Unconscious bias in organizations: Discriminatory forces at work

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Abstract

This special issue revolves around the topic of unconscious bias in organizations. The six articles included draw on diverse disciplinary, theoretical, and methodological approaches to show how unconscious bias play out in organizational settings and how they lead to various forms of discrimination. The articles contribute to the current bias literature by (1) elevating the idea of bias from individualist perspectives toward more contextual considerations, (2) drawing on multiple perspectives from different research fields and thereby creating a more interdisciplinary understanding, (3) considering unconscious and discriminatory gender bias in intersection with other markers of social inequality, and (4) by reframing current understandings of bias in organizations toward a more actionable and change-oriented perspective. To conclude, the special issue illustrates novel approaches to and discussions on the matter of investigating bias at the root of discrimination in organizations.

KEYWORDS: unconscious bias, implicit bias, discrimination, discriminatory, organization

What Is Unconscious Bias and Why Should Organizations Care?

Organizations are not neutral. Overwhelming evidence shows how organizational processes and structures are, among other things, gendered, classed, and racialized, which has consistently been linked to the way in which human beings are biased in their evaluation of each other (Acker 1990; Brewis, Hampton and Linstead 1997; Britton 2000; Martin and Collinson 2002; Smith and Parrotta 2018; Williams 2015). Every day, we are bombarded with myriads of information, which forces our brains to take shortcuts that rely on categorizations in order to make sense of our surroundings (Bargh and Chartrand 1999; Fine 2013, 2018; Hassin et al. 2005; Rippon 2019; Saini 2018). Problematic here is not the shortcut per se, but rather the culturally and historically defined categorizations we fall back on, for example, gender, class, and race. We increasingly learn how these categorizations are not as *normal*, *natural*, and *neutral* as we might think. Upon further examination, they often turn out to be based on gendered, capitalist, and colonial discourses that we are unaware of. In matters of work and organizations, this means that we often automatically create associations, for example, by linking certain bodies to certain professions and positions (Ashcraft 2013; Ashcraft et al. 2012; Einarsdóttir, Hoel and Lewis 2016; Heilman and Caleo 2018, Monaghan 2002). Therefore, our evaluations of, for example, candidates for new jobs or promotions are always gendered, classed, and racialized, even if we are convinced otherwise.

At work, our biases can easily lead us to think in stereotypical ways, whereby certain individuals benefit, while others are penalized (Carlsson and Rooth 2007; Gaustad and Raknes 2015; Muhr 2011; Moss-Racusin et al. 2012; Trix and Psenka 2003). Due to their unconscious anchoring, biases not only result in deliberate and open discrimination, but they also tend to create subtle and invisible forms thereof, which nonetheless (re)create inequality, oppression, and bad business decisions. For example, unconscious biases lead to unequal treatment and evaluation of employees, which has detrimental effects on recruitment, development, and promotion of employees as well as for their well-being and thus productivity. Caring about unconscious bias and its discriminatory effects is aligned with the business case for diversity, and organizations are increasingly showing their interest in these topics. Trying to understand and limit unconscious bias has been found to create a multitude of benefits for organizations, such as increased group innovations, productivity, creativity, enhanced relationship-building, community-building, employee loyalty, retention, commitment, and a greater appreciation for equity, diversity, and inclusivity (Danowitz et al. 2012). This explains the hype around unconscious bias training of various sorts, which many organizations embrace to signal their awareness of this issue. And yet, more recent findings show that a lot of this training is inefficient at best—and may even create negative results at worst (Bendl et al. 2015; Deane 2013; Sabharwal 2014).

With this special issue, we want to take stock of and advance the current academic debates on unconscious bias in organizations. How can we as researchers address the bias-hype in organizations? How can we do so in ways that spark new ideas and discussions on the matter of investigating bias at the root of discrimination? What aspects of unconscious bias in organizations are still to be uncovered? In what new ways can we meaningfully address them? These questions are relevant to ask, given a bourgeoning body of literature, which has already addressed topics of bias from a multitude of perspectives.

Articles Included in this Special Issue

The papers collected here tend to the problems of unconscious and discriminatory bias in organizations in nuanced ways, drawing on diverse disciplinary, theoretical, and methodological approaches. One approach is elevating the idea of bias from individualist perspectives toward more contextual considerations. A second approach

draws on multiple perspectives from different research fields and thereby creates a more inter-disciplinary understanding compared to the first. A third way is to consider unconscious and discriminatory gender bias in intersection with other markers of social inequality. Last are propositions to reframe current understandings of bias in organizations toward a more actionable and change-oriented perspective. We discuss these ways of thinking and their relation to the articles in this special issue next.

One important approach highlighted in this special issue is to elevate the idea of bias from individualist perspectives toward more contextual considerations. To this end, two articles are featured. The first article, *Gender Bias in Recruiting: Developing a Social Practice Perspective* by Nentwich, Baumgärtner, Chowdhury, and Witzig, theorizes gender bias as a context-specific and interactive accomplishment of social practices. In this conceptual article, the authors develop a different, more comprehensive way to understand, explain, and address gender bias, which they apply to the empirical context of recruiting and gender. Their findings highlight the importance of organizational structures and practices, which affect the recruitment process by affecting individuals' biased actions and behaviors. This finding helps to move discussions on unconscious bias beyond the individual's own cognition.

The second article, A Woman Who's Tough, She's a Bitch: *How Labels Anchored in Unconscious Bias Shape the Institution of Gender* by Mangen, shows how labels anchored in unconscious bias can contribute to the institutionalization of gender inequalities in organizations. This empirical study draws on interviews with 31 women directors in Canadian for-profit organizations to illustrate how labels relate to unconscious bias toward them. Furthermore, it highlights how labels legitimize or de-legitimize women in leadership and how they react to labels. Labels are understood as normative control stories that the collective tells about the *deviant* other—here, the woman leader. The women leaders, the article argues, deviate in two ways: first from their ascribed social role associated with their gender

category and second from the collective idea of what a leader looks like. In so doing, the article draws attention to organizational structures and how they are reproduced on a micro level, namely the individuals' practice of labeling.

The second approach addresses bias by drawing on multiple perspectives from different research fields, creating a more interdisciplinary understanding. The article *A Lacanian Perspective on Bias in Language: How Women Can(not) Ever 'Make It' in Academia* by Einersen, Villesèche, and Huopalainen draws on linguistic, psychological, and sociological work. The authors study gender bias in organizations by adopting a Lacanian psychoanalytic perspective to investigate bias in language without separating language from the speaker. To this end, career narratives from female professors exemplify the argument that coming into being as a performing subject means satisfying the desire of an organizational, academic other. This other, as the authors show, rests upon a masculine ideal, whereby *making it* for women in academia is constrained by the continued experience of bias. Drawing on a Lacanian approach makes visible how gender bias is simultaneously contested and reproduced in the narratives of women with successful careers in academia.

The third approach considers unconscious and discriminatory gender bias in intersection with other markers of social inequality. Here, the empirical article *Doing Un/Troubled Subject Positions as a Transgender Woman with Autism: The Case of Vera* by Skewes, Occhino, and Herold captures inclusion and exclusion processes in one transgender person's life, which also contains experiences with autism. Using Staunæs' (2005) concept of *troubling subjectivities*, this study explores how Vera negotiates her identity as a neurodiverse transgender woman. The article considers how the two categories of transgender and autism intersect and which inclusion and exclusion processes they set in motion. Vera's case unveils how bias in terms of these two social categories shapes her degree of agency both in her private social relations and in more institutional settings, for example in education and healthcare. This further shows the importance of intersectional

approaches to discriminatory bias. The individual's identity—consisting of being both a transgender woman *and* a neurodiverse person—causes new experiences that are meaningfully captured through intersectional sensitivities.

The article *Bias and Leadership Aspirations: Exploring the Interaction of Gender and Parental Status in Self-Evaluations* by Villesèche, Ottsen, and Paunova considers the intersection between gender and parental status. This study extends existing work on bias and leadership aspirations by investigating the differences in self-evaluations with regard to gender and parental status. This article reports on a quantitative survey study with data from 866 female and 1372 male members of the leading Danish union for managers and leaders. The findings indicate that men and women are differentially affected by combined gender and parenthood biases. Gendered social expectations for parents affect self-evaluations even in the Danish national context, which is characterized by high levels of gender equality before the law. Here again, intersectional sensitivities are useful to understand the conundrum pertaining to two marginalized identity categories at once: being a woman and a mother.

The last approach reframes current understandings of bias in organizations toward a more actionable and change-oriented perspective. The article *From Individual to Organizational Bias: A Norm-Critical Proposition for Unconscious Bias Intervention in Organizations* by Christensen and Guschke links the absence of positive change to a lack of engagement with structural-organizational contexts. The study identifies shortcomings in the literature, arguing that interventions tend to ignore societal power structures, organizational contexts, and concrete organizational action. In combining recent thought on unconscious bias research with norm critique and design thinking, the authors propose a new intervention model that extends to a structural understanding of bias as embedded in organizational norms. The authors present data from an action research project that included a workshop series developed and organized across three Scandinavian countries over one year. This results in an empirically

grounded conceptualization of organizational bias intervention. Thereby, the article offers two overall contributions to unconscious bias research and intervention in organizations: an empirically grounded conceptualization of an organizational bias intervention and an extended bias intervention model that integrates a norm-critical perspective.

As a way of ending the issue, we bring Lea Skewes' review of the Danish book *Antifeminisme – Kvindehad i Lighedens Tidsalder* written by Mikkel Thorup. Skewes reviews the book with both wit and humor as she describes how Thorup one by one dismantles the biases about and hostile attitudes towards feminism and feminist research. The book review is written in Danish.

Concluding Remarks

Organizations are not neutral, and with this special issue, we contribute more nuanced, reflective, and critical perspectives on this matter by illustrating unconscious and discriminatory bias at work in organizations. The articles collected in this special issue offer new ways of approaching how bias leads to stereotypical thinking, which translates into benefits and penalization of certain individuals, irrespective of merit. We aimed to take stock of and advance the current academic debates on this matter. The approaches outlined in this editorial offer distinct pathways to conceptualize, theorize, and methodologically consider bias in organizations. So doing allows us to critically interrogate the bias-hype that we may encounter in the empirical world. This means that, despite the grand promises of bias training, we nevertheless remain aware of and attentive to bias at the root of discriminatory structures and practices.

In the beginning, we asked which aspects of unconscious bias in organizations could still be uncovered. The answer, as this special issue shows, may not necessarily lie in finding and categorizing ever more forms or outcomes of bias, but rather investigating how these relate to and constitute each other, as well as how they are embedded in organizations and society at large.

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