

We address these critical insights by first differentiating between individual bias and what we term *organizational bias,* which is understood to be a bias that is built into formalized processes and practices in organizations (Correll 2017). Stressing the need for intervening at the level of organizational biases, this article then explores the following research question: *How may we counter unconscious bias at a structural-organizational level of norms that is beyond individual attitudes and behavior?* The research question is built upon the underlying claim that, if bias is incorporated into organizational practice—as organizational bias—the initiatives taken to counter bias must

necessarily also be integrated into processes of organizing with the purpose of establishing new or alternative practices that consider the potentiality of unconscious bias.

To answer the research question, we develop a workshop format that situates the bias intervention at an organizational rather than individual level; that is, it moves unconscious bias training from the level of individual agency to one of structural-organizational processes and practices. The notions of norm critique and design thinking build the theoretical basis for the developed format. Empirically, the development is grounded in data produced from five workshops held across three Nordic countries in collaboration with several case organizations to develop an intervention format. Our aim in proposing this new intervention is to overcome the bias toward individualization we find in many current antibias interventions. We suggest instead that organizational bias interventions need to account for the effects of organizational norms on individual biased behavior. Specifically, we put forth the argument that while current interventions focus on creating awareness (through knowledge) and assume that a behavior change will follow from increased awareness, our proposed workshop format creates more explicit links between knowledge, awareness, changed individual behavior, and adapted organizational processes and practices.

This article offers two overall contributions to unconscious bias research and practice in organizations. First, we propose an empirically grounded conceptualization of an organizational bias intervention that is anchored within a norm-critical understanding of unconscious bias. Second, we extend the Devine et al. (2012) and Forscher et al. (2017) bias intervention models by integrating a norm-critical perspective with design thinking methodology. In doing so, we address the three concrete limitations identified in the existing literature, thereby advancing bias research and bias intervention practice. In proposing a new intervention format, we follow Kalpazidou Schmidt and Cacace's (2019) argument that, while diversity training seems ineffective in isolation, its effects can be improved if it is incorporated into a wider program of change. The trick is, as Dobbin and Kalev (2018) point out, to couple diversity training with the right complementary measures. Rather than give up on countering unconscious bias, we thus echo Correll's (2017) call to aim for *small wins* and, specifically, propose adding a complementary measure of *norm-critical* reflection combined with action-oriented elements of *design thinking* processes to unconscious bias interventions in organizations.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. After reviewing the literature on bias and identifying the three concrete limitations in the existing literature, we briefly describe the notions of design thinking and norm critique that provided the theoretical starting points for the intervention development. We follow that with a presentation of the methodology for the action research project that builds the empirical basis for our proposition of a new organizational bias intervention. We then discuss the developed intervention in terms of the *knowledge*, *awareness*, *practice,* and *action* elements that we derive from the empirical material produced during the action research project. A concluding discussion allows us to synthesize those four elements and propose our conceptualization of an organizational bias intervention as a norm-critical extension to that of Devine et al. (2012). Finally, we reflect on the limitations and implications for future research and the practice of unconscious bias interventions in organizations.

Literature review: From individual bias to organizational bias

Overall, research on bias differentiates between conscious/explicit bias and unconscious/implicit bias (Dovidio et al. 2010). This article's focus is the latter type of bias; we use the terms unconscious and implicit bias interchangeably in line with the preferences of the authors cited. Biases can be formed against and based on different social categories and their associated attributes and characteristics. This is evident from the existing literature covering, for example, ethnicity (Agerström and Rooth 2009), race (Brief et al. 2000),

body size (Agerström and Rooth 2011), sexuality (Banse, Seise and Zerbes 2001), gender (Dasgupta and Asgari 2004), culture (Correll et al. 2008), and intergroup bias (Crisp and Beck 2005). When bias operates unconsciously, it is formed outside of awareness and may lead to automatic preferences and prejudices (Dovidio et al. 2010). One example of unconscious bias and its possible effects in an organizational setting can be found in Braun et al.'s (2017) study of gender bias, which shows a clear tendency to associate men more strongly with a manager/leadership role than women, whose gender role, conversely, is associated with being a follower. The fact that women are perceived as less ideal for management positions might, as the authors note, contribute to an underrepresentation of women while having the opposite effect on men, whose gender role is perceived as an ideal fit.

As Noon (2018) points out, the general standpoint in the literature is that we are all biased, but since biases are deeply engrained, we remain mostly unaware of them. Nevertheless, it is assumed that unconscious bias is measurable or at least quantifiable. This is clear from the overwhelming research interest in testing that which is outside of subjects' conscious or active awareness using, for example, the IAT (Greenwald, McGhee and Schwartz 1998).[2] The IAT is often used for testing participants' implicit biases *before* and *after* unconscious bias training to assess the success of the intervention in reducing individual bias. See Gawronski et al. (2008) and Quillan (2006) for other test versions and methods.

The focal point of this article, however, is not the testing of unconscious bias per se, but rather the activities aimed at redressing the impact of unconscious bias on organizational outcomes. For promoting diversity, training is the most common activity undertaken by organizations (Dobbin, Kalev and Kelly 2007).[3] Yet in a systematic analysis of the efficacy of different approaches to promoting diversity in organizations, Kalev, Dobbin, and Kelly (2006) found that diversity training, in the form of educational programs designed to raise awareness of how bias affects actions, is the *least* effective measure for increasing the share of underrepresented groups in managerial positions. Other studies suggest that such training programs activate and even reinforce bias rather than reduce it, thereby becoming part of the problem instead of the solution (Duguid and Thomas-Hunt 2015; Kidder et al. 2004). Research reporting positive effects on unconscious bias from diversity training tends to show only immediate, short-term effects that erode within a few days (Dobbin and Kalev 2018). Devine et al. (2012) were the first (to their knowledge) to publish a study showing a long-term change in implicit (race) bias. This study has since been replicated by Forscher et al. (2017).

Devine et al. (2012) developed an antibias intervention in which they conceptualized implicit bias as a habit. They argued that implicit bias, much like a deeply entrenched habit, can be broken through *awareness of implicit bias* paired with *concern about its effects* and *knowledge about how to apply strategies* that reduce bias. Their argument builds upon the idea that motivation to change behavior is triggered by awareness of a problem in combination with concern about its consequences. Regarding bias reduction strategies, these authors highlight that:

> *People need to know when biased responses are likely to occur [i.e., in which situations] and how to replace those biased responses with responses more consistent with their goals (Devine et al. 2012, 1268).*

However, Devine et al.'s (2012) empirical results demand a cautious assessment of the concept they propose. In their initial study, they argue that:

> *The complexity of the intervention results in ambiguity regarding which components are responsible for its various effects. […] several components likely work in combination to prompt […] chronic awareness, concern, and self-regulatory effort (Devine et al. 2012, 1277).*

In a 2017 replication of the study, the results notably show that:

> *Although intervention participants increased in concern more than control participants, they did not decrease in implicit bias more than control participants. […However,] the habit-breaking intervention appears to have a robust, enduring impact on the degree to which people characterise […] discrimination as a problem (Forscher et al. 2017, 41).*

This shows that while their intervention had a positive effect on the acknowledgment of the problem and concern for its effects, it did not decrease bias.

The reason for that, we argue, may be found in the failure to account for organisational structures and norms that allow and encourage the reproduction of biased behaviour. Devine et al.'s (2012) intervention model and conceptualisation of implicit bias relies on the individualised idea that a decrease in individual bias will result in less biased behaviour. They argue that:

> *'Breaking the habit' of implicit bias therefore requires learning about the contexts that activate the bias and how to replace the biased responses with responses that reflect one's nonprejudiced goals (Devine et al. 2012, 1268).*

Yet they fail to account for the mentioned context's effect on biased behavior and how that context—understood here as organizational structures, norms, and processes that enable the reproduction of bias—needs to be changed for individuals within it to be able to reduce their biased behavior. In other words, Devine et al. (2012) fail to account for habitual behavior being institutionalized and embedded in organizational processes, practices, and routines (Acker 2006; Correll 2017; Holck 2018). Although the authors argue that an individual's motivation is not only intrinsically based on their personal values and beliefs but extrinsically driven by "a desire to escape social sanctions" (Devine et al. 2012, 1269), they fail to consider that the organizational context might need to be actively shaped and changed to not just encourage but actually sanction biased behavior.

Three concrete limitations in the existing literature

The shortcoming of Devine et al.'s (2012) intervention at the organizational level points to three concrete limitations, more general to the body of research, that seek not only to investigate but also to counter unconscious bias. The limitations can be summarized by noting that these interventions focus on awareness of individual bias but are largely: 1) ignorant of broader societal power structures; 2) detached from specific organizational contexts; and 3) decoupled from concrete organizational action.

Existing interventions focus on awareness of individual bias, but they are largely ignorant of broader societal power structures. As Tate and Page (2018) argue, knowledge about broader power structures, their sociopolitical and historical situatedness in the specific context of intervention, and how they are structurally reproduced is an essential precondition to understanding how biases come about. Such knowledge avoids bias being seen as primarily an individual-level issue. These authors, therefore, highlight "the foregrounding of the individual that ignores the institutional and the systemic" as an "inherent weakness of contemporary approaches" (Tate and Page 2018, 145). We further argue that interventions are largely detached from specific organizational contexts. Given this, we wish to critique how the common view that everyone is biased (Quillan 2006) and the agent-focused modes of intervention that the view inspires tend to neglect structural constraints of action at an organizational level. As Noon (2018, 203) states, overlaying individual awareness of bias are issues of "context and praxis," which in the normal, everyday operations of organizations are unlikely to provide the conditions necessary for changing biased behavior (Smith, Brief and Colella 2010). This links to our third point, that interventions are decoupled from organizational action points. We suggest that individual awareness and action need to be supported by collective responsibility for changing an organization's processes and structures to mitigate the effects of bias (Chang et al. 2019; Noon 2018).

Thus, the purpose of this article is to propose a workshop format for a new form of intervention that should be able to address the three limitations. To that end, and to answer the research question of how to counter unconscious bias at a structural-organizational level of norms that is beyond individual attitudes and behavior, we present the elements of *knowledge*, *practice,* and *action* in addition to awareness—the common focus of existing interventions—to accommodate each of the current shortcomings. Relating the outlined shortcomings to the reviewed literature on diversity training, we put forth the argument that the focus of existing antibias training is on creating *awareness* through *knowledge,* while the link to *action*, understood as a change in behavior, is implicitly assumed; thus, its apparent fallacy is ignored (Dobbin and Kalev 2018; Noon 2018). As Tate and Page (2018, 145) highlight, "to overcome bias, an awareness of normalisation [of biases] is insufficient; instead, what is needed is a more active process." The intervention that we conceptualize in this article therefore rethinks and broadens the category of *knowledge* and integrates the two additional elements of *practice* and *action* to create explicit links between knowledge (understood as knowledge of broader societal power structures and their relevance in the specific context of the organizational intervention), awareness of biases, changed individual behavior, and adapted organizational processes and practices. We also consider not only an individual perspective on personal bias but also a structural understanding of organizational and social norms. In doing so, we aim to reduce the reproduction of biased behavior at a structural level, meaning the organizational context with its processes and practices in which biased behaviors are situated. By adopting that approach, we move from primarily working with individual bias toward addressing organizational bias.

Design thinking and norm critique

Design thinking and *norm critique* provide the theoretical starting points for the development of the intervention. It will become clear in the subsequent section *how* design thinking and norm critique were used in the intervention's development. In this part, we briefly explain the theoretical basis of both approaches to show *why* they are relevant for countering unconscious bias at a structural-organizational level of norms beyond individual attitudes and behavior. *Design thinking* describes an approach for creating solutions to complex, or wicked, problems (Buchanan 1992) that relies on working with (not working for or on behalf of) the people that are affected by such problems (Brown and Wyatt 2010), an example of which could be gender bias in entrepreneurship programs (Warnecke 2016). Design thinking is aimed at establishing a mindset and practice of curiosity, constructiveness, and experientiality originally inspired by the practices of designers (Elsbach and Stigliani 2018).

By *norm critique,* we mean critically attending to the normative processes and practices for organizing that reinforce inequalities through implicit expectations of conformity (Arifeen and Syed 2020). Norms are understood as having performative power while also being constituted performatively and thus allowing for change (Butler 1990, 2011/1993; Christensen 2018). The critical aim lies in the continuous questioning and challenging of norms that structure social and organizational relations, standards, and expectations (Ghorashi and Ponzoni 2014; Plotnikof and Graack-Larsen 2018). We suggest working with norm critique for two main reasons. One is that it avoids the conscious or unconscious singling out *diversity subjects* (Ahmed 2004; Wiggins-Romesburg and Githens 2018); that is, it avoids *othering* those individuals who fall outside normative expectations. Instead, it focuses on what norms a differentiation of same/other or same/diverse is built on and how to challenge them. The second, and related, reason is that a critical inquiry into the performative effects of norms enables a shift in the level of intervention from *individual* to *organizational* bias. By not questioning individual subjects and their (non)conformity to an existing norm, but instead focusing on the norms themselves, their reproduction, and their performative effects, norm critique

moves attention to the level of organizational practices, processes, and structures (Christensen et al. 2021). From that perspective, it thus becomes possible to focus on organizational biases and their reproduction within normative practices, processes, and structures.

The motivations for combining norm critique and design thinking, as Christensen et al. (2020, 8, *italics in original*) reflect, are to integrate "action-oriented and productive elements from *design thinking* with *norm-critical* perspectives and exercises" to allow for critical reflexivity and to "mitigate bias in the design process." As such, the emphasis is on changing processes, not individual attitudes or behavior. Design thinking on its own comes with the risk of reaffirming existing bias due to the focus on producing a large quantity of output when ideating, with little or no time for the participants to think critically about which normative, and perhaps prejudiced assumptions, expectations, stereotypes, or other generalizations, underpin the activity. Ironically, this element of design thinking prioritizes doing over thinking. It is for this reason that norm critique is introduced as a reflexive element to both raise awareness of existing norms and make immediate use of the raised level of awareness—given that the knowledge that this state of increased awareness is short-lived (Dobbin and Kalev 2018)—to qualify the design thinking process.

Methodology and method

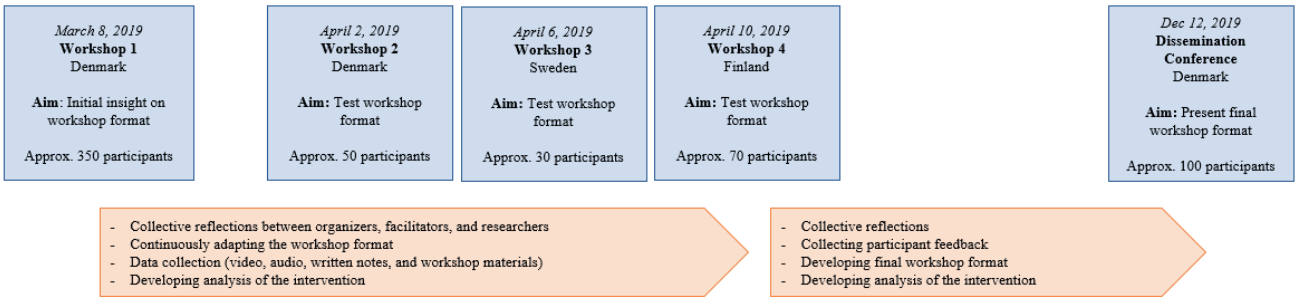
To establish a shared point of reference, we introduce the workshop format, in which our conceptualization of the proposition for a new model for organizational bias intervention is empirically grounded. This article builds upon an action research project in which the authors, together with other researchers, practitioners, and participants, created a workshop series entitled "Co-creating Gender Equality from Classroom to Organization: Innovations in Nordic Welfare Societies."[4] Data was generated in a joint learning process with the research participants (Greenwood and Levin 2007) and analyzed alongside the development, organization, and delivery of five workshops in three Scandinavian countries between November 2018 and December 2019. In the following two sections, we describe the empirical settings and content of the workshops, followed by a presentation of our approach to data generation and analysis.

Empirical setting

The workshop development process was initiated in November 2018 as a cooperative project between Copenhagen Business School, KTH Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm, Hanken School of Economics in Helsinki, the GODESS Institute (based at Hanken, facilitating transnational research collaboration in the fields of gender, organization, diversity, equality and social sustainability), KVINFO (the Danish Knowledge Centre for Gender Equality and Diversity) and Ekvalita Ab (a Finnish diversity and inclusion consultancy). The project was sponsored by NIKK (Nordic Information on Gender, a cooperative body under the Nordic Council of Ministers).

The first workshop took place in Copenhagen on International Women's Day, March 8, 2019, with around 350 participants. The workshop provided initial insights into the workshop format and structure. It is described in detail by Christensen et al. (2020). It allowed us to shape the different elements and building blocks and then develop three workshop formats to be tested in Copenhagen on April 2, Stockholm on April 6, and Helsinki on April 10, 2019. Each workshop contained the same main elements but with a different set of exercises to try out a variety of possible formats. The workshops were open to a diverse target group consisting of organizational leaders, academics, university students, NGO representatives, and other relevant stakeholders. They were attended by 30–70 people each. Building on the learning generated by the preceding workshops, we developed a final workshop model that was presented at a dissemination conference in Copenhagen on December 12, 2019. With approximately 100 attendees, the final event included a presentation of

Figure 1: Workshop Timeline



the development process, the final product, and a shortened version of the workshop.[5] Figure 1 provides a timeline of the various workshops and the actions taken between them.

To provide a basis for understanding the conceptualization we offer in this article, we also present a table outlining the shortened version of the workshop setup. The developed intervention consists of five phases, as described in Table 1. Each phase can be adapted in terms of length and focus as needed for a particular workshop's needs, aims, and scope while staying consistent with regard to the elements included. Importantly, the process should not be considered linear but cyclical, as it is possible to return to any step at any point in the process. This creates an iterative process, as shown in Figure 2.

Data generation and analysis

Alongside the workshop development and execution, we generated data from a variety of sources, consisting of written documentation of the development process, video/audio recordings, 78 pages of observation notes from the workshops, transcripts of all materials used and produced (such as Post-its and worksheets), and feedback from organizers, facilitators, and participants. The feedback from organizers and facilitators was shared and recorded in an open discussion after each workshop. Following Gilmore and Kenny's (2015, 56) idea of collective reflection as a process that goes beyond "self-reflexivity […] as an individual concern, the responsibility of the lone researcher," we shared reflections from everyone involved in the project. These reflections were the basis for further development of the intervention format and were later transcribed to be included as data for this article. The participant feedback was collected through a short survey sent to all participants after each workshop (except for the dissemination conference) and submitted by a total of 77 participants.[6] While we do not report separately on the survey results or findings, we do use feedback from them in combination with the other materials so we can take into account insights from the research team, organizers, workshop facilitators, and participants. With this approach, we aim to work critically in a way that Yanow (2012, 31) described as a "refusal to privilege one sort of voice above another." Moreover, it acknowledges informants as knowledgeable subjects rather than dismissing them as objects to be researched and understood by a knowledgeable researcher (Collins 2000).

We take the data generated in the process of developing, organizing, and facilitating the workshops as our point of departure for an *empirically grounded conceptualization* of our proposed model for organizational bias intervention. Following the idea of action research, which "rejects the separation between thought and action" (Greenwood and Levin 2007, 5), the data analysis was conducted simultaneously with continuous data generation, and our thought processes accompanied our actions, as also depicted in Figure 1. We purposely avoided following a linear process of workshop development and execution (as action) and consecutive data generation, data

Table 1: Workshop Description

Workshop phase	Description	Examples
1 – Initial problem and context definition	The problem and its context are introduced to workshop participants by the workshop facilitator or a representative from the focal organization. The workshop format and aim are introduced: facilitators familiarize participants with the theoretical concepts of unconscious bias, norm critique, and design thinking.	In the workshops in Copenhagen and Stockholm, Danish Defence was one of three case organizations. A Danish Defence representative helped the facilitators to prepare a context description in the form of a brief written summary of the case to be shared with the participants before the workshop and introduced by the facilitators at the start. Danish Defence had defined a lack of women pursuing a career as soldiers as its main challenge.
2 – Norm-critical exercise	Participants are guided through a norm-critical exercise in which they reflect on social and organizational norms and their influence on individual and organizational behavior. One exercise called *My multidimensional self* was used in the dissemination workshop in December 2019. Participants were asked to come up with five self-identified categories that represent an attribute or aspect of their identity. They selected their identities based on how they saw themselves, not how others might see them. For two of those identities, they formulated a sentence on a stereotype typically associated with the identity categories, which failed to accurately describe the participants as individuals. Using these identity categories and reflections on related stereotypes, participants were invited to introduce themselves to each other while discussing in which contexts and situations the identities become salient and when the stereotypes are experienced as constraining.	In Helsinki, the exercise on *My multidimensional self* triggered a conversation about what it means to be Finnish and how belonging to that normative category is defined and restricted. When asked to describe their identity, one participant shared that she considered choosing between ex-pat, international, and migrant but realized that all three were constructed in opposition to a normative ideal of being Finnish, even though she would, despite not being Finnish, identify as local. This enabled a discussion on how being Finnish becomes a normative category that is, on the one hand, implicitly linked to the category local and ideas of belonging, while, on the other hand, constructed against categories such as ex-pat, international, and migrant. The creation of this dichotomy, however, limits the possibilities of ex-pats, internationals, and migrants to also define themselves as local and gain a sense of belonging to Finnish society.
3 – Point of view and ideation	Participants are guided through an idea development process. They are asked to write and draw their point of view on the problem introduced at the start. They are triggered to activate their own perspective and knowledge to define the problem. Two rounds of brainstorming are facilitated, with all participants brainstorming ideas for solutions to the various problem understandings they created. The ideas do not have to be realistic or feasible at this point. The aim is rather to prompt participants toward thinking outside their usual frame of reference and developing creative ideas to address existing problems. One round of brainstorming can also be structured and re-energized by assigning everyone a role relevant to the problem, asking participants to come up with solutions based on their role's point of view instead of their own, thereby also considering organizational power hierarchies, and considering what leverage might come with different positions.	In the workshops in Copenhagen and Stockholm, with Danish Defence as one case organization, participants were asked to redefine the introduced challenge (a lack of women pursuing a career as soldiers) to a norm-critical frame. In Stockholm, one group reframed the challenge to "Stereotypical 'male' leadership attributes [create] norms of how leadership is seen [in the military]." The context information provided in the case summary and the insights from the prior norm-critical exercise were used to redefine the challenge. Framing the challenge from a structural perspective with a focus on norms, rather than on an individual level, allowed the groups to develop not only individual but also structural-level solutions during the brainstorming session. One group in Stockholm, for instance, proposed an idea of a norm-critical training program for soldiers to discuss and reflect on gendered stereotypes permeating the military work setting. Another group suggested leadership training to question the normative idea or ideals of what it means to be a good soldier and a good military leader to challenge the gendered implications of those norms.

4 – Norm-critical exercise	Before assessing the developed solutions, another norm-critical exercise is integrated to deepen and maintain the participants' norm-critical reflections. Participants are encouraged to take organizational and societal norms as points of reference for critically reflecting on dominant norms and how some of them can be needlessly exclusionary to people who do not fit or perform the norms. During the workshops conducted in Copenhagen, Helsinki, and Stockholm in April 2019, this exercise included a reflection on privileges, norms, and biases by linking the topic of unconscious biases, as introduced in the first phase, to organizational norms as structural components enabling biased behavior. The exercise consisted of an individual reflection on the participants' own privileges and a shared group exercise on the benefits and constraints of certain privileges. It allowed participants to realize how certain norms can create privileges for people with certain identity categories, yet at the same time produce stereotypes and expectations that govern how that identity needs to be lived and performed in a normative way. They further learned and experienced how biases are embedded within normative frames that enable and reproduce them in organizational settings. Importantly, this allowed for a reflection not only on biases but also on their normative bases, thereby paving the way for establishing norm-critical perspectives on organizational processes and practices.	During the workshop in Stockholm, the norm-critical exercise triggered a conversation about a heteronormative masculinity norm. It had already been noted in the *My multidimensional self* exercise that women were more likely than men to choose their gender as a category with which they self-identify. Similarly, people who did not self-identify as heterosexual more often mentioned their sexual orientation than heterosexual participants. Linking this realization with the exercise on privileges, norms, and biases allowed an exploration of the invisibility of heteronormative masculinity as a norm against which othered identities are created. It opened the learning space for a discussion on how certain privileges are taken for granted by those inhabiting privileged positions, whereas people not fitting or breaking a norm might be more aware of their marginalized position due to a lack of privilege. As one participant in the Stockholm workshop expressed, "It's difficult to see how I think, my norms. […] It's easier to see what other people do." That further fostered a conversation about the privileges linked to normative positionalities. For example, returning to the Danish Defence case, participants discussed that men might have easier access to leadership positions due to more easily fitting the norms of the good soldier and the good leader. They also reflected on the need to perform masculinity correctly, for instance through the lens of heteronormativity, so as to fit the norm. The exercise thus provided further encouragement for participants to think norm-critically when choosing solutions to explore further in the next step.
5 – Idea selection	Participants assess the solutions they developed during ideation and select three ideas they want to work with further. They are encouraged to choose ideas not only based on their feasibility but also from a norm-critical perspective by assessing the extent to which they can tackle the problem at the structural level of organizational and social norms. Participants fill out an idea form in which they specify their perspective on the problem, their solution idea, its users or target groups, key milestones, involved partners, most important results, and the time horizon for implementing the solution.	For the first workshop in Copenhagen in March 2019, we used Padlet—an online brainstorming tool—to gather all the ideas produced by the participants. This tool had the advantage of rendering ideas for solutions accessible and visible to everyone. At the Stockholm workshop, the group working on the Danish Defence case that developed the idea of a norm-critical training program used the idea form to specify elements such as weekly reflection sessions for all soldiers and feedback loops between the Danish Ministry of Defence, the military base commander, an equality officer, and individual units and groups. They also developed a time plan including direct action that they could initiate tomorrow, medium-term goals to be implemented step by step within the next year, and some action points to run continuously.
Further steps: Prototyping and implementation	Ideally, the process should not end with the selection of ideas but continue into a phase of prototyping. The prototyped ideas can eventually be implemented and tested in the organization. If the testing reveals insights that redefine the problem, the first phase of the workshop can be repeated. Likewise, if the test creates new ideas, it becomes relevant to do the third phase of ideation anew. As such, the workshop process is conceived as cyclical or non-linear.	All case organizations that participated in any of the workshops were sent an overview of the solutions developed, including the idea form, highlighting concrete next steps to take to test and implement the solution ideas.

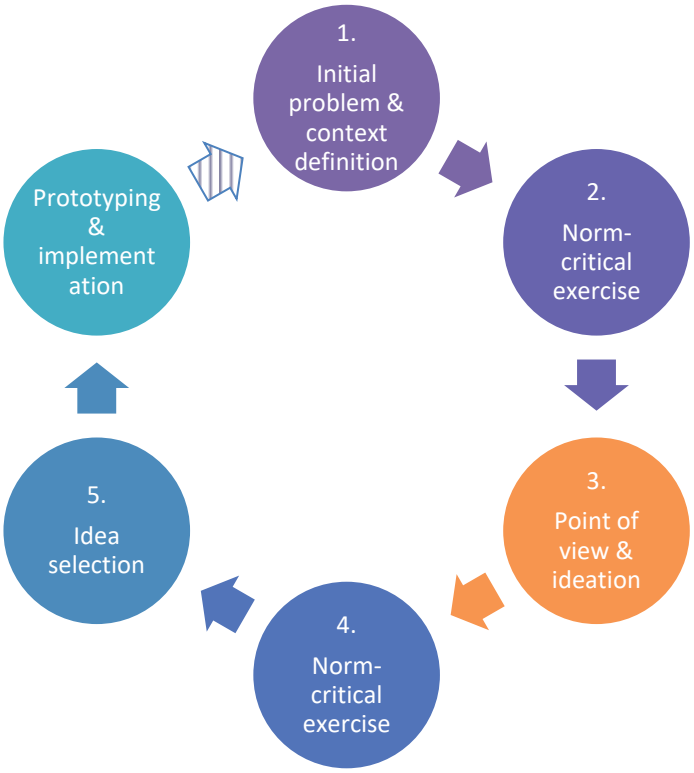


Figure 2: Cyclical workshop format. The striped arrow after prototyping and implementation indicates that you can go back to any prior step depending on the need. For example, if testing produces new ideas, it might be relevant to skip the first two steps and repeat the ideation step.

analysis, and claim formulation (as thought). Instead, we analyzed and discussed the insights from collective reflections and the participants' feedback continuously *during* the workshop period. The analytical insights produced throughout the process were integrated into the development of the intervention format and are the underlying basis for the conceptualization proposed in this article. As part of that iterative and action-based analysis, we developed the terms *knowledge, awareness, practice,* and *action*. These terms were established based on our analytical reflections on the workshops' structures and processes combined with our consideration of the gaps in existing intervention formats, as outlined in the literature review. Likewise, the four categories are conducive for further development of the workshops while also providing the structure for the next part of this article. We thus follow Ashcraft and Muhr (2018, 223, *italics in original*) in approaching "coding as a practice that begins the moment we enter the field and continues throughout the life of a project [… and] analysis as *data in co-production*" by acknowledging the iterative process of generating and analyzing data throughout the research project.

Conceptualizing a new model of organizational bias intervention

The developed intervention combines four elements, which we term: 1) *knowledge*, 2) *awareness*, 3) *practice,* and 4) *action*. These elements were, as outlined, derived from the empirical material produced as part of the action research project and are used to structure this part of the article. We describe below each element's use and purpose in the intervention, with examples provided from the various exercises. We highlight how the model goes beyond existing antibias interventions by addressing the three shortcomings identified in the literature and how elements from both norm critique and design thinking are woven into its set-up and structure.

1. Knowledge

The first element, *knowledge*, describes a theoretical introduction to unconscious bias to create an initial understanding of how biases work, their implications at a personal, organizational, and societal level, and which problems they might create in participants' particular contexts. As part of this introduction, we explain how biases are linked to broader societal power structures in the specific sociopolitical context in which the organization is embedded, thereby mitigating the first shortcoming outlined in the literature review. Furthermore, we share knowledge on norms, norm critique (Christensen 2020; Henriksson 2017; Holck and Muhr 2017), and design thinking (Brown 2008; Buchanan 1992; Elsbach and Stigliani 2018), which we introduce as the workshop's methodological basis.

While we stress that both norm critique and design thinking can only be fully understood through practice, providing participants with a theoretical introduction allows a frame for further workshop elements to be established. We can, for instance, prepare participants to feel stressed and under time pressure during the design thinking exercises (Brown 2008; Brown and Wyatt 2010) and embody a sense of discomfort during the norm-critical ones (Christensen 2018; Staunæs 2017). The aim is not to make participants feel less stressed or more comfortable but to familiarize them with the need to deal with insecurity, ambiguity, and unfamiliarity so as to learn in this intervention format. This is especially true when participants are realizing their individual position within, and potentially their contribution to, structural inequalities and injustices in organizations. A reflection shared by many and explicitly expressed by one participant captures the essence: "It is uncomfortable. It is stressful. But it actually makes you move" (Copenhagen, April 2, 2019). This quote highlights how feelings of distress and unease inherent in the approach can provide the necessary trigger to step outside one's comfort zone, question ingrained biases, and potentially change biased behavior.

2. Awareness

The second element constitutes the part that has similarities to existing antibias interventions, but in this case, it is conducted from a more structural perspective. It starts with an in-depth reflection on participants' social stereotypes, leading to *awareness* about their own unconscious biases and their influence on thoughts and behavior. Existing bias interventions tend to test participants on predefined stereotypes of, for instance, race, gender, bodily capability, etc., with each tested separately. In contrast, this workshop prioritizes reflections closely related to participants' own experiences of encountering bias within their organizational context. Postponing the use of *a priori* categories allows for the exploration of *emerging* categories relevant to the specific organizational context, its diversity, and its aim for equality by considering intersectional identity categories, as called for by critical diversity scholars (Hvenegård-Lassen, Staunæs and Lund 2020; Rodriguez et al. 2016). When asked to describe their identity, one participant shared that she considered choosing between *ex-pat*, *international*, and *migrant* but realized that all three were constructed in opposition to a normative ideal of being *Finnish*, even though she would, despite not being *Finnish*, identify as *local* (Helsinki, April 10, 2019). By avoiding predefined normative categories, we enable participants to explore the norms that exist within their organizational contexts and biases linked to those norms. Instead of only focusing on individual biases, we illuminate the structural connection between biases, norms, and privileged positions.

Another example is an exercise on privileges concerning norms and biases. Many participants were surprised by some of their own privileges. As one participant in a workshop noted: "It's difficult to see how I think, my norms. […] It's easier to see what other people do" (Stockholm, April 5, 2019). It opened the learning space for a discussion about how certain privileges are taken for granted by those inhabiting privileged positions, whereas people not fitting or breaking a norm might be more aware of their marginalized position due

to their lack of privilege (Ahmed 2004; McIntosh 2020; McIntosh, Kimmel and Ferber 2017; Sullivan 2006). Moreover, the effects of inhabiting a position of privilege or marginalization were discussed with the aim of avoiding an individualization of the problem, which might lead to pity, shame, or envy, instead of critically exploring the normative basis that enables the existence and unequal distribution of privileges. Avoiding individualization further allows for reflection on how to deal with privilege in a more nuanced way than assuming that privilege can be *handed over* to marginalized people (Applebaum 2008). As individual privilege is structurally embedded in social and organizational norms, an individual cannot simply renounce their privilege, at least not beyond a momentary act of, for example, giving space. Individual awareness of bias and privilege is not enough to change norms (Ahmed 2004). This brings us to the third element of practice.

3. Practice

The third element was integrated to avoid participants just leaving the intervention with the newly gained knowledge and awareness that everyone, including themselves, is biased. That alone does not seem to help change behavior (Correll 2017). The *practice* element, therefore, leads them through a set of exercises in which they try to act on their new insights. Participants are introduced to an organizational challenge provided by a case organization. In Copenhagen and Stockholm, Danish Defence was one such case organization, with a lack of women pursuing a career as soldiers being defined as their main challenge. Participants are asked to redefine the challenge using a norm-critical frame. One reframed challenge definition read: "Stereotypical 'male' leadership attributes [create] norms of how leadership is seen [in the military]" (Stockholm, April 5, 2019). Reframing is important, as framing the problem influences the solutions that become possible (Buchanan 1992). Participants learn that framing problems from a structural perspective allows structural, norm-critical solutions to be developed, whereas individualized problem framing tends to inspire individual-based solutions.

Still, we found that many ideas developed throughout the ideation and solution development phase were anchored within biased understandings of the problem. The Danish Defence case provides a fitting example. Several participants reiteratively stated that "[in the military] you have so many jobs that are not physical, but brain based. So, [… as a woman] you can go the civil way" (Copenhagen, April 2, 2019), thereby positioning women in a *next to* role instead of questioning the norms that inhibit women from becoming soldiers. The facilitator, through questioning, guided participants to realize which solutions were built upon their newly gained knowledge and awareness and in which cases they might have slipped back into biased frames of thought and behavior. Participants are led to reflect on which normative assumptions and biases supported the production of those ideas. In the case of Danish Defence, it was discussed how two norms and related biases persist: first, that women are always physically weaker than and, therefore, inferior to men; and second, that the career of a contemporary soldier primarily relies on physical strength. Meeting their own limitations in *practicing* bias-awareness enables participants to see and experience the structural undercurrents that guide, facilitate, and inhibit their organizational behavior. The *practice* element thus initiates an in-depth reflection on organizational norms and their performative power (Butler 1990, 2011/1993), thereby addressing the second shortcoming highlighted in the literature review, namely the (lack of) acknowledgment of structural constraints on actions in each specific organizational context.

4. Action

A final element, called *action,* translates insights from the workshop into the participants' organizational contexts. Many of the exercises throughout the workshop focus on the participants' own workplaces and organizations to allow them to

translate their learning into a relevant context. Extending that approach, the final part of the workshop facilitates the development of an idea catalog with norm-critical, bias-aware solutions for the participants' organizational challenges. The selected ideas, after being assessed for their norm-critical potential, inherent biases, context relevance, and feasibility, are described in more detail by using an idea form that we developed as workshop material for this purpose. The goal is for participants to leave the workshop with a list of possible norm-critical solutions, including an outline of how to feasibly test their implementation in their respective organizational contexts.

This final step addresses the third shortcoming in the literature—the lack of concrete organizational action points as part of interventions. To overcome this weakness, we create space within the workshop format for participants to develop specific action points that need to be initiated so as to foster collective responsibility for changing the organizational processes and structures that enable biased behavior to persist. To return to the example of Danish Defence, one group developed the idea of a norm-critical training program to discuss and reflect upon gendered norms permeating the military work setting. The training program included elements such as weekly reflection sessions for all soldiers and feedback loops between the Danish Ministry of Defence, the military base commander, an equality officer, individual units, and groups. Leveraging their existing connections to some of those contributors, the participants developed a time plan that included direct action that they could initiate tomorrow, medium-term goals to be implemented incrementally within the next year, and some action points to be run continuously (Stockholm, April 5, 2019). The *action* part is thus aimed at making it more feasible for participants to follow up on the insights gained in the workshop through concrete action within their organizational contexts.

Concluding discussion: Toward a structural understanding of bias and a norm-critical approach to bias intervention in organizations

In answering the overall research question of how we may counter unconscious bias at a structural-organizational level of norms that is beyond individual attitudes and behavior, this article offers two overall contributions to unconscious bias research and intervention in organizations. First, we have provided an *empirically grounded conceptualization* of an *organizational bias intervention* that is anchored within a *norm-critical* understanding of unconscious bias. This means that it is aimed at critically examining and changing organizational norms that enable and encourage biased behavior rather than being primarily aimed at reducing individual unconscious bias. It is important to note that we do not wish to dismiss individual responsibility in organizational contexts. The individuals taking part in the intervention are encouraged and enabled to question critically and disrupt organizational norms that are found to reproduce biases and create exclusionary effects. Yet we maintain that an individualized perspective in which a change of individual attitudes or behaviors is deemed sufficient for structural change disregards the anchoring of inequality problems and discrimination in organizational norms and thus impedes success. Instead, we suggest rethinking individual responsibility to account for the organizational positioning of the individuals involved. That is, it should not be up to the *diversity subjects* (Ahmed 2004; Wiggins-Romesburg and Githens 2018) to create the needed progress. Change needs to include participants in majority positions (Christensen 2018, 2020) because organizational norms are continuously produced—often unconsciously (Plotnikof and Graack-Larsen 2018)—by the people who make up the organization. It is equally important that individuals who have more power and leverage in the organization, such as managers and leaders, be held accountable for the structural changes that are needed to avoid biased behavior.

As a second contribution, we extended Devine et al. (2012) and Forscher et al.'s (2017) bias intervention model by integrating a norm-critical perspective. Failing to take organizational structures into account might be a possible reason for the absence of clear empirical results in the previous studies using the said model. By integrating a reflection on normative organizational processes and practices into our developed intervention, we aim to overcome the bias toward individualization found in Devine et al. (2012) and many other current antibias interventions. We maintain that organizational bias interventions need to be anchored within a norm-critical understanding of organizations to account for the effect of organizational norms on individual biased behavior. Thus, by arguing alongside and extending Devine et al.'s (2012) conceptualization, we assert that biased behavior may be discouraged through a combination of:

- Awareness of unconscious bias and how it is structurally reproduced;
- Concern about its effects on an individual and structural-organizational level of processes, practices, and routines;
- Learning about the normative contexts and situations that activate biases;
- Gaining knowledge and practical experience of how to apply norm-critical strategies that change the relevant organizational norms in those specific contexts and situations.

The underlying idea of the developed intervention is therefore not primarily to reduce or eliminate individual unconscious bias, as has been the ambition of and measure for success in much (if not most) research on unconscious bias training thus far. Rather, we seek to work toward organizational behavior becoming less biased. To that end, awareness is used solely to identify where action should be directed. As Muhr (2019) indicated, bias is only blocked by action, not by awareness. In other words, we advance the critical insight put forth by Dobbin and Kalev (2018), Noon (2018), and others that mere awareness of the existence of biases is inadequate for fostering organizational change. We further argue that interventions need to foster change within the organizational context so that biased behavior is prevented from kicking in. The workshop format proposed and described in this article provides one possible way of implementing such an intervention.

Limitations and implications for future research

As stated at the beginning of this article, the developed intervention is a *proposition* for how to address the three limitations identified in the existing literature to advance unconscious bias training. While the development is empirically grounded, we cannot claim to have proved that this new workshop format is more effective in reducing discrimination in organizations or increasing the number of underrepresented minorities. Providing such proof has not been our aim. For future research, we, therefore, encourage other scholars to adopt and, if necessary, adapt our proposed workshop format to test the impact of the intervention. To that end, we see fit to revert to our initial critique in this article regarding how the effectiveness of bias interventions has frequently been reduced to a measure of short-term change in individual unconscious bias according to one measured category (e.g. race, gender, or sexuality). While it is beyond the scope of this article to suggest how best to measure the impact of our proposed model for intervention, we hope that our description of the experimental approach to developing the workshop format will inspire equally inventive ways of measuring its success. Such work could be conducted alongside testing the intervention in other organizational contexts and areas of inequality, as called for by Chang et al. (2019). While the workshops we conducted primarily targeted gender bias, we suggest broadening the focus of the intervention to tackle unconscious biases norm-critically in relation to, for example, race and racialization, sexuality, or class and explicitly addressing how they relate intersectionally (Hvenegård-Lassen, Staunæs and Lund 2020; Rodriguez et al. 2016).

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Notes

1 For this article, we use the terms unconscious and implicit bias interchangeably in line with the preferences of the authors cited. Differentiating between these terms is not relevant to our argument.

2 See Project Implicit [https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/aboutus.html].

3 Such training goes by many names, including awareness training, diversity training, unconscious bias training, and antibias training. We do not distinguish between these terms in this article.

4 Visit [https://www.cbs.dk/en/knowledge-society/areas/diversity-and-difference/research-and-activities/networks-and-projects/learn-engage-create-with-genderlab-a-research-based-tool] for more information on the research project, which was funded by Nordic Information on Gender—a cooperation body under the Nordic Council of Ministers.

5 Link to dissemination report [https://www.cbs.dk/files/cbs.dk/genderlab_dissemination_report_1.pdf].

6 Out of the 77 participant responses, 27 were from the workshop held in Copenhagen on March 8, 9 were from Copenhagen in April, 20 from Stockholm, and 21 from Helsinki.

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