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Unconscious Bias in Organizations

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COVER ILLUSTRATION
© Anna Breit, born in October 1991 in Vienna, moves between fashion photography and free artistic projects, where she focuses primarily on people and relationships – mostly family members and friends. The cover shot fools the eye and confuses the viewers with an optical illusion of a hand in a transparent glove filled with water. Illustrating the oddity of the human brain, the ambiguous image encourages the viewers to stop and think about our biased perception and how bias influence the ways we interpret and evaluate the world around us. The lack of clarity in the picture reminds the viewers of taking a pause in our information processing to explore our distorted perceptions and reflect on the value of different views and perspectives.

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Unconscious bias in organizations: Discriminatory forces at work

By Maria Clar, Sara Louise Muhr, Lea Katharina Reiss & Kai Storm

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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 interdisciplinary 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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Gender Bias in Recruiting: Developing a Social Practice Perspective

By Julia C. Nentwich, Miriam K. Baumgärtner, Nilima Chowdhury & Verena Witzig

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Abstract

Unconscious bias training has become a popular intervention for eliminating discrimination in the workplace. Particularly recruitment processes are said to become fairer and more objective if gender biases are eliminated through training of personnel. However, the concept of gender bias, and particularly the idea that it can be trained away, has also been critiqued as too limited in its focus on individual mental processes, thereby neglecting effects of context, interaction and power. Taking this critique as our starting point, we argue that gender bias needs to be theorised in relation to a specific interaction and normative context. Building on cognitive social psychology, critical social psychology and on gender as a social practice we show that gender bias is not only an individual, but a fundamentally social activity that is embedded within organisational norms and power relations and reproduced in interaction. By theorising gender bias as a social practice, we expand the concept of gender bias beyond individual cognition. This perspective not only opens up the scope of explanation but is also a vital concept for exploring and combatting bias in recruiting.

KEYWORDS: implicit bias, gender, recruitment, social practice, critical social psychology

Why unconscious bias trainings are not enough

Unconscious bias training has been implemented in many organizational settings worldwide (OECD 2014; Williamson and Foley 2018), for instance in academia (Maes et al. 2012), to prevent discrimination rooted in biased employment decision making. The idea is that making unconscious bias conscious has become the "magic bullet" for solving any problem pertaining to discrimination, particularly in recruitment processes (Tate and Page 2018, 141). Making people aware of their biases is also supposed to change their behavior (Valian 1998). The assumption is that if we become aware of our own biases, we are made to think and learn. Research on bias training, in general, demonstrates that it is suitable for raising awareness (Carnes et al. 2015; Majumdar et al. 2004; Moss-Racusin et al. 2016). As indicated by a recent meta-analysis conducted by Bezrukova et al. (2016), diversity training also tends to increase the respective knowledge of the participants. However, these positive effects appear to be of short duration (Girod et al. 2016; Jackson, Hillard and Schneider 2014). And, more importantly, they not only fail to change behavior and prevent discrimination but may even legitimize it.

First, there is a rather "huge leap from knowing about bias to acting differently," as Noon (2018, 200) argued. For instance, studies did not find a direct causal link between implicit association test scores and discrimination, and hence, concrete behavior (Forscher et al. 2019). While the training appears to change attitudes, the assumed effect on behavior is largely unknown and contested (Paluck and Green 2009; Price et al. 2005). A recent report by Britain's Equality and Human Rights Commission (Atewologun, Tresh and Cornish 2018, 7), which examined 18 papers evaluating unconscious bias training, concluded that "the evidence for UBT's [unconscious bias training] ability effectively to change behaviour is limited. Most of the evidence reviewed did not use valid measures of behaviour change." Moreover, bias training may backfire and activate, instead of resolve, stereotypes (Apfelbaum et al. 2008; Duguid and Thomas-Hunt 2015; Kalev, Dobbin and Kelly 2009).

Taking these shortcomings as a start, we elaborate on a more comprehensive understanding of gender bias that moves beyond mere cognition. Systematically unpacking the psychological concept of unconscious gender bias, we argue that the aims of bias training have so far been under-complex as they are too narrowly focused on raising individual awareness and initiating learning. From an organizational perspective, implementing bias training has been criticized for protecting "systemic ignorance" rather than eliminating it (Applebaum 2019, 130). Explaining discrimination with individual mental processes neglects institutional structures, norms, and power imbalances (Noon 2018, 198; Tate and Page 2018). This not only ignores the complex social and organizational situations and practices of recruiting but also bypasses important strands of social psychological theories. By reviewing pertinent psychological theories and debates, we show how gender bias can be theorized as a context-specific and interactive accomplishment embedded within organizational norms and power relations—in short, a social practice. Developing this distinctively psychological perspective, we contribute a fresh take on gender bias as a social practice. Our aim is to show how the concept of gender bias can be developed in a more comprehensive way to explain and tackle bias in recruiting. Having said that, we argue that tackling gender bias in recruiting will only be effective if interventions are aimed at changing organizational structures and practices that are implicated in (re)producing gender hierarchy (i.e., the habitual privileging of the masculine over the feminine) (Nentwich and Kelan 2014). In the concluding section, we elaborate on the implications for rethinking interventions aimed at reducing gender bias in recruitment.

Gender bias in recruiting: Moving beyond the individual

Bias training is aimed at creating awareness and making unconscious bias conscious. However, this objective is problematic in at least two ways. First, it neglects long-lasting debates in social psychology, in which the notion of unconscious bias is contested in particular (Fazio and Olsen 2003; Greenwald and Lai 2017). Introducing implicit bias, Banaji and Greenwald (1995) differentiated conscious and unconscious attitudes as two different modes of information processing (Gawronski, Hofmann and Wilbur 2006). The negative judgments and attitudes that a person might hold against a certain outgroup are explained as resulting from the automatic and often unnoticed activation of negative stereotypes. However, more recent studies have shown that implicit biases are not necessarily unconscious or automatized reactions but can also be interpreted as spontaneous affective reactions that people are aware of (Hahn and Gawronski 2019). Thus, paying attention to one's spontaneous affective reactions helps to prevent discriminatory behavior. Therefore, bias training should move beyond raising awareness and rather aim to acknowledge bias and act upon it.

Second, research on gender bias so far mainly focuses on individual cognition. The social context, power, and norms are not touched upon and are thus treated as a black box, thereby leaving important questions unanswered. This leaves out important aspects when it comes to explaining recruitment decisions, which do have a context. There is a company, an occupation, a job description that needs to be considered. Furthermore, employment decisions result form debate and discussion, even if they are often made by individuals. Finally, recruitment decisions are inherently social, and thus power and social norms are at stake and need to be taken into account. In the following three sections, we explain in greater detail how the concept of gender bias needs to be expanded, amplyfying its potential by taking context, interaction, and social norms into account.

Gender bias beyond individual mental processes: Incorporating social context

Gender bias is assumed to be relevant for recruitment, particularly if there is a lack of fit or incongruity (Eagly and Karau 2002) between gender stereotypes and the characteristics of the job. Ashcraft (2013), for instance, argues that people not only derive identity from their work, but work also derives identity from associated people. More specifically, certain jobs have certain properties that fit certain persons, but not others. Thus, evaluations of possible job candidates are gendered because the required job features are automatically perceived to be matched by a male job candidate (Ashcraft 2013). Depending on the masculinity associated with a position, decision makers are likely to perceive women as ill-equipped or even deficient in terms of attributes that are thought to be relevant for succeeding in the job (Eagly and Karau 2002; Heilman 2012, 118). Thus, performance expectations for female applicants are lower, and so are their chances of getting the respective job. Furthermore, a female skill set is portrayed differently compared to a male skill set, for instance, in the context of being recommended as a member of a medical faculty, as shown by Trix and Psenka (2003). These automatic processes represent implicit biases, resulting in stereotypical thinking and discrimination.

Perceived masculinity is dependent on the job itself, but also occupation (military versus education), academic fields (sciences versus humanities), function, and organizational hierarchy (Heilman 2012, 118). The other side of the coin is stereotypes about women, which are more salient when women are perceived as typical females, for instance when they are physically attractive (Heilman and Stopeck 1985) or have children (Heilman and Okimoto 2008). Moreover, structural factors such as minority status or diversity policies can accentuate a women's gender in certain organizational contexts (Heilman 2012).

This lack of fit perception determines the way information is processed (i.e., attention, interpretation, and recall of information) (Heilman 2012), which are related to the recruitment, selection, and promotion of women. A seminal meta-analysis by Koch, D'Mello, and Sackett (2015) on gender bias in employment decisions showed that the degree of incongruence between stereotypical gender traits and the gender stereotype of a job determines the strength of the bias, being most pronounced in male-dominated jobs. The authors also challenge the assumption that additional information on the evaluated person reduces or even removes gender bias. However, the perceived fit or congruity is dependent on the organizational context and the "cultural construal of leadership" (Koenig et al. 2011, 637). This is empirically supported by Koch et al. (2015), who found that women are more likely to face discrimination in male-dominated environments, which tend to be the ones highest in salary and prestige, but not in female-dominated or integrated ones. This research shows that information processing is not only an individual mental process but is highly dependent on the context.

In a similar vein, gender schema theory (Anderson, Spiro and Montague 1977) has highlighted that our expectations of women and men as well as our evaluations of their work are shaped by gender schemata. Gender schemata are defined as "a set of implicit, or nonconscious, hypotheses about sex differences" (Valian 1998, 2). A central assumption of schema theory is that schemata are built up through multiple situations with similar information (Nishida 1999). Once a schema has been established, information is processed top-down through the schema and not bottom-up through the information contained in each encounter. Hence, the cultural and historical categorizations of gender are crucial for individual information processing and for what is perceived as normal (Nishida 1999).

While cognitive schema theory convincingly shows that the enactment of gender bias is context-dependent, it does not explain why and how these associations become relevant in different social situations, e.g. "how stereotypes and prejudice are communicated, taken up or resisted by others" (Durrheim 2012, 187). Stereotypes and prejudice not only depend on the context in which they are activated, they are also fundamentally social activities (Shotter 1993). In the following sections, we further unpack these arguments that discursive psychology makes by emphasizing the interactive nature of gender bias.

Gender bias beyond automatized activation: The social function of prejudiced talk

Gender bias is usually explained with basic cognitive processes of categorization. Categorization organizes, orders, and manages information processing and serves to stabilize individual world views (Tajfel 1978). It is therefore suggested that thinking is pervasively infused with distortion and simplification as categories are either activated or not. The activation of a category is explained with salience and is hence purely situational: Either the situation makes a category salient, or it does not (Fiske and Taylor 2008). Once it is salient, cultural gender beliefs are activated and result in bias (Ridgeway and Correll 2004). However, research studying talk-in-interaction (Billig 1996; Edwards 1991) has emphasized that both the selection of a category and the category being effectuated in a situation is more than an automated process. Categorization in this perspective becomes "something we do, in talk, in order to accomplish social actions (persuasions, blamings, denial, refutations, accusations, etc.)" (Edwards 1991, 517). Hence, arguments are never only uttered; they are criticized and justified (Billig 1985, 1996). From this perspective, stereotypes serve as rhetorical resources: "Racial stereotypes are not simply repressed anachronistic remnants that leak, undetected, into behaviour. They are also rhetorical resources that are used to account for one's preferences and behaviours" (Durrheim 2012, 192). Hence, bias is always located in a situated argumentative exchange, and it is worth examining the situations in which more or less biased arguments are invoked, but then either supported or challenged (Billig 1985, 99).

Further investigating how categories are selected in interaction, Billig (1985) shows that categorization always also involves particularization. With particularization, Billig emphasizes that the particular features upon which a category is built need to be selected out of an array of possible distinctive features. Hence, he contrasts the view of the pervasive, inevitable, distorting use of the categorization process with the equally necessary and pervasive process of particularization. As these processes are not predetermined, the selection of a category is potentially open for discussion. "If the world can be categorized in different ways, then the choice of one particular categorization can be seen as being part of an argument against another way of viewing things and is to be defended by argument against argument" (Billig 1985, 97). Categories can be challenged by particularizations, and particularizations can be challenged by categorizations. Here, the rhetorical, argumentative perspective comes into play: every topic has its countertopic (e.g., every prejudiced attitude can be countered with a different attitude), both of which are enacted in argumentation. In fact, categorization and the activation of a certain cognitive schema are not necessarily inevitable and might be as open to critique as is enacting the power relations that are in place (Augoustinos 2016, 246). Gender bias in recruitment is thus not so much an automatized process but a "collaborative accomplishment" (Condor and Figgou 2012, 207).

The relevance of the argumentative nature of categorization for gender bias in recruitment is vitally shown by a recent study by van den Brink et al. (2016) analyzing committee meetings of recruitment panels in a Swedish bank and a Danish professional services firm. Both companies featured a promotion system that was based on performance reviews conducted by a committee after a certain employment period. The researchers describe several rhetorical strategies that inflated the male candidates' strengths while downplaying their weaknesses. This dynamic was reversed for female candidates; their strengths were downplayed while their weaknesses were inflated. For male candidates, this played out primarily by dedicating most of the available time to discussing men's strengths rather than their weaknesses. Ambivalent descriptions of male candidates' abilities were often ignored by the committees or reframed as a positive—hence, categorization was countered with particularization. In addition, mainly men were ascribed "star potential" (van den Brink et al. 2016, 25). Candidates were praised for their humor, optimism, or charming personalities. None of these traits were part of the ideal candidate profile, but they gave the committee members the impression that the "chemistry is right" (van den Brink et al. 2016, 26).

A second mechanism described was to downplay men's weaknesses. Weaknesses were often reframed as strengths or seen as something candidates would overcome with time, especially if they were young. For example, a male candidate who was described as "too passive" by the committee received feedback that he was "secure, calm and stable" (van den Brink et al. 2016, 26). The initial weakness was reframed as his specific leadership style. On the other hand, female candidates' strengths were downplayed, and their weaknesses inflated. Women's qualifications were usually not discussed in detail; they were evaluated based on whether they had passed the criteria for the management development program. Overall, when women were ascribed potential, it was usually the potential to reach an initial management position, not the "star potential" (van den Brink et al. 2016, 25) to rise to top management. Women's strengths were often reframed as weaknesses. For example, a candidate who was perceived as overly assertive got the feedback to be more "humble" or "gentle", traits that are not associated with being a successful manager, but with stereotypical female behavior (van den Brink et al. 2016, 28). Furthermore, unlike the male candidates, women's weaknesses, such as low self-esteem or lack of initiative, were perceived as irremediable flaws, not something they could overcome with training and experience.

The authors concluded that it was easier for the reviewers to envision the male candidates becoming successful managers because they fit the mold of the ideal candidate, while it was more difficult to picture the female candidates on a similar career trajectory. The authors theorized their findings by drawing on the notion of gendered practices aimed at creating a good fit with the social norm—the image of the ideal worker. However, looking more closely into how this fit was created, it is not only the perceived fit with a pre-formed schema that the speakers in this situation effectuated, but the category itself was collaboratively created in the very interaction. Elaborating on the respective criteria, the reviewers in this study not only engaged in a process of categorization but also particularization. By developing and agreeing on specific categories and their fit for the objective of the review exercise in situ, gender bias was collaboratively accomplished (Condor and Figgou 2012) by putting forward arguments to advance the male candidates but failing to find reasons to advance women.

With this example, we can see that categories are rather flexible as well as highly selective. They serve as discursive resources that are used in context-specific, normative ways. Categorizing in this perspective is a "discursive practice that actively constructs versions of reality and identities for speakers and others" (Augoustinos 2016, 246). Hence, categories are not merely activated in an interaction but are also produced.

Gender bias beyond interaction: Social norms and organizational power relations

Intervening in an ongoing construction process is not as straightforward as we might think it is. Practicing gender constantly reproduces gendered practices (Martin 2006) and hence is connected to power relations and social norms or "hegemonic gender beliefs" (Ridgeway and Correll 2004, 514). Discursive psychologists, for instance, have shown that argumentative interactions are also very consequential for the positioning of the speakers. Taking up different positions within discourse, speakers position themselves in talk and in consequence construct themselves as a person (Davies and Harré 1990). For instance, in their analysis of racist discourse in New Zealand, Potter and Wetherell (1998) have shown that people can and do position themselves within (i.e., identify with) both racist and anti-racist discourse within the same interview. Because talk fulfills different social (e.g., argumentative) functions, the same individual can construct varying and even contradictory versions of the same topic or reality depending on the immediate context. Taking up a certain position and putting forward a certain category to be used in an argument is thus motivated by the need to position the speaker as a certain kind of person—for instance, a tolerant, open-minded, or well-informed person.

This suggests that bias in recruiting often results from active self-positioning, as evidenced by research investigating the intensive maneuvering that occurs when discussing topics that might involve prejudiced talk (Augoustinos and Every 2007; Nentwich and Ostendorp 2016). *Calling a spade a spade* or the widespread use of disclaimers as *I am not racist, but* show that it is not *just talk* that is being done here, but an ideology that is negotiated, social norms that are applied and maintained, and identities that are produced. Prejudiced views are hence not uttered in an automated way but serve certain purposes. They "support, rationalize and legitimate the status quo" (Augoustinos 2016, 267). Billig (1988, 144) draws on Althusser to emphasize the self-making aspect of prejudiced talk and the contradictions in everyday discourse: "it is the ideological contradiction which 'interpellates' the subject." As the prevailing social norms are referenced when talking, the speaker positions her or himself accordingly. Hence, from such a practice-based perspective, identities and social norms are produced as well as reproduced by prejudiced talk (Wetherell 2008). Positioning thus always bears the power to reproduce the social norms in place.

Having said that, prejudice talk not only positions *the other*, but also the speaker (Nentwich and Ostendorp 2016). As a matter of fact, speaking up is not without consequences but positions the speaker as either credible or incredible, and therefore as a competent or incompetent organizational member. As criteria are constructed in a collaborative way and by creating a good fit with the social norms in place, it is almost impossible to challenge or criticize what is going on. Violating the collaboratively accomplished categories, the speaker would discredit him or herself as naïve or not familiar with the specific requirements and hence risk his or her personal standing in this setting. Understanding gender bias as a social practice incorporates this kind of motivation, namely, to be perceived as a credible speaker.

To further develop such a practice perspective on identity and stereotyping, it is crucial to investigate the cultural knowledge captured by stereotypes (Durrheim et al. 2009). Regarding gender bias, studies on the gendered organization and the ideal worker norm (Acker 1990) contribute valuable insights. For instance, Gherardi (1994) emphasizes that organizations have their specific codes or cultures of how to behave as a man or a woman. Employees might not be fully aware of these often very implicit rules, but they know what kind of behavior, clothing, or dress is required of them to be in line with the norms in place. A prevailing norm concerning gender, however, is the general association linking masculinity to power, authority, and career orientation (Gheradi 1994). When we speak about the ideal manager, we most likely envision a man (Schein 1996). Moreover, there is evidence that while men are considered as *natural* leaders, women are depicted as better suited for follower positions. This gender hierarchy constitutes an important organizational gendered practice (Martin 2006) that results in activating as well as perpetuating gender bias (Ridgeway and Correll 2004). The attitudes or discursive positions available to speakers in a given interaction, in turn, are shaped by inherent power relations and thus the social position(s) they claim. In other words, while in theory, every prejudiced evaluation can be countered (and potentially invalidated) by an unbiased evaluation—for instance, of a job applicant's qualifications—in reality, such rhetorical maneuvers are restricted by situational, normative constraints. For example, research on the perceived validity of discrimination claims has shown that members of the dominant group perceive members of marginalized groups (e.g., women denouncing sexism or people of color denouncing racism) as oversensitive and thus not credible (Calder-Dawe 2015; Kahn et al. 2016). Hence, inhabiting marginalized social identities entails not having the power (or right) to claim certain subject positions (e.g., a critic of biased behavior). Regarding designing training for gender bias in recruitment, critical pedagogy scholars have concluded that it is those who have privilege who need to teach other privileged individuals *about* privilege (Messner 2011).

Furthermore, there is evidence that the dominant group of an organization is not interested in changing unequal practices. De Castillo (2018) recently introduced the resistance model, claiming that the implicit bias model leaves out a central aspect, namely the underlying motivations and incentives for attitudes and beliefs. Therefore, unconscious prejudice is supported by psychological resistance, maintaining related unequal structures, which benefit the dominant group of an organization. A related topic is gatekeeping practices (Tienari et al. 2013). Trix and Psenka (2003) investigated the role of gatekeeping practices among medical faculty, leading to the selection of similar people. In letters of recommendation for medical faculty, a gender schema was reinforced that portrays male applicants as researchers and professionals while portraying women as teachers and students.

That gender bias is also constructed in organizational practices is demonstrated by Holgersson's (2013) study on the hiring practices of Swedish managers. Her research reveals that the search process was often organized in rather informal ways and started with a specific (male) candidate in mind. Besides formal qualification, social acceptability turned out to be an important criterion, although only informally. This included being male, of middle age and Swedish nationality, heterosexual, and preferably married (Holgersson 2013, 459). These informal guidelines resulted in candidates who fulfilled these criteria; in other words, they looked like a manager, so they did not need to fulfill all formal requirements to be hired. A good fit with this norm was also achieved by the senior managers' practice of grooming younger men to take on management positions in the future, and the protégées, in turn, signaling that they were ready for a career move. Hence, a good fit is achieved through homosocial networks. As women cannot match the informal blueprint of the norm of the ideal candidate, they are not identified and remain excluded from these networks that support men's careers. It is the ideal worker norm that is accomplished, not only collaboratively through interaction, but also by routinized organizational practices such as the process of continuously defining and redefining the competencies of job applicants throughout recruitment.

Rethinking gender bias in recruiting: A social practice perspective

We have seen so far that gender bias in employment decision making is highly context-dependent and collaboratively accomplished by rhetorical strategies in interaction. It confirms, as well as reproduces, the social norms in place; regarding gender, this manifests in the qualities and skills ascribed to the ideal (male) candidate. If we conceive of gender bias as a social practice that produces identities as well as social norms and thus reproduces contextual and culturally specific ideals, its entanglement with organizational hierarchies and power relations comes to the forefront.

The respective context in which the stereotype is activated shows that the main objective of stereotypical talk is to create a good fit with the norms or ideals in place. Rhetorical strategies are employed that create said fit while at the same time positioning the speaker in a favorable light. What makes this process implicit is that biased notions based on gender stereotypes are not uttered explicitly but are collectively constructed in highly orchestrated ways that rely on cultural as well as situational knowledge. As we are held accountable for what we say by others, prejudiced views are rather uttered "by implication," as Durrheim (2012, 189 et seq.) suggests. As his research on mundane talk on race shows, often the category itself is not mentioned, but a concern is voiced that is only loosely connected to the category but needs further interpretation and cultural knowledge to be understood. For instance, uttering an opinion on black people on the beach, speakers would not refer to race as a category (black people) but problematize their behavior. Only when all interaction partners know what the talk is about, the prejudiced meaning of it is understood. In this way, the speaker is probing the social norms applicable to the situation. Hence, uttering prejudiced views relies on the competence of the listener to understand the implication and needs to be perceived as a joint action (Shotter 1993).

Conceptualizing gender bias as a social practice also allows us to incorporate findings from sociology and gender studies to enhance our knowledge on how bias is *done* in organizational practices. However, while the literature on gendered practices in organizations has explained the exclusion of women in recruitment processes with gendered and gendering practices (van den Brink et al. 2016), homosociality (Holgersson 2013), or self-group distancing (Derks, van Laar and Ellemers 2016), the concept of *bias as a social practice* holds the potential to highlight further aspects. Most importantly, discourse psychology's focus on the maneuvering of the speaking subjects has shown that human beings are by no means *cultural dupes*. They are not merely setting in place what social norms have *told* them to do and hence are merely executing the power relations in place, but as well actively interpreting and hence capable of changing and subverting those very norms. Having said that, there is definitely some agency involved. Given that members of recruitment panels have limited degrees of freedom as the image of an ideal candidate is setting clear normative boundaries for them, they are at the same time highly motivated to prove themselves as knowledgeable subjects. Perceiving them as competent members of the organisation sheds further light on the possibilities of changing or reducing bias.

At the same time, the interactions and discursive activities that make up the recruitment process are fundamentally shaped by the distribution of privilege. Those who fit the image of the ideal worker or candidate themselves are the ones who can most effectively challenge and critique it as they are speaking from a position of power (Nentwich, Ozbilgin and Tatli 2015). However, such a move requires that the legitimacy of both the critique of the ideal candidate and alternative concepts are established, which in turn necessitates a more fundamental change in the organization's way of doing things and hence a change in organizational practices, ideals, and desires (Byrne et al. 2019). Otherwise, anti-bias initiatives lack legitimacy and become an exercise in "confessing bias" (Applebaum 2019, 139) as opposed to actually counteracting it. Reconceptualizing gender bias in recruitment as a social practice rooted in organizational norms and power relations means shifting the focus away from the individual (and her or his supposedly context-independent biased notions) and toward the organizational structure and logic. In other words, there is more to it than only making individuals (i.e., members of recruitment panels) aware of what is going on. It is necessary for the organization as a whole to engage in a process of critical reflection to generate an understanding of which concrete practices, norms, and ideals create the preconditions for biased recruitment outcomes (Murgia and Poggio 2009). Most importantly, this "reflexive undoing" should tackle the "organizational subjectivities, and the normative conditions upon which they depend, and not organizational subjects" as Reich, Rumens, and Tyler (2016, 2075) emphasized. However, such a process would need to incorporate addressing issues of identity and privilege and thus the targeted inclusion of (white) men. Insights from education studies on the use of critical reflexivity around privilege could be useful for designing training on the male norm (Souto-Manning 2011).

What else is there to learn for bias training? Apparently, there is a strong need to move beyond a perspective of "the gender we think" to a perspective of "the gender we do" (Gherardi 1994, 591). Because the doing of gender—which usually maintains the gender hierarchy (Nentwich and Kelan 2014)—resides in everyday interactions and behaviors, which in turn are shaped by gendered organizational practices and structures, gender-equitable recruitment requires an active effort to undo gender (Tienari et al. 2013). Neglecting these structural and institutional aspects of discrimination might even result in the stabilization and further legitimization of discrimination, as power imbalances are not taken into account (Tate and Page 2018). How could these insights inform the practical implementation of anti-bias training?

First of all, the scope of training must incorporate internal mental processes and reflections about how information is processed in complex social situations. Training concepts should be targeted at restructuring the cognitive schemata (Rumelhart and Norman 1978). This process demands sufficient exposure to discrepant experiences, conscious reflection on one's experience, or active efforts to reorganize what one knows. To combat bias, training needs to not only inform participants about their biases but also motivate them to self-reflect, unlearn, and provide participants with concrete steps for acting differently in specific situations (Lindsey, King, Hebl and Levine 2015; Rumelhart and Norman 1978). Bias training from this perspective would need to educate participants on how to prevent the production of certain categories while supporting others. In practice, this means that training must provide guidelines on how to intervene in interactions in situ to disrupt the ongoing practice (of) gender (Martin 2006). Training must take into account that biases are based on unspoken institutional rules. They are gendered practices (Martin 2006) that are performed in interaction. Rather than trying to change personal attitudes, training should be designed on changing these practices and hence focus on interactions and institutional practices as a site of change (Deutsch 2007) (e.g., by making visible and questioning the hierarchical categorization of masculine-and feminine-connotated skills and competences) (Murgia and Poggio 2014).

Furthermore, training should not attempt to address the issue of implicit bias in an unspecific way. Bias is not enacted in a general way but rather provoked by a specific situation and in a particular setting. Successful training will take this into account and focus on the norms and practices of a specific situation, such as the meetings of a promotion committee. The training should enable participants to identify crucial, bias-prone situations within the interaction, as well as problematic norms employed in the process, and invite them to experiment with possible alternatives. For instance, van den Brink et al. (2016, 28) describe the interpretation of assertiveness in women as being too forward or too critical. Bias training should encourage committee members to first take notice of the double standard of interpreting men's assertiveness as advantageous and women's assertiveness as detrimental for a management position. Furthermore, they should sharpen participants' awareness of when and how this bias is typically enacted in the committee's meetings. Finally, committee members need to be trained to actually intervene in the interaction. This could even go as far as Witzig and Seyfarth (2020) suggest by providing participants with a set of appropriate responses for uttering critique and resistance in the very moment of the interaction. For instance, by questioning a given interpretation instead of confirming it: You mention that Sarah is too confident. Generally, we want our managers to be assertive. How is this different? As laid out earlier, for the training to be effective, it needs to include a discussion of power and privilege to create awareness of the differential preconditions for the recruitment committee members (for instance, based on gender or seniority) to voice critique.

To conclude, what is needed in bias training is a thorough reflection of those practices that produce biased categorizations of men and women and masculine and feminine competences. Such an approach to bias training is about cultural change rather than altering individuals' mental processes and thus lays the foundations for the undoing of gender (hierarchy) in the context of recruitment (Nentwich and Kelan 2014). Undoing gender requires tackling both institutional practices, such as implementing new guidelines that lay out best practices around designing job profiles and evaluating job applications, as well as typical interaction patterns, such as promotion committee members co-constructing female assertiveness as detrimental.

Conclusion

In this article, we developed the notion of gender bias in recruitment as a social practice. Taking a critique of the conceptual foundations of conventional bias training as a starting point, we argued that gender bias in recruitment happens within particular social contexts, notably in gendered organizations (Acker 1990), is performed as prejudiced talk that fulfills clear social functions, such as positioning oneself as a credible speaker, and is enabled by organizational norms and power relations. As we have shown, this conceptual relocating of gender-biased recruitment outcomes within everyday interactions and identity work, in particular, the doing of gender, has concrete implications for the design and implementation of anti-bias initiatives. We hope that our contribution is useful for both the theoretical advancement of current debates on improving organizational diversity and for informing the work of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion practitioners.

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“A woman who’s tough, she’s a bitch.” How labels anchored in unconscious bias shape the institution of gender

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Abstract

This study shows how labels anchored in unconscious bias can contribute to the gender institution. It draws on interviews with women leaders in Canadian for-profit organizations to illustrate how labels relate to unconscious bias toward women leaders, how labels delegitimize or legitimize women leaders, and how women leaders react to labels. Guided by these results, the study theorizes how the micro-level practice of labeling anchored in unconscious bias can uphold or disrupt gender categories and associated gendered social roles, thus shaping the gender institution.

KEYWORDS: Unconscious bias, label, gender, institution, leadership

Introduction

Unconscious bias refers to how our beliefs are biased without us being aware of this. Research highlights the role of unconscious bias in gender inequalities: unconscious bias hurts women professionally by slowing down their career advancement, harming their performance evaluation, and limiting opportunities (Wynn and Correll 2018). This research generally does not view gender from the perspective of an institution. Yet, gender can be thought of as an institution: it is defined by, reflects, and shapes beliefs, practices, norms, and rules that endure and are linked to being and acting like a gendered person (Martin 2004). Institutions generate by-products like inequalities (Lorber 1994). The institutional perspective on gender is helpful because it enables us to understand how gender inequalities can be upheld or disrupted (McCarthy and Moon 2018). It emphasizes the multiple phenomena involved in gender (i.e., beliefs, practices, norms, rules) and the various levels where these phenomena occur (i.e., the micro level of the individual, the meso level of organizations, and the macro level of society).[2] As McCarthy and Moon (2018) argue, studies on how gender inequalities can be disrupted are rare, especially those spanning the various phenomena and levels of the gender institution.

I consider the implications of unconscious bias for the evolution of gender institution, including its disruption. To do so, I explore how the micro-level phenomenon of labeling anchored in unconscious bias relates to the macro-level phenomenon of gendered social roles (e.g., men leaders). I study this relationship in the context of Canadian organizational leadership in the 2010s, which is gender-homogenous: women represent less than 15% of corporate directors in Canada (Canadian Securities Administrators 2019). Drawing on interviews with 31 women directors, I analyze three research questions: How do labels express unconsciously biased beliefs toward women leaders? How do labels affect women leaders in their leadership roles? How do women leaders react to labels?

This study contributes to our understanding of unconscious bias, labeling, and the gender institution in three ways. First, it highlights the consequences of unconscious bias expressed via labels. Labeling theory, which conceptualizes labeling, focuses on the micro level where interactions occur (Heckert and Heckert 2002). In contrast, I consider the more extensive, multi-level context surrounding interactions. Doing so helps us understand the broader consequences of unconscious bias that extend beyond labels to involve macro-level societal structures like social roles (e.g., leaders) and expectations about who plays what roles (e.g., men are leaders). Labels grounded in unconscious bias can shape these roles and their associated expectations. This happens because labels communicate judgments about roles that individuals enact and about how enactments conform to expectations. Labels thereby control or attempt to control individuals—they can be thought of as control stories. In the context of women leaders in Canada, I show how labels designate them as deviating from social roles associated with their assigned gender category (i.e., women are caregivers) and their unassigned gender category (i.e., men are leaders). Labels typically delegitimize these women in their leadership roles, to which they react in various ways: they accept labels, reject them, or distance themselves from them. As I explain in the discussion section, labels and the reactions they yield can contribute to upholding or disrupting social roles and thereby the gender institution. In sum, unconscious bias has broad implications, not just for labels that express bias but also for social roles that draw on gender categories and the gender institution.

Second, the study illustrates the multiple phenomena involved in gender inequalities, the various levels at which these phenomena are situated, and how they are related. I link the micro-level phenomenon of labeling grounded in unconscious bias to the macro-level phenomenon of social roles. I thus emphasize the complexities involved in gender inequalities that draw on multiple phenomena situated at different levels. These complexities need to be accounted for when considering how to disrupt gender inequalities, lest attempts at disruption sidestep critical phenomena involved in inequalities. Such bypassing is all the more likely because these critical phenomena underlying gender inequalities can be mundane and occur daily and in various settings. For example, labeling grounded in unconscious bias is a mundane phenomenon that readily escapes attention, remaining under the radar. Yet labels, as control stories, are essential tools for upholding gender inequalities. This study thereby cautions that the disruption of gender inequalities requires being attentive not just to the complexities of phenomena underlying gender inequalities but also to their mundaneness.

Finally, the study further speaks to what is needed for disrupting the gender institution and gender inequalities by combining the distinct ontologies and epistemologies that characterize labeling and unconscious bias (Moon and Blackman 2014). Labeling involves a relativist ontology and supposes that there is not one reality out there; instead, reality is constructed internally in an individual's mind. Its epistemology is subjectivism: reality cannot be discovered separately from the individual who does the discovering in light of their values and goals. Meanings about reality are constructed and ordered via systems of language and symbols, including labels. In contrast, unconscious bias research, anchored in psychology and social psychology, has a realist ontology whereby one reality exists out there. Its epistemology is objectivism: reality and meaning can be discovered separately from the individual. The realist ontology can direct us to what is needed for disrupting gender inequalities. For example, we need to become aware of how cognitive processes can lead to gender-biased beliefs expressed through labels. We need to find ways to question these beliefs and the resulting labels and overcome them. The objectivist epistemology identifies heuristics underlying biased beliefs and offers insights for addressing labels reflecting these beliefs. The relativist ontology, in turn, highlights how the gender institution is experienced differently by individuals depending on their setting and how these experiences involve socially constructed categories like gender. It shows how disrupting gender inequalities can be successful or unsuccessful. Solutions need to consider how unconscious bias and labeling relate to contexts and practices involved in constructing gender categories, including labeling grounded in unconscious bias. The subjectivist epistemology emphasizes that we become knowledgeable about these contexts and practices and their broader implications, notably for gender inequalities. Doing so helps us find more effective ways of disrupting the gender institution.

Unconscious bias

Beliefs originate in cognitive processes during which we pay attention to, perceive, interpret, store, and retrieve information. Throughout this process, we unconsciously use heuristics, or mental shortcuts, to simplify our experiences, saving on cognitive resources (Shah and Oppenheimer 2008). Heuristics lead us to classify our experiences based on categories, resulting in bias. To illustrate the link between heuristics and bias, I use three powerful heuristics from the foundational study of Tversky and Kahneman (1974): representativeness, availability, and anchoring.[3]

The representativeness heuristic implies that we process experiences based on the most representative prototype (i.e., example or model for similar experiences). We compare individuals to our prototype based on how we perceive them (e.g., what we see them wear) and assign them to categories. One of the most salient categories is a typically binary gender category (i.e., man, woman); gender categorization is instantaneous and spontaneous, without effort or intention (Holtgraves 2010). We acquire and internalize information about gender categories throughout our lives, starting as children (Hollander, Renfrow and Howard 2011). While there are salient categories other than gender (e.g., race, age), this study is concerned with gender categories, which I will thus focus on in developing the theorization.

Gender categorization sets off cognitive processing about social roles. We have mental prototypes of women's and men's roles in society, including stereotypes (i.e., widely held oversimplified generalizations of specific groups of people and roles) (Drake, Primeaux and Thomas 2018; Eagly and Steffen 1984; Eagly and Wood 2016). A woman is expected to act communally, care for others' physical and emotional needs, be nice, display emotion, and enact specific roles (i.e., a caregiver like a mother). A man is expected to behave as an agent, be rational, assertive, and controlling, and enact particular roles (i.e., an agent like a leader). When we assign an individual to the woman category, our mental prototypes of gendered social roles imply that we see her in caregiving rather than leader roles. Our beliefs are gender-biased: we attribute different social roles to her than if we had categorized her as a man.

The availability and anchoring heuristics also result in unconscious gender bias. The availability heuristic implies that we process an experience based on how easily we recall similar cases. Consider an individual assigned to the woman category (e.g., due to representativeness). When we know more women who are caregivers than leaders, we view her as more likely to be a caregiver than a leader. Our beliefs are, again, gender-biased.

The anchoring heuristic implies that we process an experience based on a reference point (or anchor) and make adjustments relative to this point until we reach a reasonable inference. Consider again a woman. We adjust our beliefs about how she enacts caregiving roles based on our reference point for a woman engaged in caregiving. Our beliefs are gender-biased: we judge her differently than we would judge a man who does caregiving since we have distinct caregiving reference points for women and men. In caregiving roles, women are often evaluated more harshly than men (Villicana, Garcia and Biernat 2017).

This discussion illustrates how we use heuristics during cognitive processing, sidestepping information about complexities and details relevant to processing our experiences. Instead, we assign individuals to gender categories, which we associate with specific gendered roles (e.g., men are leaders, women are caregivers). Cognitive processing can thus result in gender-biased beliefs.

Labeling

A labeler uses a label to designate a labelee and their behavior. Labels are activated while the labeler engages with the labelee when interacting with them (e.g., working, talking) or reflecting on them. They express the labeler's beliefs, which can be gender-biased, and enable them to interpret and organize their experience (Ashforth and Humphrey 1997). The labeler has learned labels over time while engaging with others (Bryant and Higgins 2010).

Conceived initially as a sociological approach for dealing with deviant behavior and mental illness (Becker 1963; Davis 1972; Gove 1970), labeling theory is concerned with how social groups set rules and how those who break rules are judged as deviant.[4] It views deviance not as a property of the labelee but as a form of social control: the labelee's behavior is labeled as deviant relative to what is expected of someone in their category, including their gender category, to get them to align their behavior with expectations. Labeling theory views categories like gender categories as constructed and reflecting an arbitrary social consensus that does not necessarily describe a correspondence between the label and what is labeled (Ashforth and Humphrey 1997).

Labeling theory originally conceptualized deviance as negative: an individual's behavior is labeled as not conforming to what is expected of their assigned category or conforming to what is expected of an unassigned category. A woman leader, for example, could be labeled as deviant for her gender category: she is viewed as not communal enough given that she is a woman and too agentic given that she is not a man (Eagly and Karau 2002). Scholars have since also considered positive deviance, behavior that overconforms relative to what is expected (Heckert and Heckert 2002).[5]

Labels differ from words: they evaluate labelees and their behavior relative to a category like gender (Ashforth and Humphrey 1997; Domenico 2008). Labels can involve well-known expressions loaded with meanings that draw on analogies, historical characters, and mythologies. For example, Acker (2006) explains how "Women enacting power violate conventions of relative subordination to men, risking the label of 'witches' or 'bitches'" (447).

This discussion illustrates how labeling is a complex process that can combine a desire for control with unconscious bias. Labeling theory points out that we label to control behavior that deviates from what we expect given the category assigned to a person. Unconscious bias points out how cognitive processes can also shape labels: labels can express unconsciously biased beliefs about a person's category, including their gender category. Categorization theory has been used to explain that we label because cognitive processes draw on categories (Ashforth and Humphrey 1995, 1997; Bruner 1957). Although categorization theory considers how categories can be invoked unconsciously, it does not link categories to heuristics that we unconsciously use. It was developed before Tversky and Kahneman (1974) did their foundational work on heuristics. Along with the rich scholarship it spawned, their research enables us to understand how categories are grounded in heuristics used in cognitive processing. Unconscious bias research illustrates the cognitive roots of categories inherent in labels.

The gender institution, labeling, and unconscious bias

Unconscious bias and labels that express it can be situated in the gender institution, as illustrated in Figure 1 adapted from McCarthy and Moon (2018).

The gender institution involves phenomena at three different levels. At the highest, macro level, it includes the gender order, which refers to the broad structural context in which specific relations and practices occur, and involves rules (Connell 2005; McCarthy and Moon 2018). Next, at the meso level, are gender regimes that determine how gender is patterned (Connell 1987) and that "feed up into the gender order and down into everyday practices" (McCarthy and Moon 2018, 1155). Finally, at the micro level are the gender practices, that is, how individuals do and undo gender (Deutsch 2007; West and Zimmerman 1987).

Unconscious bias, and labels that express it, are part of micro-level gender practices. Unconscious bias refers to beliefs or ways of perceiving and thinking, thus involving cognitions. When individuals are unconsciously gender-biased, their beliefs about phenomena relating to men and women systematically differ because they consistently assign individuals to different categories based on their perceived gender. Gender categories are part of the macro-level gender order, and they are associated with specific social roles (e.g., women are caregivers, men are leaders). In other words, unconscious bias, as a micro-level practice, draws on another macro-level practice. Unconscious gender bias, thus, is a complex phenomenon that involves more than one level of the gender institution. In Figure 1, arrow *a* captures the link between micro-level unconscious bias and the macro-level gender order.

Unconscious gender bias can be expressed in labels, illustrated by arrow *b* in Figure 1. Labels then are gendered too: labels applied to women systematically differ from those applied to men; they vary across different, and usually binary, gender categories. In this study, I explore whether and how unconscious bias is expressed in labels; that is, I explore the relationship between these two micro-level gender practices (arrow *b* in Figure 1) in the specific context of women leaders. Women leaders potentially violate two norms regarding the social roles associated with their assigned gender category: the norm of the caregiver who is a woman and the norm of the leader who is a man. I determine whether women leaders are perceived as violating these norms by analyzing whether labels designate women leaders as negatively or positively deviating from the norm of the social role associated with their gender category. Negative deviation signals violation of the norm, whereas positive deviation signals conformity and over-conformity.

Moreover, I am interested in the immediate and larger implications of labeling grounded in unconscious bias. I, therefore, explore two additional questions and ask how labels anchored in unconscious bias affect women leaders in their leadership roles and how women leaders react to these labels, captured by arrow *c* in Figure 2.

Labels are unlikely to leave women leaders neutral. Labels reify what they describe as “truth” and define what is normal; they remove a woman leader’s individuality, reducing them to the label (Ashforth and Humphrey 1995, 1997). Thereby, they affect their identity. Identity is central for individuals; it answers the questions: Who am I? And, who am I not? (Alvesson and Willmott 2002). It has multiple dimensions: an individual can harbor many selves (e.g., leader, caregiver) that surface in distinct settings. Crucial for identity is acceptance from others, especially those in the same social group (Tajfel 1981). A label

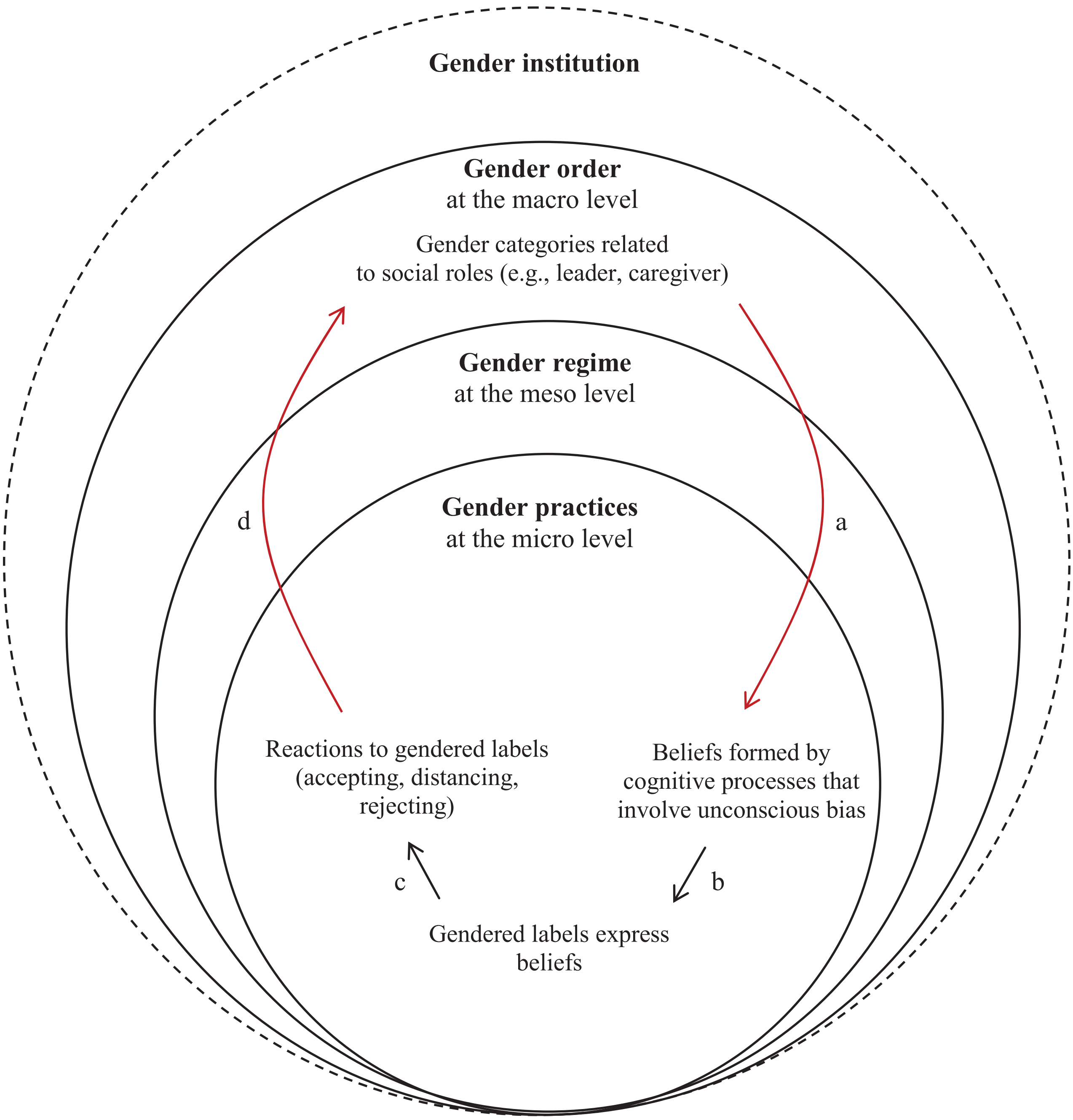

Figure 1. The gender institution, unconscious bias, and labels, adapted from McCarthy and Moon (2018: 1156)

communicates whether the group accepts or rejects a labelee (Ashforth and Humphrey 1995, 1997). An accepting label confirms the labelee's identity, particularly the dimension of their identity related to the group (e.g., other leaders) (Mangen and Brivot 2015). In contrast, a rejecting label can exacerbate the social disdain that the labelee experiences and signal that they are inferior to the labeler and their group. A rejecting label threatens the labelee's identity, specifically its dimension related to the group. The labelee tries to address this threat and be accepted by the group, engaging in coping behavior. Labeling thus controls the labelee from the *outside in* (Ely and Padavic 2007). It can also control them from the *inside in* when individuals label themselves. Self-labels reflect discourses that individuals have internalized, including self-stereotyping, when they adopt the features of those they identify with. During self-labeling, individuals control themselves to conform to internalized expectations (Covaleski et al. 1998). Whether they work from the outside in or inside in, labels control the labelee's identity in a social role.

In my analysis, I explore how women react to labels, particularly how they cope with difficult, rejecting labels. While this analysis remains firmly situated at the micro level, I discuss my results in the larger setting of the gender institution by linking labels and their reactions to the macro-level gender order. Specifically, I consider what labels and their reactions imply for social roles associated with gender categories and the norms and expectations about who should take on what role, shown by arrow *d* in Figure 1. My goal is to illustrate how the link between micro-level unconscious bias and macro-level social roles comes full circle within the gender institution: social roles are mobilized when unconsciously gender-biased beliefs are formed; these beliefs are then expressed in labels, which, together with the reactions they yield, contribute to how social roles evolve. As such, unconscious bias is a crucial micro-level phenomenon that, through its link with other micro-level and macro-level phenomena, may contribute to the gender institution and gender inequalities.

Data

This study is grounded in interpretivism, whereby meanings are constructed by individuals situated in a particular cultural context. The context involves 31 participants, who are women appointed to their first board of directors of for-profit firms in Canada between 2012 and 2018, bar one exception.[6] The firms operate in various industries (e.g., consumer products, environment, finance, government, healthcare, information technology, law, media, mining, oil and gas, pharmaceuticals, telecommunications, transportation, real estate, retail, utilities). At the time of their appointment, all participants except two already held paid professional roles, primarily in corporate leadership (e.g., senior vice-president, president of their own firm, partner at a firm, C-suite officer) and had been in leadership roles for about 15 years.[7] Participants had diverse ages, ranging from the mid-thirties to the mid-sixties, most being in their fifties.[8] They were racially and ethnically homogenous; most were white and not from ethnic minorities. They were educationally homogenous: most had at least an undergraduate degree, although in different fields (e.g., commerce, engineering, geography, history, law, philosophy, political science, psychology, sociology, science). Fewer participants had a master's degree (e.g., Master of Business Administration, Master of Law in Public Administration), a doctoral degree, or a professional or a director certification (e.g., Certified Public Accountant).

Participants were recruited via snowball sampling and from lists of board appointees obtained from management circulars and governance networks. Each participant took part in a semi-structured interview, which took place face-to-face in English or French in the interviewee's professional setting (e.g., their office), their home, or Concordia University. Interviews lasted on average 95 minutes, were tape-recorded with consent, and subsequently transcribed. Interviewees narrated their life stories before answering questions about women and leadership.[9] Interviewees were generally happy to share their experiences. My presence (and that of a co-researcher who helped conduct interviews) may have primed them for choosing narratives due to gender similarity.[10]

Analysis

The interviews were conducted as part of a more extensive study on women in organizational leadership. Because the larger study does not focus on unconscious bias, no explicit questions about unconscious bias (nor deviance or labels) were asked. Instead, unconscious bias was inferred from transcripts using thematic analysis of what interviewees talked about (Feldman et al. 2004; Riessman 2005). Interviewees' stories (i.e., the chronological succession of logically coherent events) are packed with information (i.e., context, history, main events, consequences) (Czarniawska 1997, 2000; Franzosi 1998). Through stories, interviewees reflected on and made sense of transitioning into and experiencing leadership; while doing so, they conveyed conscious and unconscious views that they and others held (Como et al. 2020; Jefferson and Hollway 2000). I used their stories to understand how they experienced unconscious bias (my broad theme). To conduct my thematic coding, I used an abductive approach: I worked in four stages, detailed below, circling between understanding my data in light of my broad theme and drawing on the literature to deepen how I make sense of the theme and what emerges from the data (Alvesson and Kärreman 2007; Deville, Mangen and Pérès 2017; Feront and Bertels 2021; Mangen and Brivot 2015). My iterative approach enabled me to progressively zero in on my theme while understanding the context in which it occurs, which is crucial for exploring its narrower and broader consequences. The unit of analysis is an interviewee's account.

Stage 1. I read each transcript to familiarize myself with the interviewee and her experience of transitioning into leadership. In addition, I engaged with the literature on gender in organizations to facilitate the detection of gendering patterns in each interviewee's experience.

Stage 2. To prepare this manuscript for the special issue on unconscious bias and organizations, I reread my interviews while being attentive to unconscious bias. I paid attention to how interviewees experienced their lives in terms of their own or others' unconsciously biased beliefs. To identify unconscious bias, I looked for gendered features and experiences that were naturalized and reified (e.g., "women are naturally more emotional than men," Interviewee 17) and for individuals and behaviors spontaneously and instantaneously categorized based on gender (e.g., "We can't consider her for that because now she has a child at home," Interviewee 27).[11] During this process, I noticed how similar labels were often used by interviewees or individuals they discussed. These labels evoked my curiosity about how labels are related to unconscious bias. To understand this relationship, I consulted the literature on labeling, unconscious bias, and gender in organizations. I realized how labeling is a crucial gendering practice that has not been linked to unconscious bias, despite the cognitive roots inherent in labels and bias. Accordingly, I decided to continue exploring the relationship between unconscious bias and labeling in the context of my interviewees' experiences.

Stage 3. Guided by the second stage work, I reread each transcript while paying attention to the themes of labels and unconsciously gendered beliefs and experiences. I broke down transcripts into data units (i.e., a few sentences or a paragraph) representing a line of reasoning or a small story. I examined each data unit to determine whether unconsciously gendered beliefs and experiences related to labels were present. In NVivo, I developed codes for the labels that emerged from this process. In choosing labels, I remained as close as possible to the interviewees' accounts. I applied labels in a non-exclusive way, which allowed for ambiguity in experienced situations (i.e., one interviewee can have more than one label associated with them). Once the codes for labels were created, I searched for linkages between them (i.e., commonalities and similarities) by comparing and contrasting them.

This procedure confirmed my initial codes and ensured that they reflected distinct phenomena connected to labeling and unconscious bias.

Stage 4. I referred back to the literature on labeling and unconscious bias. Guided by them, I reviewed the codes from Stage 3 and reread data units to ensure they related to unconscious bias and labeling. Throughout this process, I was aware of my biases potentially influencing my interpretation. I strove to interpret as little as possible from these accounts. To assuage concerns that I over-interpret, I show extensive excerpts from these accounts in the results section. This process resulted in the final codes, each reflecting a label: caregiver, bitch, token, one-of-the-boys, emotional, and empathic.

Results

I now describe labels that emerged during the interviews, how they express unconscious bias toward interviewees and affect interviewees in their leadership roles, and how interviewees react to them.

Caregiver

Interviewee 28 explained: “I think women are still looked at more as primary caregivers.” Interviewee 4 recalled how, at a conference, a man commented on the lack of women in his industry: “Oh, you know, it’s not really fun to work in areas that we work in, and I’m building this line and operation and northern climate, and it’s cold. It’s far from your families. Who would want to work there?”

Interviewee 27 witnessed women seen as mothers held back from professional opportunities; she was told about an employee that “We can’t consider her for that because now she has a child at home. […] Well, she won’t want to do the travel.”

Interviewee 20 talked about her job interviews: “For sure, they cannot ask me, but they are all asking the question: ‘So, will you have a child?’ […] Well, for a man, when you debrief, you won’t say: ‘Yep, he’s going to have kids.’ It is not a question; if he has kids, his girlfriend will take care of them’.”

The label reflects an unconscious bias: women leaders are assigned into a gender category (i.e., women) and its associated caregiver role whereby they take care of their family’s needs. Caregiving is inconsistent with leading: leaders are seen as agentic and concerned with themselves and their careers. The label signals negative deviance from the leadership role.

The label delegitimizes interviewees in their leader role: it highlights the gender dimension of their identity and the related caregiver role, obscuring its leader dimension. The label also limits them in enacting this dimension. Given the resources (e.g., time, effort) they dedicate to caregiving, they differ from the fully available ideal leader. The onus is on them to prove that they have the resources necessary for leading. Yet, they cannot be sure that their efforts in this regard suffice due to the presumed caregiver role associated with their gender category. The label reminds them of the difficulty of being available in a way that is coherent with the ideal leader and sets a boundary around leadership that they may be unable to cross fully.

Interviewees reacted to the label by accepting it.

Interviewee 16 stated: “We run the house. We have more responsibilities, no matter how good your husband is.” Over time, they learn to cope with caregiving and arrange their lives to enact their professional roles. Interviewee 17 explained: “Mommy guilt, you have it forever. […] you learn how to manage it, and you learn how to prioritize. […] I realized I don’t need to be at every parent/teacher interview.”

Interviewees also reject the mom label. They are aware of others’ gender categorizations. Interviewee 27 questioned why a mother cannot be considered for a professional role: “I said ‘I don’t know how you can; we don’t know that.’ So just being alert for those intended or unintended biases and I would say in some cases intended.”

Interviewee 30, who listened to the man explain that women would not want to work in his industry, pushed back: "I got really angry […] So, I said to him, 'What human would want to work there? Why do you think your men are okay and women aren't? If you give me an intellectual challenge and compensate me properly, let me worry about my family.'"

Bitch

Interviewee 19 observed: "Women are still perceived as the ones that should be softer, caretaking, more everything is just from the heart, and doting and nurturing." Women perceived as violating the caregiver role are penalized. Interviewee 19 explained: "When you don't fill that role, and people expect you to fill that role going back to expectations, you're seen as a tough, sorry to say it, bitch."

Perceptions of violating caregiving roles are grounded in behavior that is omitted (e.g., not soft enough) or committed (e.g., being assertive). Interviewee 26 explained: "We get called bitches all the time. […] Of course, we do. Women who are very strong."

Interviewee 17 pointed out how men are spared the label: "We all know a guy who's tough; he's assertive, he's confident. A woman who's tough, she's a bitch."

The label reflects an unconscious bias: women leaders are assigned a gender category with the related emotional caregiver role. They are to be friendly, nice, and concerned with others and abstain from behaviors related to their unassigned gender category (i.e., men), such as assertiveness and control. The label signals negative deviance from the caregiver role: women leaders fail to enact caregiving behavior and, instead, behave assertively.

The label delegitimizes women leaders in their leader role; it highlights their identity's gender dimension and the related caregiver role, obscuring its leader dimension. The label also limits how they can enact this dimension; it attributes them an inhuman feature (i.e., a bitch is a dog) that *others* them from the ideal leader who is presumed to have humanity. The onus is on them to prove that they possess humanity adapted to their gender; they must show that they can be what is seen as nice. Yet, they cannot be sure that their efforts suffice, given the immutability implicit in the label. The label reminds them of the difficulty of meeting the leader ideal and draws a boundary around leadership that they might be unable to cross fully.

Interviewees reacted by accepting the label. Interviewee 17 stated: "We spend a lot of time as women making sure that we project just enough confidence not to be seen as a bitch. We are much more focused, women, on wanting to be liked, right?" Interviewees also rejected the label. Interviewee 26 told the labeler: "What did you just say about a woman? Come on. That's not how you do it."

Other interviewees ignored the label. Interviewee 27 argued: "If you're true to yourself and you're being who you are, then let them call you whatever they're going to call you."

Token

Women leaders worry about being seen not as individuals but as tokens representing their gender. Interviewee 1 explained why she opposes gender quotas for boards: "I think it weakens the skill level, you know? I think it's important to have goals and to push, but to have a quota for the sake of putting someone on board; I think it becomes ... You're like a token woman."

The label involves an unconscious bias: women leaders are categorized based on their gender, which is not associated with leadership. Instead, leadership is associated with their unassigned gender—men, who are seen as having the characteristics required for leading. The label signals negative deviance from the leader role; due to their gender, women leaders are viewed as being incompatible with this role.

The label delegitimizes women leaders in their leader role; it highlights their identity's gender dimension, thus obscuring its leader dimension. It also limits how they can enact the latter dimension. As women, they differ from the ideal leader, which has consequences for them. They are excluded from social events. Interviewee 10 recalled how "the professionals, the lawyers and the accountants would always invite the guys ... I was the boss, but they would invite the guys fishing."

Exclusion from social events leads to exclusion from decision-making. Interviewee 30 explained: "They're not on the golf course, they're not in the strip joints […] But you don't know where decisions are made. Some of them are made more there."

The onus is on women to prove that they have the features necessary for leading. Yet, they cannot be sure that their efforts suffice, given their gender. Interviewee 6 reported how, after she got herself invited to a golf game with her (men) peers during a work trip, she was reminded of her gender: "And while inviting me, however, it's interesting because he said: 'My wife will be joining us for golf that day also,' which is very good. I think it was his way of saying, 'You will not be alone as a woman.'" The label reminds women leaders of the difficulty of attaining the leader ideal and draws a boundary around leadership that they might be unable to cross fully.

Interviewees accept the label. They look for ways to establish and prove their skills. Interviewee 4 explained how, during the board recruitment process, "having the support from my company gives me credibility, but […] they will google you and say, 'Alright, she's legitimate, right? Not just some chick they put on the board.'"

Interviewees also reject the label and question how leadership is understood. Interviewee 31 argued: "There's the opportunity to get promoted, but you're going to have to step aside into an infrastructure role […] you have responsibilities for a team and a budget, but it's not revenue-generating and just doesn't give you the same street credibility. While these are brilliant, hard-working, accomplished women, it does make you think that there are some cultures that are just not ready for women to step into the C-suite."

Interviewees who reject the label can quit. Interviewee 7 recalled: "And I quit because in fact I was recruited because they wanted a woman. […] It was a boys' club […] They didn't want my opinion." They propose alternative perspectives on leadership. Interviewee 31 explained: "There is sometimes, I think, an unconscious bias. That if you haven't been a CEO, you're not as qualified. Now, having said that, it is interesting to me because I think diversity of thought and experience leads you to hold conversations differently." They are proactive.

Interviewee 15 recalled: "And the CEO-chair who runs the company looked at me and said, 'Interviewee 15, I am unable to find women for my boards.' I said: 'What?' […] 'I will look into this, I will give you a list. There are women who could be on the boards of your different companies. […]' So, it is possible, one only has to look for women'."

One-of-the-boys

Interviewee 7 recalled: "I was often told: 'You're one of the boys.'" Interviewee 17 explained how her men peers label her: "I'm never the object of the joke. When they realize that I'm in the room sometimes, they're like, 'Oh dear interviewee, sorry.' And then eight of them will say, 'You don't need to say you're sorry to interviewee; she's one of the guys.'"

Although Interviewee 6 was not labeled one-of-the-boys, she recalled being included among her men peers once they realized that she played golf well: "They discovered that I can play. And suddenly, their attitude toward me changes. I am … not lying. It was night and day. […] Being invited, I was able to mix with these men on an informal basis."

The label involves an unconscious bias: women leaders are categorized based on their gender, which is not associated with leadership. Instead, leadership is related to their unassigned gender—men—who are seen as having the characteristics required for leadership. Women leaders are viewed as having at least some of these characteristics since they are in leadership or have a masculine-typed skill (e.g., playing golf). The label signals positive deviance from the leader role; women are seen as enacting it better than expected, given that leadership is not associated with their gender.

The label nevertheless delegitimizes women leaders by limiting the scope of how they can enact the leader dimension of their identity. Since leadership is still defined in masculine terms and leadership roles are occupied mainly by men, the label reminds women leaders of how their being in leadership roles is an exception to the norm. The label is like a badge of honor that labelers bestow on them, and it signals acceptance by their (men) peers. Because labelers can label, they can also unlabel and remove the badge of honor and membership in the group of peers; the threat of unlabeling is implicit in the label. Membership depends on the acceptance of those who have labeling authority—women leaders' peers. The onus is on women leaders to meet the implicit requirements for remaining a member in good standing. These requirements involve adopting and accepting group behavior, which limits how they can enact their leadership role. The label reminds them that male-type behavior is expected, drawing a boundary around leadership that women leaders might be able to cross if they accept this behavior.

Interviewees reacted to the label by accepting it. Interviewee 6 described how, once her men peers accepted her into their group, they got to know her better: "for them, someone who can talk sports is important. […] We asked questions, we were able to get closer through the sport. […] I was being asked questions about my prior experience, and so I could better make known what I know."

Interviewee 17 reported how she dealt with her men peers' jokes: "inevitably, they start making jokes. Of course, they're gonna be these sexist kinds of jokes, or whatever it is. […] They're guys. […] So I can either be super offended, get up, and walk out, which will create a crazy dynamic for me next time around the table. Or, I can just ignore them. Because when they're in a locker room, they talk a certain way. […] If I can't take it, then I shouldn't be there."

Interviewees also distanced themselves from the label. Interviewee 7 explained: "It doesn't affect me because I take it with a smile."

Emotional

Interviewee 26 recalled: "One of the things that I've always been accused of, or given a reprimand for, is being emotional." The label reflects an unconscious bias: women leaders are categorized based on their gender: they are women, with the related emotional caregiver role, in which they experience and display emotion (Schiebinger 1991; Shields 2013). Emotional caregiving is inconsistent with leading, which is associated with rationality and control. The label signals negative deviance from the leader role: women leaders fail to enact the self-control and rationality (e.g., ability to separate feelings from ideas, objectivity, logic) necessary for leading.

The label delegitimizes women in their leader role: it highlights their identity's gender dimension and the related caregiver role, obscuring its leader dimension. It also limits how they can enact this dimension because they are seen as lacking the ideal leader's self-control and rationality. The onus is on them to prove that they have these features. Yet, they cannot be sure that their efforts will suffice due to their gender identity. The label reminds them of the difficulty of meeting the leader ideal and sets a boundary around leadership that they might not be able to cross fully.

Interviewees reacted to the label by accepting it. They saw themselves as the problem that needed to be solved via specific behaviors. Interviewee 26 explained: "So again, to be as calm. There's certainly demeanors that you can have that help you in terms of that."

Interviewees also distanced themselves from the label. Interviewee 7 explained how the view that women are more emotional "does not age well."

Empathic

Interviewees see women as having unique features useful for leadership due to their caregiving roles. Interviewee 30 explained: "because women can look so holistically at things, they see all these different options, permutations, combinations and know that this person might […] you look at some of the projects where there’s been great success on the community level, and it’s like Bangladesh, microlending, it’s women ’cause they have to look. We’re still genetically programmed to take care of the kids and feel that community, right?”

Interviewee 29 argued: “I think women negotiate all the time for themselves, for their families […] We just grow up knowing what trade-offs are worth it and not worth it. […] I think men expected to have what they wanted. They could actually really hurt the organization to get it. I just think that women are a bit more ... Maybe it’s an empathy thing.”

The label involves an unconscious bias: women leaders are categorized based on their gender, with the related caregiver role. Because of the caregiving skills associated with this role, they are seen as well-equipped for enacting the leader role. The label signals positive deviance from the leader role; women leaders bring more caregiving to leader roles than expected, given that the ideal leader is unconcerned with caregiving.

The label legitimizes women leaders in their leader role by combining their identity’s gender dimension and the related caregiver role with its leader dimension. Caregiving and leading are complementary instead of incompatible. Although the label highlights how women leaders differ from men leaders, who are presented as not having as rich a set of caregiving skills, this othering is not limiting but enabling. The label expands how women leaders can enact their identity’s leader dimension by emphasizing how their caregiving roles bring new and valuable skills into leadership. It encourages women leaders to enact leadership in a way that differs from the leader ideal and trespasses the boundary around leadership.

Interviewees reacted to this label by accepting it. Interviewee 17 explained: “I’ve always found it as a total advantage to be a woman. […] I think they always thought that I could bring a very different perspective to the table.”

Discussion and conclusion

This study asks three questions. How do labels express unconscious bias toward women leaders? How do labels affect them in their leader role? How do they react to labels? These questions aim to help us understand how labels grounded in unconscious bias shape the gender institution.

Regarding the first question, labels express unconscious bias by designating women leaders as deviating from their assigned gender category (i.e., women) and associated social role (i.e., caregivers) or as deviating from their unassigned gender category (i.e., men) and related social role (i.e., leaders). Deviance is negative for all labels but two (i.e., emphatic, one-of-the-boys).

Regarding the second question (i.e., how do labels affect women leaders in their leader role?), labels mostly delegitimize women leaders in their leadership roles but they can also legitimize them therein. Delegitimizing labels emphasize the gender dimension of women leaders’ identity while obscuring its leader dimension. They also limit women leaders in how they can enact leader roles, given their assigned gender category. Accordingly, delegitimization draws a boundary around leadership that women leaders may be unable to cross fully. The one legitimizing label (i.e., empathic) combines the gender dimension of women leaders’ identities and the related caregiver role with its leader dimension and highlights how enacting leader roles is enriched by their identity’s gender dimension.

Regarding the third question (i.e., how do women leaders react to labels?), women leaders react by accepting labels, distancing themselves from them, and rejecting them. Accepting women leaders agree to a labels’ implicit gender category and the associated social roles, embrace responsibility for being labeled, and control their behavior to escape the label (in case of negative deviance) or maintain it (in case of positive deviance). Distancing women leaders do not necessarily accept a label’s implicit gender categorization and the associated social roles, yet do not reject them. Rejecting women leaders resist the label’s gender categorization and the related social role;

they situate the responsibility for the label not with themselves but with the categorization.

I now circle back to Figure 1 to show how the answers to my three research questions illustrate the link between labeling grounded in unconscious bias and the gender institution across its different levels. The distinct social roles (i.e., leader, caregiver) that are associated with gender categories are situated at the macro level; the unconscious bias that draws on these gender categories (captured by arrow *a* in Figure 1) and the labels that express unconscious bias (arrow *b* in Figure 1) are located at the micro level. Women leaders react to labels via acceptance, distancing, and rejection, shown by arrow *c*. When they accept labels, women leaders control their behavior to conform to idealized social roles related to gender categories. As a result, labels, gender categories, and social roles are upheld (arrow *d* in Figure 1) and are subsequently activated again during cognitive processing involving unconscious bias. Since the gender institution is grounded in gender categories and related gendered social roles, accepting reactions contribute to upholding the gender institution and gender inequalities. In contrast, when women leaders distance themselves from labels, they do not seek to conform to idealized social roles. Women leaders who reject labels go further: they question labels, implicit gender categories, and associated social roles, and they propose practices to undo these roles. These reactions can contribute to uprooting labels, gender categories, and related social roles, thereby disrupting the gender institution (arrow *d* in Figure 1) and gender inequalities.

This study makes three contributions to research on unconscious bias, labeling, and gender. First, it emphasizes the consequences of unconscious bias, which extend well beyond the micro-level practice of labeling that labeling theory is concerned with. Instead, consequences also involve macro-level social roles, which can be upheld or disrupted via labels and labelees' reactions to labels. Accordingly, unconscious bias has broad repercussions, notably for gender inequalities inherent in gendered social roles. While I have explored the consequences of unconscious bias for the gender institution through the relationship between unconscious bias and two particular phenomena (i.e., labeling, social roles), unconscious bias can involve other phenomena and levels of the gender institution. For example, meso-level gender regimes, such as organizational performance evaluation systems, are implemented by individuals who can have unconsciously biased beliefs about those being evaluated, which affects performance evaluation outcomes and potentially the gender institution. Similarly, macro-level gender orders like laws are enacted by individuals who can be unconsciously biased (e.g., judges who engage in discriminatory victim-blaming), affecting legal outcomes and the gender institution. Future research can explore other phenomena through which unconscious bias relates to the gender institution.

Second, this study highlights the complexities involved in the gender institution, particularly its different phenomena and the various levels where these phenomena are situated. I show how, in my case, the institution of gender is shaped by practices located at the micro level (i.e., labeling grounded in unconscious bias) that interact with macro-level social roles. By focusing on the so-far unexplored practice of labeling grounded in unconscious bias, this study extends research on the complexity of gender institution and their evolution. McCarthy and Moon (2018) argue that "empirical studies on all dimensions of the gender institution are rare" (1154). I do not explore all these dimensions, but instead focus on the micro and macro dimensions, sidestepping the meso dimension. Nevertheless, the two dimensions that I include in my analysis enable me to highlight how the gender institution is shaped by and shapes a multitude of often mundane phenomena situated at different dimensions. Labeling, in particular, is mundane as people often spontaneously label others, and themselves, on an everyday basis and without second thoughts. My study emphasizes how mundane practices like labeling can pass under the radar and thereby contribute to sustaining the gender institution, especially when they are intertwined with other phenomena (e.g., unconscious bias, social roles) in a complex web of relations. While other mundane phenomena (e.g., social events) have been explored from the perspective of how they shape the gender institution (Ortlieb and Sieben 2019), mundane phenomena, in general, remain under-researched in light of their potential to uphold and disrupt, in a hidden manner, gender inequalities. Organizational research would benefit from more work that explores mundane phenomena and the webs in which they are entangled in shaping the gender institution.

Finally, the study emphasizes the practices needed to disrupt the gender institution by combining two research streams with distinct ontologies and epistemologies: unconscious bias and labeling. Unconscious bias research, grounded in (social) psychology, has a realist ontology and an objectivist epistemology, whereas labeling has a relativist ontology and a subjectivist epistemology.[12] Realism and objectivism guide us toward what is needed for disrupting the gender institution: becoming aware of unconscious biases, the underlying heuristics, and how biases influence how we speak and act. Relativism and subjectivism point out how individual experiences differ and how these experiences are constructed, notably through the stories we tell when we label. To disrupt the gender institution, we need to account for the richness in experiences and their construction. Doing so enables us to adapt disrupting practices and deconstruct, notably, by unlabeling, or undoing labels. Unlabeling can involve, as illustrated by the women leaders in this study, rejecting labels and questioning their assumptions about social roles associated with labels. Future research can build on this study to harness the strength of joining multiple ontological and epistemological paradigms.

Doing so is, of course, not without problems. For instance, by combining unconscious bias and labeling, we implicitly adhere to their ontologies and epistemologies. The realist ontology and objectivist epistemology underlying research on (social) psychology have been questioned (Pérez-Álvarez 2018). Can researchers who do positivist studies be removed from their research questions and answers? Their beliefs are enacted in how they work (e.g., how they set up experiments) and shape their conclusions, which may reveal more about them than about the questions they seek to answer. By implicitly adhering to a realist ontology and objectivist epistemology, we abstract away from how researchers' settings affect their conclusions. As a result, we risk relying on conclusions that would be different had these settings been different. We thus need to be careful in using conclusions from this research.

This study has various limitations. First, its interviewees are relatively homogenous (e.g., white, upper class); more diverse individuals were not interviewed. We do not know how they are labeled, what these labels do to their legitimacy, nor how they react to labels. A more comprehensive understanding of how labeling grounded in unconscious bias contributes to gender institution requires broadening the analysis. Second, this study is not concerned with antecedents that act as mediators between labels and reactions to them. Research on settings other than organizational leadership suggests that mediators can play a crucial role in how labelees react (Ashforth and Humphrey 1995). Future research can shed light on these mediators in organizational leadership.

Notes

1 I thank Nicolas Martelin for comments, Nelson Dueñas for research assistance, and Sophie Audousset-Coulier for help with the interviews.

2 Beliefs are ways of perceiving and thinking about gender; practices are ways of doing and undoing gender (Deutsch 2007; West and Zimmerman 1987); norms are descriptive or injunctive beliefs about who gendered individuals are and what they do (Kiesling 2003); rules refer to laws, policies, and regulations (Bothello and Mangen 2021).

3 Other heuristics include affect and inherence (Dale 2015).

4 Labeling is a perspective rather than a scientific theory (Ashforth and Humphrey 1997).

5 The literature distinguishes between how behavior compares to a norm and how it is evaluated relative to the norm (Heckert and Heckert 2002). In this study, labeling concerns the latter; negative (positive) deviance refers to behavior evaluated as deviating negatively (positively) from a norm.

6 The interviewee who was not a director had recently accessed executive leadership in a for-profit firm. Due to miscommunication prior to the interview, we found this out at the start of the interview.

7 Leadership experience is inferred from interviewees' LinkedIn profiles; leadership is defined as roles at the level of director, vice-president, or higher (and equivalent roles).

8 Interviewees mention their age or I infer it based on their LinkedIn profile. For four interviewees, I was unable to infer their ages.

9 The interview guide is available upon request.

10 The co-researcher declined to co-author this study.

11 Inherent in my approach is the risk that I identify unconscious bias where there is none or that I fail to identify bias. Although I have been careful in inferring bias in interviewees' accounts, I cannot rule out misidentification.

12 Labeling has also been explored via a realist ontology and objectivist epistemology that seek the causes of deviance (Lemert 1981). Some scholars in (social) psychology adopt a relativist ontology and a subjectivist epistemology.

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A Lacanian perspective on bias in language: How women can(not) ever *make it* in academia

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Abstract

In this paper, we contribute to the study of gender bias in organizations by showing how adopting a Lacanian psychoanalytic perspective helps us study bias in language while not separating language from the speaker. We use career narratives from female professors to exemplify our argument. We argue that coming into being as a performing subject means satisfying the desire of an organizational, academic other, and argue that this other's desire rests upon a masculine ideal. To support our arguments, we present and analyze narrative excerpts and show how *making it* for women in academia is constrained by the continued experience of bias—manifested in language—leading to an unresolvable split between striving to be a successful woman in academia and meeting the masculine-centered standards for the *ideal worker*. The Lacanian approach thus allows us to show how gender bias is simultaneously contested and reproduced in the career narratives of women with successful careers in neoliberal academia. We conclude the paper by addressing the broader implications and limits of a Lacanian perspective for studying and tackling (gender) bias in organizations.

KEYWORDS: unconscious bias, gender bias, language, Lacan, psychoanalysis, female professors, academia

Introduction

Bias can be defined as opinions and views that are triggered when we encounter differences and diversity in everyday situations (Bargh and Chartrand 1999; Fine 2013; Muhr 2011, 2019). Bias helps us categorize our experiences of the world so we can function in it without being overwhelmed by information (Risberg and Pilhofer 2018). Bias is thus a psychic, cognitive operation that makes us see and interpret reality in a distorted way (Hassin et al. 2005; Rippon 2019; Saini 2018). Hence, bias is hardwired into human cognition and social behavior, and we all take part in the production and reproduction of categories and the biases attached to them. Sizable literature (Carlsson and Rooth 2006; Gaustad and Raknes 2015; Muhr 2011; Moss-Racusin et al. 2012) specifically considers the effect of bias on the workplace experience of those who do not *fit* into the ideal worker picture: people who are not male, white, heterosexual, or able-bodied. This has led to the formation of the term *gender bias*, that is, the collected forms of bias that constrain women's access to and participation in the workplace (Acker 1990; Heilman 1995, 2001; van den Brink, Benschop and Jansen 2010). Moreover, social psychology research shows that people prefer to associate with successful in-groups and may thus uphold prejudice toward the out-group they are a part of (Phills et al. 2019). This means that women may also hold and reproduce negative biases about themselves when the ideal worker tends to be a masculine one.

Bias manifests itself in our everyday behavior, including how we speak and convey information. This is what is usually discussed as being *biased language*. As part of efforts to address bias, objectivist or realist approaches suggest that we can intervene in language to *remove* bias (Holroyd 2012, 2015). Today, software is even being developed along that line of thought to, for example, rewrite job ads to attract more diverse candidates. While we agree that de-biased, inclusive language is an important dimension to support efforts for equality, diversity, and inclusion, such interventions relieve a symptom rather than cure the *illness* of bias. Also, from such a perspective, language is somehow considered to be independent of the speaker, something that you can change *for* them and that may even change people in return. In line with previous Lacanian work in organization studies on women in academia (Fotaki 2013; Harding 2007), we approach bias as expressed through and inherent to language. We contribute to the study of bias in organizations by showing how adopting a Lacanian psychoanalytic perspective on bias helps us to study bias and its complexities in language in a way that does not separate language from the speaker.

We use the case of women in academia to illustrate our theoretical arguments. Academia is both a gendered profession and workplace, increasingly infused by neoliberal values (Archer 2008; Fotaki 2013). Of global concern, women are underrepresented in university faculties (UNESCO 2019) in general and in senior ranks in particular (Fotaki 2013). In academia, women suffer from gender bias (Harding 2007; van den Brink et al. 2010). Extant work investigates how bias plays out in affecting women's career advancement (Acker 1990; Heilman 1995, 2001). The causes for bias in academia are complex, manifold, and often interrelated with the dominance of stereotypically masculine norms (Fotaki 2013), discriminatory practices (van den Brink and Benschop 2012), and lead to various gender inequality outcomes (Munar and Villesèche 2016). For example, bias affects hiring and promotion (Husu 2000), publications (Lund 2012), grant funding (Salinas and Bagni 2017), and university league tables (League of European Research Universities (LERU) 2018, 2019). Gender(ed) inequalities and bias in academia are (re)produced through everyday practices such as assigning less prestigious tasks to women (Guarino and Borden 2017), perpetuating the masculine ideal of working long hours (Fotaki 2013), and prioritizing work above all other obligations (Toffoletti and Starr 2016). Moreover, mothers and young women tend to be treated as a liability, which affects female early-career researchers (Huopalainen and Satama 2019). Also, extant work illustrates how gender-based wage differences (Koskinen Sandberg et al. 2018) and gendered hurdles to women's career advancements (Cohen and Duberley 2017; Munar 2018) impact how long women stay in higher education.

In sum, we can say that gender bias constitutes a significant source of inequality in academia. Yet, women are also organizational participants in the academic workplace and thus inevitably participate in the reproduction of bias, which testifies to the complexity of changing the workplace. By this, however, we do not mean to assign responsibility to individual women for the reproduction and maintenance of bias, but rather seek to show how bias manifests through the language that women are subjected to and use to signify what it means to *make it* in academia. Our empirical illustrations come from career narratives reconstructed from interviews with twenty-two female professors. In this paper, we argue that the organizational Other's desire rests upon a masculine ideal, and we show how, for women in academia, *making it* is constrained by the continued experience of bias—manifested in language—which ultimately leads to an unresolvable split to meet the masculine-centered standards for the *ideal worker* while sustaining an identity as successful women academics. In other words, the Lacanian approach lets us show how gender bias is simultaneously contested *and* reproduced in the career narratives of women with successful careers in neoliberal academia.

Lacan, Language, and Bias

In management and organization studies, a growing body of work draws upon Lacan's work (Arnaud 2002; Arnaud and Vidaillet 2018). Notably, Lacan's theories have opened up interesting perspectives on subjectivity at work (Bicknell and Liefooghe 2010; Cremin 2010; Hoedemaekers and Keegan 2010). For Lacan, subjectivity is fragmented, decentered, and subordinated to the unsurpassable realm of the signifiers. Lacan defines the subject as a *function* of the signifier (Lacan 2006, 798); hence, language has a structuring role for the subject and is an inescapable part of subjectivity. Language forces subjects to constantly articulate themselves through a symbolic structure that disconnects them from themselves and the world (Žižek 2006). Thus, Lacan's position can be understood as suggesting that language, in providing signifiers with which to identify, exists at the frontier between the psychic and the social, and that it structures and mediates both (Hook 2006). Lacan was influenced by linguistics and especially by Ferdinand de Saussure (Fink 2004). However, rather than viewing signs as coherent entities in which the signifier and the signified are linked to each other (e.g., the word table and the physical object), Lacan argued that they are radically separated from each other. In short, this means that the signifier is barred from the signified; thus, the signifier is the most important entity in language.

This supremacy of the signifier means that when examining Lacan's work, one must devote attention to *the organization of the signifiers* (Parker 2005). For Lacan, signifiers are the primary material of the unconscious and the Symbolic order (Žižek 2006). The Lacanian subject comes into being as a result of entering the Symbolic order, a network of signifiers determining how the subject identifies itself (Hoedemaekers 2007). The subject is born into the language others use to express their desires and that we are obliged to use to express ours. Lacan's point is that language is the basic structure of society, and different discourses, therefore, make us who we are, or at least how we see ourselves. As formulated by Lacan: "Man [*sic*] thus speaks, but it is because the symbol has made him man" (Lacan 2006, 277). The Symbolic order is something that we are all literally subjected to and thus cannot escape. In contrast to the prevalent cognitive and behavioral psychology approach to bias, for Lacan, the unconscious is thus not grounded in ineffable psychodynamic processes or instinctual forces but, instead, in language (Lacan 2006). The unconscious is thus integral to language and the afferent shared (although unstable) horizon of meaning (Kapoor 2014). Human subjects are caught in a network of discourses that *speak* through them and where they unconsciously situate themselves (Arnaud 2002). For Lacan, our perception of *reality* stems from the linguistic nature of the unconscious; thus, the stimulus we receive and the process, by means of a *judgment process*, actually comes from outside the psyche; it stems from language. What we perceive as *reality* is, thus, a discourse and not reality itself (Žižek 2006). Put differently, in Lacanian terms, we relate to *reality* through the Symbolic order, that is, the linguistic field in which our unconscious thoughts perform their *judgment operation*.

Integrating the Lacanian conceptualization of the unconscious with discussions of gender and bias in organizations, it follows that gender bias is thus a linguistic reality, a discourse. We ascribe meaning to gender, yet the meaning that we experience comes from the unconscious structure of language. Gender bias resides in the Symbolic order in the sense that language brings a symbolic representation of what men and women are like or should be like, that is, descriptive and prescriptive gender stereotypes[1] (Heilman 2001). It follows that the Symbolic order cannot exist for the individual subject, for the realm of language preexists the individual subject's entry into it (Lacan 1977). Thus, bias is already—and always has been—part of our language that structures women and men collectively. It follows that our subjectivity is already shared socially, and bias can be understood as an underlying system of categorization that allows the (gendered) subject to come into being.

Furthermore, the Lacanian subject is characterized by an original and radical lack of identity or a *lack of being* (in French, *manque à être* (Lacan 2006)). This means that a non-identifiable and ungraspable (in Lacanian terms *Real*) lack of identity disturbs all experiences people have of themselves. This empty space—that is, *lack of being*—is filled up by the Other, which serves as a host for social expectations, norms, rules, and prohibitions (Naulleau 2013). In other words, we compensate for our lack by appealing to the Other (Arnaud and Vanheule 2012). Lacan often repeats the phrase "Man's desire is the Other's desire" (Lacan 2006, 222, 525, 690). With this, Lacan implies that our desire is not controlled by what we want, but rather what Others want from us: The subject desires to receive the Other's recognition. Specifically, Lacan suggests that subjects are shaped by an unconscious structure characterized by the subject's relationship to the Other (Fink 1997). In sum, subjects respond to the desire of the Other but always in ways that overstep the level of consciousness. We do not seek our own satisfaction per se; rather, we get satisfaction from receiving the Other's recognition (Bicknell and Liefooghe 2010). Given this, the subject is constantly trying to sort out what the Other wants from it, so as to realize the Other's desire (Žižek 2006). The way we see ourselves or the constant desire to do more is thus already and always controlled by how we think the Other wants to see us, and our self-concept is controlled by the Other's desire (Cederström and Hoedemaekers 2010).

In sum, the Lacanian subject can best be understood as *being spoken by* the Symbolic order, and the Other as *that place* from which the subject seeks recognition. Importantly, an organization can come to take the place of the Other (Arnaud 2002). When we look at the organization from a Lacanian perspective, we can conceive it as a signifier that binds a field of signification to it. This desire for recognition can be traced in language by analyzing the organization of signifiers used to describe lived experiences. Furthermore, the field of significations will delineate conditions of possibility and impossibility for the performing subject. For women, this would mean delineating how they can come into being as performing subjects, that is, how they can *make it* in a given organization and role despite—or thanks to—particular stereotypes that are already given to them in language. Following Lacan, the women will imagine that this organizational Other looks upon them, and they will try to fulfill the Other's desire.

In this article, we focus on academia as an example of an organizational context where the Other's desire is gendered in a way that disadvantages women. Institutionally, we can see how the structure of academia is organized, reproducing masculinity (Kimmel 2016, 16). To choose the life of an academic is to enter an institutional *game* that, historically, has been structured to value masculine *ways of doing* (Cole and Hassel 2017). Following this, we argue that academia structures a specific organizational Other that implicitly shapes, in masculine ways, the expectations about an ideal worker's nature, capacities, and needs. In other words, a masculine academic Other. The idea of *making it* thus means satisfying the masculine academic Other's desire of how to be and how to act as a professor (representing the pinnacle of an academic career). In this way, academia is structured around an ideal of masculine performance, which places women further away from becoming the *ideal* worker. In this context, women are thus split between their efforts to fulfill the Other's desire while constantly facing the fact that they cannot fulfill it as women. More specifically, if subjectivity is conceptualized as an effect of language—even though women who *make it* to professorship can find signifiers to account for their experiences and to make sense of their world—the structure of their speech is provided by the Symbolic order (Lacan 2006), and the signifiers they deploy belong to the organizational Other, that is, the organization's expectation of performance inhabiting a masculine ideal. Following Lacan, we become castrated by language and *trapped* by (bias in) language. This biased, gendered structure can, in turn, be traced in language via the Lacanian analytical approach that invites us to identify *the organization of the signifiers* (Parker 2005) here in neoliberal, gendered academia. This framing thus lets us ask the question: How does bias manifest in career narratives of women who have *made it* in academia?

Empirical Material and Methods

To collect career narratives, we conducted interviews with twenty-two female professors at higher education (HE) institutions in the Nordic countries (i.e., about two-thirds of the women were at this employment level) as part of a broader project about gender inequality in academia. The interviewees were informed that the purpose of the data collection was to investigate gender (in)equalities and bias in HE and that the aim was to represent and give voice to the research subjects and their lived experiences of justice. Other outputs use parts of this dataset, including a case study. At the HE institution under scrutiny, the proportion of female professors has changed little over time (increasing by about only 2% in the last decade) and was approximately 18% at the time of writing. For this research, the interviewed women are considered to form a group sharing a gender identity and hierarchical position. At the same time, we acknowledge that their identities/subjectivities also differ in terms of age, disciplinary background, national origin, and other categories. While the complex intersections of gender, age, scholarly background, nationality, and ethnicity are not the focus of this particular article, we expect that these intersections will be considered more closely in future work with this dataset or by other researchers with different data.

Following other studies that adopt a psychoanalytic approach (Hoedemaekers and Keegan 2010; Kenny, Haugh and Fotaki 2019), we collected empirical materials with semi-structured and open-ended interviews. Lasting between one and two hours, these working life interviews (Fotaki 2013) aimed to elicit narratives on how the women make sense of their career paths within academia. Questions were aimed to elicit accounts of how experiences and perceptions influence the interviewees' sense of what they believe has been significant for them reaching the highest ranks in academia, that is, to *make it*. Questions were asked about a range of experiences concerning career, departmental culture, and academic work more generally. All interviews were transcribed in full, including pauses and slips. Indeed, for Lacan, our everyday lives are replete with unconscious acts, which, because they are unconscious, are inaccessible to us; nonetheless, they manifest themselves in the form of slips, miscommunications, confusion, mistakes, and blind spots (Kapoor 2014).

A psychoanalytical approach requires researchers to work on "the line of the Symbolic" as a means to locate the Other (Parker 2005, 3). By doing so, we underline the particular weight and insight that language and articulation of signifiers have for Lacan, as they are significant aspects of his approach. Following this, we propose a re-quilting of unconscious bias by asking the Lacanian question *Che vuoi?* and begin a process of identifying the *privileged* (i.e., most commonly expressed) signifiers related to *making it* in academia.

We now outline what these tools are and how we employ them to analyze our data. First, *Che vuoi?* In *Seminar V*, Lacan introduces his famous Graph of Desire, an attempt to model human desire, which is described in Écrits (Lacan 2006, 681-700). A key component of this graph is the Italian phrase *Che vuoi?*— that is, how the subject *asks* the Other, "What do you *really* want of me? What is it that you desire of me?"—and encapsulates how human desire is always an attempt to fulfill the Other's desire. As mentioned, the Other is to be understood as *that place* we seek recognition from (Arnaud 2002, 702), in our case, academia. Second, Lacanian researchers concentrate on identifying the *privileged* signifiers that circulate in an organization to identify the hold the organizational Other has on its members (Naulleau 2013). For Lacan, the subject's desires come to be projected onto certain influential aspects of the Symbolic and onto signifiers that dominate a given social context (Lacan 2006). By drawing out the privileged signifiers, we gain insight into the Other that provides women with the infrastructure, so to speak, of how to perform in order to *make it*. As mentioned, Lacan argues how representations are taken up by the unconscious such that, by a process of judgment, we give signifiers substance. Biases emerge in language and take their point of departure from these privileged signifiers with which our interviewees relate to a *reality* wherein they must perform in certain ways in order to *make it*.

In this paper, we limit our inquiry to locating the Other and the privileged signifiers in responses to a central interview question we asked respondents about career advice: "What advice would you give to younger women in academia?" By asking this question, we asked them to reflect on what they believe has been significant for them *making it*. Answers to this question can inform how language structures what *making it* means for women. With this question, following Lacan, we are actually asking *Che vuoi?* In much the same way that the subject turns to the Other and asks, "What do you *really* want of me? What is it that you desire of me?" we are asking the women what *they* want from younger female academics as a means to locate the Other. Specific signifiers are more commonly used than others, which indicates that these are *shared beliefs* among the women; hence, this is where we locate the Other in language that determines the women collectively.

The interpretation of interview transcriptions commenced with repeated readings of the answers to our central question about career advice. These accounts were considered through the Graph of Desire that supposes asking the Lacanian question *Che vuoi?* on behalf of the respondent. This allowed us to identify privileged signifiers (i.e., repeated signifiers that occur across interviews) that help to delineate the structure of the language used by our respondents to make sense of their career and in turn develop accounts of the Other. The findings were discussed and refined among the authorial team. In the findings, we present illustrative excerpts of this work. While we are not portraying this analysis work as *psychoanalysis*, we reckon our interpretation of the interviewees' language is approached *as if* they were subjects in an analysis. We acknowledge that applying a Lacanian framework raises the challenge of claiming to know anything because, for Lacan, there is no absolute truth. Importantly, this paper is not meant to produce truth as such, but rather to offer valuable explanations and illuminate bias in language. The psychoanalytical approach is not designed to support theory testing, and the Lacanian perspective cannot offer closure or generalizable findings (Parker 2005). Put differently, a Lacanian lens enables us to *encircle* the problem being studied, providing traces of how the academic selves and bias are (re)produced through language rather than attempting to explain them (Hook 2006).

Findings

By identifying the privileged signifiers in response to the Lacanian question *Che vuoi?* we start to understand how the Other informs women how to perform and, thus, how they come into being as performing subjects. Some signifiers are more commonly used and appear across interviews, indicating the set of shared beliefs within the organization. To illustrate how signifiers help reveal bias in language, we present and discuss three excerpts from replies to our central interview question on career advice for younger scholars.

Excerpt 1

> *Interviewee: Okay, advice to give to women: Focus on research. Copy the men!*
>
> *Interviewer: Do you mean focus on networking?*
>
> *Interviewee: Yeah, network! But [laughs] network with the right people. Yeah. Don't … don't network with people who do second-rate research. Network with people who do top research and work with them. Uh-huh, yeah. And be strategic about that. Yeah. I think women have it: "Oh yeah. Nice person to collaborate with." No! Collaborate with someone who's good. Always go for collaborating with the best people. Yeah. Yeah. Don't spend time doing organizational stuff. No!*

In this excerpt, we hear "Copy the men," which refers to a specific behavior that women need to adopt. The interviewee, who discussed networking earlier in the interview, hears the call of the Other who tells her to mime masculinity, and she responds to this call by acquiring the signifier "copy." The signifier "copy" implies that this particular type of behavior is not something that comes *naturally* to women; it structures a call for women to go against the way they naturally are. We hear how the Symbolic order structures a differential logic: *Woman* is positioned as the opposite to *man*, that is, women as communal (nice, warm) and men as strategic. Put differently, the linguistic code is made for the masculine subject meaning, so that women are defined negatively in relation to men (Irigaray 1993). To "copy the men" and to be "strategic" with her networking practices is a way for this interviewee to become what she perceives the Other desires from her.

Thus, the interviewee's response to the Other's call is simultaneously an attempt to contest bias. The interviewee seeks to demonstrate how *she* has what it takes and does not do what women *naturally* do. Yet, she is already trapped by bias in language, accepting the bias-infused dichotomy as a supporting argument for her advice. In other words, by giving such advice based on her own career, the interviewee attempts to maintain the ideal of *making it* by structuring a difference between her and other women (who network with people just because they are nice). However, this is, following Lacan, just an imaginary cover-up for what really drives and determines the subject, and that is the unconscious force of language. The interviewee becomes trapped by language and, thus, by bias, even though she attempts to distance herself from other women because she is still a function of the signifier. Following Lacan, the system of language still operates above and beyond her (and us all); thus, bias remains inescapable in language. In this way, we see how "Copy the men" bears the promise of being able to *make it*, which is a contestation of bias. Meanwhile, the Symbolic order still structures women further away from becoming the *ideal worker;* thus, bias is reproduced as the interviewee is unable to escape the signifying effect of language.

Excerpt 2

> *A second [piece of] advice: Lean in! If it is something for you, you need to recognize exactly what it is that you want. If management create something you are interested in: Lean in! But be prepared, because it's tough out there. You have to be prepared! You're not going for a managerial career for glory, right? So, it is … you need to be ready for tough conversations.*

In this excerpt, we hear "Lean in," which, similar to the above, seems to refer to a specific behavior that women need to adopt, and which echoes neoliberal imperatives for women found in Sandberg's book with the same title (Chrobot-Mason, Hoobler and Burno 2019; Sandberg, 2013). In effect, bias in language informs women that they must transform their subjectivity in a certain way; they must perform a split in subjectivity: a *performing* self versus a *real* self. Women's *real* self is already inscribed in the Symbolic order as the way women *naturally* are, while this *performing* self is rather an attempt to answer to and fulfill the Other's desire. The signifier "Lean in" thus calls on women to work on themselves, to transform their selves, to split their subjectivity. They must make themselves into more confident or resilient subjects in the workplace. Here, the signifier "Lean in" is thus not merely about copying a masculine practice (such as instrumental networking); it is about becoming a different kind of woman who realizes that she needs to do something more (than the men) to get what she wants.

Thus, our interviewee becomes trapped by bias in language as bias informs the split she imagines the Other desires from her. The Other says that, in order to *make it*, women must change themselves. The Symbolic order provides the necessary material for the interviewee to relate to herself and to the Other from whom she seeks recognition, but language is not freely at the interviewee's disposal. The signifier "Lean in" thus arguably belongs to the Other. In sum, the signifier "Lean in" is, on the one hand, a contestation of bias, as this advice envisages a way out of bias, a way for women to come into being as performing subjects. On the other hand, the Symbolic order still structures women away from becoming the *ideal worker*, as the woman who leans in is still not the equal of a man who literally does not have to do so. Thus, bias is reproduced and the female academic is unable to escape the signifying effect of language.

Excerpt 3

> *Yeah, actually, there are many women who talk to me about different things. I always, well I still tell everyone that if you are a female, then you have to be strong, meaning don't ever show weakness. It's important not to show weakness! You might be a soft person, but when you're out there you cannot let them boss you around. That's one thing. And another thing: Here in academia, your knowledge is the most important thing! So, when you publish, or when you show, I mean in our world it is publications that very much matter! That counts a lot! So, publish, publish, publish! Even if they don't stay. Let's say they go elsewhere. Elsewhere, they also look at your publications first. So, make time to publish. Yeah. And you need to be strong.*

In this excerpt, we hear, "If you are a female, then you have to be strong." Again, we hear advice revolving around a specific type of behavior that women need to acquire: The women must "not show weakness." The respondent goes on to say, "You might be a soft person, but when you're out there you cannot let them boss you around," which further indicates that this behavior is something women need to develop/learn, even if this is not their *real self*. Thus, bias in language again structures a splitting—a *performing I* versus a *real I*—indicating a (partial) loss of subjectivity. Our interviewee also utters "cannot let them boss you around," where the signifier "them" seems to implicate that she is speaking of someone, perhaps (an)Other? For Lacan, our very existence is "responsive to the Other" (Žižek 2006, 69). Following this, the interviewee emerges as a subject performing in response to the Other's call.

Moreover, we hear that "it is publications that very much matter." The signifiers "publication" and "publications" appear often across the interviews, which echoes the existing literature on neoliberal academia where the focus is on research productivity as a way to display superiority (Fotaki 2013; Toffoletti and Starr 2016) and a way for women to avoid having someone else boss them around. Also, gender differences in publication productivity are just one explanation for the persistent gender inequality in academia, because research is often better rewarded than teaching (Long, Scott, Paul and McGinnis 1993). Here, the way bias emerges in language again structures a symbolic distance to the masculine ideal of performance, which makes the Other call on women to transform themselves, to split their subjectivity. Because language is seen as something that speaks above and beyond the rational intentions of the subject (Fink 1997, 3), bias becomes an inescapable *reality* for the interviewee who seeks to overcome it.

Discussion and Conclusion

In this article, we investigate what *making it* means for women in academia and show how bias is sustained in language and prevents closure for women in academia. Using a Lacanian framework, specifically the analytical tool *Che vuoi?* and the notion of privileged signifiers, we analyze interview replies to the question: "What advice would you give to younger women in academia?" These privileged signifiers, together, help us understand how, in their advice to future generations, the interviewees are trying to make sense of what the Other's desire is (*Che vuoi?* or What do you want?), and how the privileged signifiers reveal a gendered understanding of how these signifiers are manifested in women's academic careers. In other words, our study provides insights into the effects of language in constituting gender bias in organizations in general and, in our case, how this affects women's subjectivity and careers in academia in particular.

Overall, our analysis suggests a split in women's subjectivity to fulfill the Other's desire: a *performing* self vs. a supposedly *real* or *natural* feminine self. This split appears necessary for a successful career, for *making it*, yet sets women professors apart from other women who have not (successfully) satisfied the masculine academic Other. In our analysis, we hear not only how bias about ways of being and acting are (re)produced in the collected narratives, but also how women are trapped in language through the use of signifiers that carry masculine understandings of performance adopted by women to respond to the Other's (perceived) desire. Our study thus contributes to work about gender and bias in organizations by showing that *making it* in academia (or in other male-dominated organizations) is, for women, conditioned on much more than being granted a title, thus providing original insights into the pervasiveness and resilience of bias even for social groups that can appear to have overcome and defeated it. Put differently, even though our interviewees have reached the level of professorship, they have not overcome bias, as bias sustains itself in the Symbolic order and thus in language. Moreover, we show how the academic performance discourse binds women in a set of relations that symbolically and repeatedly structures them away from becoming the *ideal worker*. We also contribute to the literature by taking a Lacanian psychoanalytical approach to study bias as expressed in the language of persons who are themselves the *object* of the bias, thus not separating the language from the subject.

In this article, we focus on specific Lacanian concepts and tools, and our study is thus by no means an extensive scholarly account of what can be achieved with Lacanian analysis. Rather, it is intended as an architecture for introducing the Lacanian approach to studying the complexities of bias in language, here applied to the particular case of female professors' career narratives. This architecture can be applied to any other context and profession. Future work could extend our study by using other Lacanian tool to understand not only what we think the Other desires—and through which signifiers this is expressed—but also how women attempt to fill the lack created by this desire. Such inquiry would for example be relevant to better understand how signifiers feed into a *fantasy* and how such a continuous attempt to satisfy the Other possibly provides women with *jouissance*, that is to say a form of satisfaction going beyond pleasure (Harding 2007). This aligns with an understanding of Lacanian psychoanalysis as a cultural and linguistic practice trying to uncover the unconscious desires that *speak* to us (Kapoor 2014). In line with this, future studies may also aim to go beyond the diagnostic and seek to identify *ways out* or interstices for change/action to further the possibilities for resistance, for example, by combining the works of Lacan with the works of Žižek (1989, 1997) and Irigaray (1985, 1993). Irigaray famously contends that women fundamentally lack their own language, which means that women's use of the masculine Symbolic order creates an idiosyncratic impossibility for women to *make it* in academia and elsewhere. According to Irigaray, this designation of the woman as the lacking Other has not only affected what the male world from its position of knowledge/power says about women but also what women themselves come to consider their own and the direction of their searches (Irigaray 1985, 1993). She thus points to the need for women to develop their own language, although she does not provide us with a way to achieve this. In a similar vein, Kristeva theorized the *writing subject*, that is, the idea that any authorial gesture means constant changes in position across the conscious and unconscious (1980). For Kristeva, it follows that there are always interstices where both the Symbolic and the semiotic are at play, which can destabilize and create new meanings. Recent feminist attempts to *get out of the trap* include Carusi's (2021) book *Lacan and Critical Feminism*, in which she revisits the Graph of Desire and argues that the original emptiness (*manque à être*) may also be seen as a space (to be) filled with opportunities by a *writing subject*, as theorized by Kristeva.

Besides the fact that in this paper we focus on replies to a single interview question, we acknowledge other, broader limitations of our research design. We conducted interviews in a single institution and cultural setting and focused on women's narratives only. Future research could investigate men's experience of the lacanian *lack of being* in their careers and contrast the findings with ours - with a view to de-bias academia, not least what constitutes professional success in that context. Also, female professors are not a homogeneous category, and experience can vary significantly along intersections with other social identities. Intersectional approaches would be beneficial in that regard and help to further disentangle the different facets of bias in academia. Finally, in terms of our theoretical framework, we acknowledge the critiques of (Lacanian) psychoanalytical approaches in relation to feminist standpoints (Moi 2004; Segal 1996). Overall, the feminist critique of Lacan is concerned with phallocentrism in his work and how he perpetuates a masculine language that supports patriarchal metanarratives that put the male at the center of the Symbolic (Fotaki and Harding 2012, 6). At the same time, others see the potential in his thoughts and believe that his work has much to offer feminism and gender studies (Fotaki and Harding 2012; Grosz 1990). What Lacan offers is a consideration of how the Other can inform behaviors and ideas. Many influential contributions have been made by French feminists such as Irigaray, Cixous, and Kristeva—often labeled *Post-Lacanian-Feminists* (Fotaki and Harding 2012; Kapoor 2014)—rethinking Lacan's work. We thus see our work as contributing to this body of scholarship, in particular to the stream initiated by organizational scholars and women in academia (Fotaki 2013).

In this article, we take a Lacanian approach to show how gender bias is simultaneously contested and reproduced in the career narratives of women with successful careers in neoliberal academia. Bias is contested because women's narratives of *making it* envisage ways out of bias by explicitly pointing to a need for a split in subjectivity. However, this splitting occurs because the women are already *trapped* by bias in language; bias is thus still reproduced in these narratives, which ultimately structures women further away from coming into being the *ideal worker* in academia. We want to stress again that this does not place responsibility on women for both addressing and reproducing bias. Rather, we see our article as providing further evidence for the need to change organizational structures, norms, and work practices collectively so that women are not left to cope with (gender) bias in organizations on their own.

Notes

1 While descriptive gender stereotypes designate what women and men *are* like, prescriptive gender stereotypes designate what women and men *should* be like.

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Doing Un/Troubled Subject Positions as a Transgender Woman with Autism: The Case of Vera

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Abstract

This paper aims to capture in/exclusion processes in the life of a transgender person who is also diagnosed with autism. We use Staunæs' (2005) concept of *troubling subjectivities* to explore how Vera negotiates her identities as a neurodiverse transgender woman. We pay particular attention to how the categories of transgender and autism intersect and which in/exclusion processes they set in motion. We unfold how identifying as transgender and being diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder shape Vera's life. Specifically, we aim to unveil how these social categories shape her degree of agency in her private social relations and in institutional settings of education and healthcare. This is important because: a) research shows that a significant number of transgender people also inhabit the clinical category of autism; and b) the intersections of multiple social categories change the conditions under which someone is allowed to do their particular personhood in different social settings. We show that while Vera is able to perform identities related to the categories of transgender and autism in personally empowering ways, she is also obstructed by *identity overwork*. That is, others' positioning of Vera as *troubled* repeatedly requires her response on multiple social levels and in various contexts.

KEYWORDS: Transgender, Autism, Troubled Subject Positions, Identity, Intelligibility, Intersectionality

Introduction

In classic social psychology, *bias* is often depicted as an individual's belief held about a social group, which then motivates discriminatory behavior toward a member of this group (Rudman and Glick 2010). This approach often suggests a rather simple causal effect where biased belief *A* leads to discriminatory action *B*. However, more importantly, it suggests a rather un-dynamic, or at least, unidirectional understanding of the discriminatory relation. Take, for instance, the transphobic belief that cis[1] women are "real" women, while transgender[2] women are "deceptive" about their gender. This belief is of course important to document because it *is* very likely to result in discriminatory behavior. However, the exclusive focus on how A leads to B tends to overlook that discrimination is not just a unidirectional mechanism. Rather, it is often a more complex social interaction carried out in dynamic relational exchanges with the intention, or the effect, of positioning the target as *less than*. When someone claims that "realness" belongs to cis women, they are in effect defining a social norm and positioning transgender women as falling short of that norm. However, the reception of this iteration of the norm will depend on the person the claim is addressed to, as well as the *cultural master narratives*[3] or contexts that they are both situated in and draw upon. This complex social interaction, set in play through discrimination, can be captured by Staunæs' (2003, 2005) Butler-inspired understanding of the Foucauldian subject. For Staunæs and Butler, the subject "becomes a subject [in] a process (…) of simultaneous mastery and submission" (Davies 2006, 425). It is through this paradoxical dynamic of mastery and submission that subjects have the potential to achieve *intelligibility* (Butler 2004b) or *the status of viable subjecthood* (Davies 2006, 427). In this sense, we are all dependent on people's un/doings of us in our process of becoming. However, some people, more often than others, have to actively take up, renegotiate, or even reject these un/doings by others in order to achieve viable subject positions. That is, some people must put in *identity overwork* (Herold 2016) in order to achieve *viable subjecthood*.

In this article, we strive to avoid the same pitfall that trans scholars have critiqued Butler's early work for, namely using the example of the transgender person to prove a theoretical point about the constructedness of gender without engaging more deeply with the lived experiences of transgender people (Namaste 2009). In order to avoid this pitfall, we aim to focus on one persons' lived experiences of the in/exclusion processes that mark her life story, including the *doings* and renegotiations that are integral to these experiences.

Meeting Vera in a Scientific Context

The first author of this article was introduced to Vera in 2013 through a research colleague who specialized in autism.[4] The research project in which Vera was first engaged was experimental. The research team had particularly striven to recruit (cis) women diagnosed with autism because (cis) men are overrepresented in this group. However, when Vera showed up as a representative of the category woman, she intentionally challenged the cisnormative assumptions of gender in the research design. By showing up as a participant, she spurred discussions among the research team about the taken-for-granted and implicit cisgendered norms. Thus, Vera, who explicitly defines herself as a gender activist, was quite successful at *troubling* the cisnormative research practice.

Vera's proactive approach furthermore led her to take charge of our research agenda before the first interview had even taken place. When the first interview was scheduled in December 2013, Vera, unprompted, sent her CV and what she labeled her "Life Story," which was an autobiographical written account of important events in her life, marked by many experiences of discrimination. Hence, Vera conveyed her story partly in written form, partly in two in-depth face-to-face interviews[5] with the first author. The interviews lasted approximately four hours in total. Both interviews were transcribed for later analysis.

In her CV, Vera lays out her educational background, including lecturing and leadership experiences. In her written "Life Story," Vera describes herself as a lonely and socially isolated child who had a sense of being different from everyone else. In order to validate Vera's decision to share this personal information, and inspired by *participatory action research* (Singh, Richmond and Burnes 2013), the first author constructed the interview guide on the basis of Vera's written "Life Story," which meant that Vera significantly shaped the research agenda. After the first interview, which emphasized experiences with discriminatory processes directed at Vera's gender, we sent notes and interpretations of the first interview to Vera to allow her to offer feedback on our interpretation of her. Vera's feedback led to some changes, mainly due to anonymity concerns, but not to any major re-interpretations of the emerging analysis. The second interview itself, however, refocused the project and placed Vera's autism diagnosis more at the center. This re-focus was driven by a law change regarding transgender rights for people with diagnoses such as autism, which was implemented a few months after the first interview.[6] This change led Vera to reflect on how this might directly influence her life and agency going forward.

The processes of in/exclusion captured in the analysis are primarily the ones identified as important by Vera herself. Thus, inspired by *participatory action research* as well as Namaste's (2009) reflections on *collaborative transformative intellectual practices*, we situate Vera as *the* expert of her own life story, valuing her *subjugated knowledge* (Foucault 1980) as a transgender person. A participatory and collaborative approach requires that research about marginalized groups involves these marginalized groups throughout the research processes (Singh, Richmond and Burnes 2013). It also requires that one avoid using minorities to make a purely theoretical point (Namaste 2009; Prosser 1998; Raun 2014; Stryker 2017). Therefore, our aim is to capture how Vera experiences the subject positions she is placed in, picks up herself, and seeks to renegotiate in various everyday contexts. We explore Vera's *doings* both on an interactional level with her mother, educational personal, and healthcare professionals, as well as on an institutional[7] level with the educational and healthcare systems. In doing so, we align our approach with Namaste (2009) by working with an empirically grounded approach to theory that addresses the political and intellectual priorities of the collaborator Vera. This approach stands in contrast to how transgender lived experiences have often been rejected as invalid forms of knowledge (Enke 2012; Holm 2017; Namaste 2009; Raun 2014). We aim to "conduct trans analysis with respectful curiosity" (Raun 2014, 13).

Cultural Context—Conflicting Social Categories?

In order to set the stage for Vera's identity work and the renegotiations that she repeatedly needs to engage in, we need to outline the cultural context in which her identity work takes place. Denmark is often portrayed nationally and internationally as a "liberal haven" for transgender and other Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Queer, Intersex or Agender (LGBQ+) individuals, which is largely due to the early historical and institutional inclusion of gender and sexual minorities (Raun 2010). Transgender people are, in theory, able to access hormone replacement therapy and gender-affirming surgeries paid for by the tax-funded welfare state if they meet certain clinical criteria and requirements. However, state clinics have been critiqued as cisnormative (Occhino and Skewes 2020).

Despite Denmark's "liberal haven" image, discrimination against transgender people is still widespread. According to the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA-Europe) survey, 70% of transgender people living in Denmark reported experiencing one or more of the following types of harassment in public: a) comments; b) verbal abuse; c) threatening behavior; d) physical abuse; or e) sexual abuse directed at or driven by their gender identity (Turner, Whittle and Combs 2009). Overall, there is still a general lack of recognition of what it means for transgender people to live in a society that is fundamentally shaped by cisnormativity.[8] To understand the discriminatory challenges that Vera experiences in her everyday life, it is important to know that in 2014 (after our first interview with Vera), a reduction in rights for transgender people with mental illnesses was implemented with the following law:

> *[A] person may apply to be allowed to be castrated as part of sex change if the applicant has been diagnosed with transsexualism, has a persistent desire for castration, and is able to grasp the consequences (Law on the amendment of the Health Law 2014, our translation and emphasis).*

The addition "is able to grasp the consequences" in praxis excluded transgender people if they were diagnosed with psychiatric disorders that would be perceived to affect their ability to fully comprehend the consequences of their decision[9], and in this regard, an autism diagnosis was considered as an expression of a "mental illness" which conflicted with access to trans-specific healthcare (Amnesty International 2014). This meant that transgender people, like Vera, who were diagnosed with autism risked their gender identity being considered unintelligible. This was in spite of the fact that an autism diagnosis, according to the World Professional Association for Transgender Health's (WPATH) Standards of Care, should not result in limited access to trans-specific healthcare. According to WPATH's Standards of Care, clinicians should only screen for issues such as autism in order to incorporate any concerns such a diagnosis may raise for the overall care and treatment plan (Coleman et al. 2012, 24).

The fact that the Danish healthcare system, at the time, limited access to trans-specific healthcare for people with an autism diagnosis conflicted with growing recognition that a significant number of transgender people also inhabit the clinical category of autism—something which Vera also explicitly stated was mirrored in her own social context. Research backs up her perception by showing that the diagnosis rates of autism are higher among transgender children and adolescents than in the general population (De Vries et al. 2010; Glidden et al. 2016; Shumer et al. 2016; Van Der Miesen, Hurley and De Vries 2016). However, the degree of overlap between the categories of transgender and the autism diagnosis varies greatly across studies. While Shumer et al. (2016) report an overlap of up to 23.1%, De Vries et al. (2010) report an overlap of 7.8%. This variation demonstrates that the degree of overlap between these two categories is still up for debate, yet even the most conservative estimate of 7.8% covariance suggests a significant association between the two categories, especially since the base rate of both is so low (both the autism diagnosis and the diagnosis of gender dysphoria is estimated to apply to around 1 pct. of the population).

Analytical Tools

Passionate about queer theory, Vera herself perceives gender as a socially negotiated category. She says:

> *"I usually say that I understand gender as a relational phenomenon or a dynamic group process and when I'm not in relation to others I don't experience the challenges that come with being attributed a gender which does not align with my gender identity" (Interview 1).*

Thereby, Vera captures that the challenges of inhabiting a transgender identity arise in interaction with others. To capture the social dynamics of the in/exclusion Vera experiences, both due to her gender identity and her autism diagnosis, we draw on Staunæs' (2005) intersectional concept of *troubling subjectivities* to help us frame Vera's life story and experiences.

Inspired by Butler's *performative* take on gender, Staunæs considers both gender and intersectionality a form of *doing* (Staunæs 2003). This entails that intersecting categories are understood as *non-additional* (Staunæs 2003, 102)—and thus that belonging to multiple social categories (as we all do) will not necessarily have the same consequences for interactions with everyone or across institutional settings. In short, categories are relational; therefore, we need to understand complex social negotiations in order to understand discrimination and its effects. The stigma and *troubling* that emerge from different social categories vary from person to person, situation to situation, and from context to context. Staunæs' concept of *troubling subjectivities* captures how identifying or being identified with more than one social category that is culturally devalued might intensify the possibility for stigmatization in social interactions. That is, the relationship between social categories can create and enforce hierarchies (Staunæs 2003, 2005). *Troubled subject positions* emerge from this congealment of asymmetrical power relations. Staunæs' work contends that no individual is born into a particular essence of *troubled* subjectivity. Rather, all subject positions can—at least in theory—become *troubled* through different interactions. However, Staunæs, at the same time, emphasizes that some individuals are more likely than others, *repeatedly* and *across situations*, to be positioned as *troubled* and therefore unintelligible (Staunæs 2005). Staunæs' conceptual framework fits well with Vera's own articulations and understandings of her gender as a relational phenomenon (shown above). Staunæs' framework also helps us capture how the two different social categories are forefronted in different contexts in different ways. For example, Vera worries that being neurodiverse as a transgender woman reduces her chances of being granted access to trans-specific healthcare. But at the same time, she experiences that the autism diagnosis grants her access to benefits in other institutional contexts, namely support in an unemployment context (which will be spelled out later). This captures how being diagnosed with autism affords Vera both positive and negative negotiation positions depending on who she is interacting with and how the *cultural master narratives* position everyone in relation to each other.

To further underline Vera's efforts to renegotiate both her gender and her autism diagnosis in an empowering manner, we also employ the concept of *identity overwork* (Herold 2016). People who are not always easily recognized within a cisnormative framework are often forced to repeatedly explain and validate their gender positions. That is, in order to avoid or minimize the effects of *troubling* experiences related to how she prefers to *do* gender, she has to take on *identity overwork*. If one furthermore is (or is perceived to be) neurodiverse, one's identity workload is further increased, adding to the efforts it requires to achieve a viable subject position.

We argue that our theoretical framing assists us in unpacking complex and dynamic discriminatory processes in which Vera must invest heavily in challenging the *cultural master narratives* in order to carve an intelligible space for her *counternarrative*. We aim to capture multifaceted and diverse discriminatory dynamics that enforce cisnormative and neurotypical standards in Vera's life, but we also hope to underline that intense investments in *troubling* these norms can lead to changes that allow for greater agency for Vera and other transgender-identified people. By striving to see the world through Vera's eyes, we are exposed to an uphill battle with many multifaceted discriminatory experiences, but Vera's perspective and story also offer hope for both greater inclusivity and more agency for people belonging to, or identifying with, multiple stigmatized social categories.

In our analysis, we strive to show the multifaceted discriminatory processes Vera navigates in her everyday life. We bring this forth by structuring the analysis in three main sections: a) discriminatory processes at the intimate or relationship level (the micro level); b) discriminatory processes in institutional settings such as the educational and healthcare systems (the meso level); and finally, we aim to capture c) discriminatory processes set in motion at political levels through national laws (at the macro level). This structure enables us to capture how Vera is positioned, by herself and others, in *un/troubled subject positions* related to the two categories: transgender and autism. It also enables us to reveal the potential stigma that often emerges from these dynamic processes and how Vera manages this stigma. Finally, the theoretical framework and our micro-, meso- and macro-level structure analysis help us to bring forth when and how Vera manages to increase her agency and lay claim to *intelligible subject positions* in spite of resistance in different contexts and at different levels.

In the analysis, we aim to give room for Vera's articulations of how she navigates, is *troubled* by, but also makes use of her identification with the two different yet entangled and often *troubled* identities.

Analysis

In Vera's case, *troubled subject positioning* arises in different social contexts, and at both micro (intimate), meso (institutional) and macro (structural) levels. Overall, our analysis aims to show how the *troubling* of Vera's gender identity and autism unfolds across social levels, and how they sometimes, but not always, add up to *troubled subject positions*. We follow Vera as she engages in *identity overwork* (Herold, 2016), for example, through frequent renegotiations of her gender positions in attempts to create new and more empowering subject positions that are in line with how she experiences herself as a gendered and neurodiverse being. This overwork becomes necessary due to the intense *troubling* Vera experiences in various contexts. As her life story unfolds, we see how Vera's mother measures her against cisgender norms and emphasizes that she should stop deviating from them. Vera also explains how something as basic as obtaining an education can involve juridical *troubling* because of how she expresses her gender identity both in clothing and name. Finally, we explore how Danish legislation concerning transgender people's access to trans-specific healthcare shapes the degree of agency Vera can claim with regard to accessing gender-confirming healthcare technologies. We show how Vera often aims to renegotiate the conditions for *doing* that she is offered in various social interactions and contexts. So, while her childhood involves few empowering narratives of renegotiation, her adult life is tightly packed with activist interventions all designed to reduce stigmatization and increase her own and other transgender people's agency.

The analysis is structured in three sections, each of which addresses the significant social levels of Vera's everyday life: a) intimate relationships; b) institutional settings in which Vera interacts with different types of professionals and institutionalized norms; and c) a political level that dictates the national laws and norms concerning Vera's rights as a neurodiverse transgender woman.

Un/Troubling in Intimate Relationships

Vera's relationship with her mother takes up a large part of her life story. Vera describes how her mother, throughout her life, explicitly and continuously has positioned her as "deviant and hard to understand for others [i.e., cisgender people]." Vera provides several examples of how her mother wants her to adapt her gender identity to cisgender standards, even prompting her to seek medical help to get "cured" and embrace a male gender identity. In fact, her mother expresses this preference regarding both peer relationships in childhood and educational choices in Vera's adult life. For example, when Vera tells her mother that she wants to pursue a nursing degree, her mother encourages her to become a doctor instead because this is "more fitting for a man"—thereby not only misgendering Vera but also gendering her educational choice. To try to accommodate her mother, Vera takes several educational detours trying out different male-typed education. However, Vera finally commits to taking on nursing, while at the same time beginning hormone replacement therapy.

Taking a deeper look at how the categories of transgender and autism intersect on an intimate-relational level in Vera's life story, we find that this intersection makes Vera's positionality precarious. For example, in her written "Life Story," Vera emphasizes how, as a child, she was constantly struggling to make meaningful social contact:

> *"I was a distinctly quiet child, and I did not draw attention to myself. I remember back*

> *in the day how my mother would take me along on shopping trips and just place me by a counter or in a shop and ask me to stay put until she came back. I would just sit there nicely for several hours and wait." (Written "Life Story").*

Looking back at these experiences as an adult, Vera frames these experiences as follows:

> *"That we [neurodiverse people] function differently often means that our needs are neglected. I am thinking of the times I was placed at the counter during shopping, right? Even though I was not able to show my needs for contact in a way my mother understood, and even though I was not a child who cried and drew attention to myself, I still had the need for contact. But because I signaled on a different wave-length, my needs were not met. There was an empathy gap" (Interview 1).*

Vera's neurodiversity placed her at risk of not having her emotional needs met by her primary caregiver. Not expressing her needs in a neurotypical fashion was interpreted as her not having those needs at all. Vera expresses how her social situation was further *troubled* because both children and adults misgendered her as a boy and encouraged her to play with boys even though she felt she did not belong in this group:

> *"Without being able to put it into words, I felt that I belonged with and longed to be among the girls. Unfortunately, neither the girls nor the adults allowed me this [access], because they could not see who I was deep down. This probably contributed to my isolation" (Interview 1).*

This uncovers that Vera's premises for *doing* gender as a neurodiverse child have contributed to her social isolation, albeit in different ways. In both cases, others have struggled to recognize her and her social needs because of the concurrence of these two often stigmatized categories. Thus, not performing neurotypically and not fitting society's cisgendered script has resulted in *troubled subject positions*, and consequently both social and emotional exclusion for Vera as a child. Not being seen and met caused her to withdraw from social interactions. Vera's social withdrawal, or "isolation strategy" as she labels it, is driven at least in part by other people's misreading of her, or their need to regulate her *doing*. This means that the social awkwardness that she experiences as being integral to her neurodiversity is strengthened by the *troubled* positionings and *unintelligibility* she is subjected to as a transgender child.

While Vera describes how she has suffered socially because of both her transgender identity and her neurodiversity, she also forefronts the rich intellectual path she associates with the latter. When asked what it means for her to be on the autism spectrum, she answers:

> *"It means that I am a unique person—and that I have been unique throughout my childhood. It means that I have a growth potential in certain areas that I have now achieved a greater understanding of, that I can reflect on and work with to the extent I want to. It also means that I have some unique strengths that I can use constructively" (Interview 1).*

One of the strengths Vera explicitly attributes to autism is her scientific interest and skills. Vera explains how she was fascinated by science from an early age, which positioned her positively as "the little professor" in her family. This position as scientifically knowledgeable and competent is carefully enacted by Vera in her adult life as well. One example is in the interview situation, where Vera breaks with the traditional position of the interview subject both before and during the interview by positioning herself as a co-researcher throughout the process rather than a passive research subject submitted to a researcher's predefined framework. Throughout the interviews, she contextualizes her personal experiences with scientific findings, often comparing her own experiences with a larger scientific sample to strengthen her claims. She also presents some statistical analyses she has carried out on psychological test scores she has found online. In other words, she gains agency in the research context by utilizing scientific language. This is just one example of how Vera gains personal agency by employing the traits she attributes to her autism. She also attributes many other positive abilities to autism: a) her ability to focus on academic, complex issues; b) her lack of fear of ”putting herself out there” in her transgender activism; and c) her autism network is the first space that has offered her symmetrical friendship relations. In other words, Vera feels at home in the category of autism and the traits she thinks of as arising from her neurodiversity. In contrast, in the context of her childhood, she finds no obvious advantages of being perceived as a boy while identifying as a girl. Adults and other children saw her through cisgendered and gender-stereotypical norms and kept positioning her differently than she experienced herself. In childhood, this led to social isolation and a negative self-understanding as ”being off”. In adulthood, however, Vera strives to counteract this experience and the associated stigma by engaging in transgender activism.

Un/Troubling in Institutional Settings

While Vera grew up with what she describes as a ”normalizing discourse” in her family, this is far from the only setting where she is negatively perceived as someone who transgresses norms. Throughout her life, interactions with and in institutions have very often resulted in *troublesome* experiences of stigmatization, where Vera has been positioned as someone who needs to be dealt with or interpreted through judicial or medical texts—a subject marked as different or deviant from the norm. In this way, Vera is often interpolated by the cisgendered and neurotypical majority as a challenge to, or even a burden for, them.

One institutional context in which Vera's gender identity becomes particularly *troubled* is the obligatory internship she had to take on in order to complete her nursing degree. During several internships, Vera experienced explicit verbal and structural transphobia. For example, in her first internship, she was told that she had to wear a uniform designed for the male nursing staff and a nametag with her assigned male name. The institutional justification was that she needed to:

> *"…ensure credibility with the patients. I could not pass myself off as a different gender than I in fact was. I should not create an unnecessary distance in the relation [to the patients]" (Interview 1).*

The reason why Vera cannot wear clothes and a nametag that align with her gender identity makes clear that there is a perceived ”right” and a perceived ”wrong” way of *doing* gender in this institutional context. Vera is positioned as being not only ”wrong” but also ”deceptive” based on how she does gender. Vera's way of *doing* gender is considered so deceptive that it is assumed to threaten the relation to the patients she is meant to help. However, it is worth noting that this concern is raised *before* any patients have actually interacted with Vera—revealing that the concern reflects the staff's gendered expectations rather than concrete objections to her as a nurse.

Because of these institutionally enforced challenges in her first internship, the legal counselor at Vera's nursing school contacted the next institution to emphasize that they could not legally prevent Vera from wearing the uniform designated for the female staff. This is obviously an action intended and perceived by Vera as a helpful gesture. However, it reveals that even basic acts like wearing uniforms involve interventions on an institutional and judicial level. The second hospital decided to comply with national laws, which in this particular case protected Vera's right to choose how to express herself through clothing. However, they did not accept her choice of pronouns, but insisted on referring to her as "he/him" throughout the internship and encouraged the patients to do the same.

The Sexology Clinic is another institution that measures Vera against cisgendered norms. The clinicians at the Sexology Clinic have spent years assessing the degree to which Vera fits the supposedly pathological ”transsexual” category. That is, the clinic measured Vera's gender identity against a pathologically defined category, and if she had not been deemed fit for this diagnosis, she would have been denied access to trans-specific healthcare anywhere in Denmark at the time. However, the clinicians did position her as "transsexual", and she was granted access to hormone replacement therapy. It is important, however, to emphasize that Vera does not identify as transsexual but as transgender. Capturing that categories are a form of *doing* with agentic potential, Vera explains the important difference between the effects these two categories produce for her:

> *"[Transsexual] is a concept that I consider less empowered than transgender because if you in the law offer rights for transgender people and if you advocate politically for transgender people, then you offer rights for the whole group—and then it is up to the individual to decide which rights they feel they need covered—like which procedures one would like to go through. However, if you only offer rights to transsexuals, it [limits] who can benefit. Furthermore, if you apply the concept of transsexual, then it is no longer the individual who chooses [but the clinicians]" (Interview 2).*

By identifying with and forefronting the category of transgender rather than "transsexual", Vera feels that she can be more inclusive as a transgender activist. She also associates this category with empowerment and individual choice to define her own needs. She thus situates this social category in opposition to the clinical term "transsexual", which she interprets as limiting the agency of people by privileging medical categories over people's own articulations of their identities. In this way, her choice of terminology draws attention to the asymmetrical relations between the clinical gatekeepers and people seeking gender-confirming procedures at the Sexology Clinic.

Vera is further *troubled* in the clinical setting because she has been assigned the clinical label of autism within less than six months of our first interview. Vera explains how she did not want to be assessed for the diagnosis of autism but was encouraged by an unemployment officer to do so in order to assess which kinds of jobs she would be able to master. She eventually yields to the unemployment officer's request. However, while the diagnosis offers her access to resources within the unemployment system, she worries whether this will be yet another reason to *trouble* her as a subject in the medical system because autism, at the time, was assumed to be counter-indicative of being "transsexual". Asked directly whether she has been told that her autism diagnosis will prevent her from accessing gender-affirming surgeries in the future, she answers:

> *"You can say that there is a fear [that this might happen when I tell them about the autism diagnosis], and that it is a soundly founded fear because other autistic people have experienced being rejected at the first interview [at the Sexology Clinic] because of autism, or simply have not been accepted for a first interview" (Interview 2).*

This means that even though Vera has already been diagnosed as "transsexual" and therefore has been on hormones for years, she now worries that her new diagnosis of autism will make the Sexology Clinic reluctant to accept her for further gender-affirming procedures. She speaks openly about how she does not want to lie to the Sexology Clinic, but at the same time, she is worried about what the price of her truthfulness will be (Interview 2).

Un/Troubling on a Political Level

Vera's gender identity is also *troubled* at a macro level, as Danish politicians at the time had granted the Sexology Clinic a de facto monopoly on all treatment options for transgender people. Throughout both interviews, Vera is critical of the Sexology Clinic's approach to transgender people and the norms she feels that they enforce, so she actively strives to renegotiate them. She describes how societal gender norms sneak into the Sexology Clinic's interpretation of what it means to be transgender in ways that remind her of her mother's gender normativity:

> *"We had worked [towards having the clinical diagnosis of "transsexual" removed from the list of mental illnesses] with the focus on natural variation and room for diversity. And have an expectation that because transgender is categorised as a mental illness, it leads to stigmatisation, which cues all sorts of stereotypes in the screening process (…) It reflects that there are norms in society in general that are similar to my mother's: 'Can't you just be cured?'" (Interview 1)*

In this way, Vera sees a connection between the kind of *troubled subject positioning* she experiences in her relations with her mother and the way the Sexology Clinic casts her as an individual in need of a clinical diagnosis and management.

If we stopped the analysis here, it might paint a picture of Vera primarily as a victim of deep and multi-layered stigmatization. However, the picture is more complex than that, because Vera responds to other people's *troubling* of her. She does not just passively accept others' positioning of her. She actively uses her unique gendered position to try to *trouble* the cisgendered norms that limit her agency—that is, she strives to renegotiate her conditions for subjecthood. Vera explicitly states that she understands gender as "an inter-relational phenomenon or a dynamic group process" (Interview 1). According to Vera, gender is a social practice in which she is actively engaged in renegotiating through activism. Therefore, traditional social psychology cannot capture Vera's *life world* sufficiently. To capture her *life world,* as she sees it and reports on it, a unidirectional understanding of discriminatory relations does not suffice. Other people clearly do *trouble* her gender (and her neurodiversity), but Vera pushes back on their *troubling* of her. Their discriminatory actions shape her degree of agency, but they do not determine it. She voices her critique of other peoples' *troubling* of her both in the interviews and publicly. Drawing on academic discourse, in particular queer theory, she poses the question: "Who has made the decision that society ought to function in this way?" With this question, she invites a rethinking or renegotiating of stereotypical gender expectations.

In contrast to her childhood interactions in which she was often positioned as *unintelligible*, Vera now aims to create empowering subject positions for herself and other transgender-identified individuals through gender activism. She has successfully repositioned herself so that she is approached as an expert by both LGBTQ+ activists and national politicians. In fact, her activism has been the driver behind some of the progressive changes regarding transgender people's agency in Denmark. In this way, Vera has succeeded, to some extent, in changing the macro-narrative of how transgender can be *done* in Denmark. Vera attributes this achievement to her autism. So, while the Danish medical practices struggle to grasp that being transgender and having an autism diagnosis is an *intelligible* position to inhabit, Vera explicitly links autism with how she *does* transgender in empowering ways:

> *"I usually say that this [autism] is super practical because so many are afraid that people will look at them the wrong way. Some of the people I talk to who are transgender are anxiety ridden. They might be scared of catching the bus. Afraid that a fellow passenger will look at them in the wrong way. That is, they might fear—because they assess other people's facial expressions—that they recognize them as their biological sex. And all of that I have largely been spared because I just do not notice it if anybody looks at me funny" (Interview 1).*

Here, Vera captures how cisgendered norms of assigning biology primacy over gender identity can make navigation in the public sphere *troublesome*. She also points out how the fact that she does not automatically perceive other people's social cues functions as a form of social shield or protection. Indeed, by not automatically reading other people's faces and body language, she is spared their potential judgment. In this sense, Vera understands her neurodiversity as a protective shield against transphobia. She explains that this shield enables her to be a public advocate for transgender rights. She explains that she can claim and negotiate greater degrees of agency exactly *because* she is not affected by social judgment to the same degree as neurotypical people.

Summing up, it stands out that Vera does not passively accept the *troubling* of her that she is exposed to. She fights back. Vera might be *troubled* repeatedly at micro-, meso- and macro-levels, but through her activism, she holds up a mirror to us all and shows us how our *troubling* of her can be *troubled* right back. She leaves us to answer the question: "Who has made the decision that society ought to function in this way?"

Conclusion

When we follow Vera's life story from childhood to adulthood, we see how her transgender identity and autism intersect in different ways. Throughout her life, Vera has repeatedly been precariously placed by others who have marked her as *unintelligible*. This *unintelligibility* is brought about in interpersonal relations, institutional settings, and at the level of the Danish state's judicial regulations. Vera is repeatedly positioned as conflicting with cisgendered and neurotypical expectations and asked to adapt to the majority view of "normality". Importantly, this experience is commonplace for her—and as we show—this occurs regularly at micro-, meso-, and macro-levels.

Staunæs' (2003, 2005) intersectional concept of *troubling subjectivities* offered us a way in which to frame Vera's articulations of the in/exclusions processes set in motion by different people, institutional norms, and *cultural master narratives*. We used this framework to explore what conditions or possibilities were created or suppressed for and by Vera. This helps us to explore in which situations, and under which conditions, Vera was afforded *intelligible* or *viable subject positions*. Throughout the paper, we have illustrated the *identity overwork* (Herold 2016), which Vera is burdened by at all levels of life. We capture how Vera fights back against the *troubling* of her, claiming greater degrees of agency for herself. For example, she achieves this by positioning herself as a co-researcher by using "scientific language" in the research setting (a skill that she attributes to autism). Through this repositioning of herself, she can shape this case study in significant ways. Even more important, Vera makes clear that her neurodiversity does not always hinder her negotiation skills, but in fact, sometimes facilitates them, and because of this, she has successfully reshaped transgender rights in Denmark and earned recognition for this achievement at all levels of society.

By retracing Vera's lived experiences, we show that even though the two categories of transgender and autism sometimes strengthen each other's stigmatizing effects, in other situations, the two categories interact in ways that enable Vera to perform *identity work* that has agentic effects. It is clear, however, that the latter dynamic requires a lot of energy and effort managing stigma at an individual level, as well as specific relationships and contexts that enable this empowerment. Thus, gaining a socially *untroubled subject position* when one is neither cisgendered nor neurotypical requires extensive *identity overwork*.

Vera's "Life Story" illustrates how some subjects are consistently positioned as *troubled* at multiple levels: in personal interactions, institutional settings, national law, and *cultural master narratives*. In this way, Vera's experiences make explicit how we all carry "enigmatic traces of others" (Butler 2004a, 46), but that some people are burdened more by this social interdependence than others. As Butler formulates it:

> *"[A]t the most intimate levels, we are social, we are comported toward a 'you,' we are outside ourselves, constituted in cultural norms, that precede and exceed us, given over to a set of cultural norms and a field of power that conditions us fundamentally" (2004a, 45).*

When subject positions clash with cultural norms, extensive *identity overwork* is necessary in order to obtain *intelligibility* or *viable subject positions*—and sometimes even basic human rights. Importantly, this is not unique to Vera's life, but also captures other marginalized people's life experiences. For instance, Clare (2017), who employs a disability studies approach, states that

> *"Some of us are granted personhood as our birth right, but others are required to prove and defend it every day" (28).*

This resonates very well with Vera's experiences—*viable subjecthood* requires *identity overwork* in order to be obtained.

Staying with Clare's (2017) disabilities studies framework, they *trouble* an understanding of diagnosis (and the ideology of cure attached to this) at an individual level:

> *"cure requires damage, locating the harm entirely within the individual human body-minds, operating as if each person were their own ecosystem" (Clare 2017, 15).*

Instead, Clare's framework (similar to Staunæs') encourages us to look at the whole *ecosystem* rather than just the individual *body-mind*. They particularly encourage us to pay attention to what purpose a diagnosis serves, whose interests are upheld through diagnostic labels, and how these labels serve the function of attributing more value, privilege, and power to some lives compared to others. Vera captures this dynamic when she speaks about the clinical diagnosis of *transsexual* as not only privileging clinicians' interpretation of gender identity over transgender people's self-identification but also feeding into *troubled subject positions*. Both Clare's and Staunæs' frameworks support Vera's personal experience that diagnosis (or *troubled subject positions)* can play into existing power dynamics and contribute to empowering some while disempowering others.

At a meta-level, our case study shows how social categorization entails a possibility for stigmatization that creates, congeals, and enforces hierarchies and asymmetrical power relations between people. Some *subject positions* are associated with *troublesome* meanings and are therefore deemed by our cisnormative, neurotypical society to be in need of intense normative, clinical, and judicial management. Often, this *troubling* of certain subject positions is entangled with diagnosis (such as "transsexuality" and autism). This underlines that diagnoses are never neutral tools (Clare 2017, 42). Diagnoses have interrelational effects for both the people who employ them, and in particular, the people who are labeled with them. As Clare (2017) put it,

> *"[D]isorder means not only dis-order, but also wrong, broken, in need of repair. Disorder is used to constrict and confine, devalue and pathologize" (43).*

Vera experiences this value judgment from multiple levels in her life, for instance, her mother's "normalizing discourse" and her mother's explicit request for a "cure" for Vera's gender identity. But importantly, the healthcare professionals Vera meets *also* share her mother's perception of this need for a cure at an individual level, rather than at a societal or social justice level. Exactly because of the discriminatory effects that diagnosis can set in motion, it becomes urgent that we strive to answer Vera's question:

> *"Who has made the decision that society ought to function in this way?" And we might add: "[W]hich realities are defined as trouble by whom and for whose benefit?" (Clare 2017, 72).*

Both these questions can facilitate us in uncovering who currently is empowered and privileged in and by particular *cultural master narratives*—and both questions underline how important it is to bring the lived experience of marginalized groups to the forefront in order to counter an asymmetrical congealment of power.

Notes

1 We use Enke's definition of cisgender as naming the "characteristic of staying with or being perceived to stay with the gender and/or sex one was assigned at birth" (Enke 2012, 20).

2 We use the term *transgender* throughout because our case study person Vera prefers this term.

3 Inspired by Herold (2015) we use the concept of *cultural master narratives* to capture that viable subjecthoods are constructed through a culturally informed storyline that invites for certain forms of doing, while unwelcoming other forms of doing. Here we aim to offer a case story of one person who strives to increase her own agency by contributing to a counternarrative that differs from the one which the *cultural master narrative* invites her to tell.

4 We use the terms *autism* and *neurodiversity* because Vera uses these terms to describe herself.

5 The follow-up interview took place approximately eight months later in 2014.

6 See the Cultural Context section for more information on the relevant law change.

7 Inspired by Ahmed (2017) we understand institutions dynamically as a place in which habits and norms become cemented through repetition.

8 A highly significant marker of cis-normativity in Denmark is the fact that social security numbers are binarily gendered. This system literally makes non-binary people unintelligible.

9 See Dietz (2016) and Occhino and Skewes (2020) for further discussion of the legislative changes.

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Bias and leadership aspirations: Exploring the interaction of gender and parental status in self-evaluations

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Abstract

This article aims to extend existing work on bias and leadership aspirations by investigating whether there are significant differences in self-evaluations when jointly considering gender and parental status. With a data subset from a survey of 866 women and 1372 men who are members of the leading Danish union for managers and leaders, we examine the relationship of gender and parental status with leadership aspirations. *Contra* theory-based expectations, our exploratory study's findings show little difference between mothers and women without children, whereas fathers report significantly higher leadership aspirations than men without children. Supplementary analysis indicates that lower aspirations are accompanied by lower self-evaluations of competence. Our findings thus suggest that men and women are differentially affected by combined gender and parenthood biases and that gendered social expectations for parents affect self-evaluations even in a national context characterized by high levels of gender equality before the law.

KEYWORDS: leadership aspirations, gender, parenthood, self-evaluations, bias

Introduction

A growing body of work takes an interest in gender bias and how such bias adversely affects women's careers in particular (Kossek, Su and Wu 2016). Gender bias can be defined as the personal beliefs one holds about differences in women's and men's skills and capabilities (Abraham 2020) and encompasses distinct subtypes of bias (e.g., selective perception, choice-supportive bias, bandwagon effect) that are explored separately in scholarly work. The negative effect of gender bias is particularly strong when women occupy or aspire to leadership roles (Bierema 2016; Doldor, Wyatt and Silvester 2019). Indeed, the archetypical leader remains male (Hoyt and Murphy 2016; Meriläinen, Tienari and Valtonen 2015), and masculinity is still perceived as a dominant feature of a leader across cultures (Koenig et al. 2011). Moreover, women who challenge this presumption can face adverse reactions when seeking power (Okimoto and Brescoll 2010; Rudman and Glick 2001). Overall, women are thus not considered fit for many leadership roles, which decreases the likelihood that they aspire to leadership (Ottsen 2018; Sánchez and Lehnert 2019) and have successful leadership careers (Watts 2009).

However, the dominant focus on gender bias alone limits our insights into how other demographic or biographic elements shape constraints and opportunities in the workplace. A subset of the academic literature considers how parental status relates to workplace outcomes. Some research in economics and labor relations investigates structural aspects, such as the *child penalty* and its impact on women's earnings and career progression (Kleven, Landais and Søgaard 2019) as well as the wage premiums of fathers (Fuller and Cooke 2018). Other streams in sociology, organization studies, and social psychology focus more on the role of bias about mothers for their workplace experience and career development (Berggren and Lauster 2014; Heilman and Okimoto 2008; Kmec 2011). Moreover, top positions are still perceived to require extensive work hours and constant availability, which is perceived to be poorly compatible with having a family (Padavic, Ely and Reid 2020). This is particularly true for mothers who tend to perform more care work than fathers and are associated with the caregiver role rather than the breadwinner role (Kmec 2011).

A large part of research on bias takes an interest in the deleterious effects of bias as something imposed on us by others (that we denounce or resist), which has consequences in terms of pay, hiring, and promotion decisions. However, we also know that bias can be internalized and that we may adopt certain behaviors due to stereotype threats, for example (Spencer, Logel and Davies 2016). We thus echo and engage with calls in the literature for more research on gender and parenthood biases, self-evaluations of competence, and aspirations for leadership roles and top positions (Fritz and Van Knippenberg 2018; Heilman 2001; Sánchez and Lehnert 2019). To contribute to research on the workings of bias in organizations, we extend existing insights into the interrelations of gender and parenthood in relation to leadership aspirations. We base our hypotheses on international research and test them on data collected in Denmark, which is internationally reputed for its gender egalitarianism.

Our analyses show that there is little difference between mothers and women without children but that fathers report significantly higher leadership aspirations than men without children. Moreover, lower aspirations seem to be accompanied by lower self-evaluations of competence for leadership roles. This exploratory study contributes to the literature on bias in organizations and the literature on gender and leadership by showing how bias about gender and parenthood affects the self-evaluations and leadership aspirations of different demographic groups in different ways. Thus, our findings suggest that the interrelation between gender and parental status may be more central for leadership than previously theorized and that internalized bias related to parenthood works alongside internalized gender bias.

Theoretical framework and hypotheses development

bias in self-evaluation: Bias is generally studied as something inflicted on certain out-groups based on assumptions and stereotypes about who they are and how they behave. However, bias is also something that affected individuals can integrate into their self-concept (i.e., internalized bias). Internalized bias relates to a stereotype threat; in this psychological state, the mere concern about being treated negatively based on the stereotype to which one has been assigned impairs personal performance in a way that unwittingly ends up confirming the stereotype (Spencer, Logel and Davies 2016). Moreover, experiments show that the risk of being judged negatively due to gender bias can elicit an unconscious, disruptive state that undermines women's leadership aspirations (Hoyt et al. 2010; Hoyt and Murphy 2016).

Bias, gender, and leadership: There is mounting evidence that women are interested in taking responsibility at work and that opportunities for achieving leadership positions tend to increase in cultures that emphasize gender equality (Rhode 2017; Wilton et al. 2019). However, working women often find themselves in situations where bias affects how their behavior, skills, and achievements are interpreted. Numerous studies show gender bias in recruitment, with male applicants being evaluated more positively than female applicants despite similar degrees and seniority (Castilla and Benard 2010; Isaac, Lee and Carnes 2009; Steinpreis, Anders and Ritzke 1999). More generally, we know that bias can have the effect that some occupations appear to be "suited for certain people and implausible to others" (Ashcraft 2013, 7-8) so that certain socially identified groups are perceived to be incompatible with a given occupation (Sønderlund, Morton and Ryan 2017). Societal norms for occupational identity affect perceived lack of fit with being a leader (Morgenroth et al. 2021). Women see other women's success at the top level as the exception rather than the rule; they account for the world around them to predict their success and define their career choice (Barbulescu and Bidwell 2013; McGinn and Milkman 2013). Women do not match the ideal leader archetype (Meriläinen, Tienari and Valtonen 2015; Ottsen 2019), and this, in turn, may affect their self-evaluations (Becker, Ayman and Korabik 2002) and their leadership aspirations (Ottsen 2018).

Leadership and parenthood: While bias about women in leadership and the internalization of such bias are addressed by a sizable and a still-growing body of literature, there is limited understanding of how parental status—or parenthood bias—interacts with gender in relation to self-evaluations and leadership aspirations. Society exerts strong expectations on women concerning motherhood (Collins 2019; Eagly and Steffen 1984). Motherhood and caring for one's children are deemed central to a woman's identity, whereas the traditional expectation of the father is that of a provider or breadwinner (Bear and Glick 2017). Thus, the image of the ideal worker conflicts not only with gender but also with the image of the ideal mother (Reid 2015) as a *hyperfeminine* figure who focuses on care work. It has been documented now quite extensively that women are negatively affected by bias about motherhood in employment situations (Heilman and Okimoto 2008; Kmec 2011) in terms of compensation (O'Toole and D'aoust 2000), in their competence evaluations (Correll, Benard and Paik 2007), and their career development more generally (Berggren and Lauster 2014). As an example, one compelling field experiment demonstrates that compared to fathers with the same CV, mothers are deemed to be less committed, less competent, and deserving of lower salaries (Kmec 2011).

Mothers' aspirations for leadership may be negatively related to the internalized ideas they hold about leadership. Moreover, a series of external factors may factor into aspirations here (Sánchez and Lehnert 2019). As mentioned earlier, top positions are still perceived to require extended work hours and around-the-clock availability, which are poorly compatible with family life; in turn, this becomes a salient problem for women who do most of the household work and whose household work increases after having children (Padavic, Ely and Reid 2020). We thus hypothesize that:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): Parental status interacts with gender such that mothers will self-report lower leadership aspirations than women without children.

Alongside the motherhood penalty discussed above, "fatherhood status combines with other markers of organizational privilege to produce larger fatherhood earnings bonuses" (Hodges and Budig 2010, 742; see also Fuller and Cooke 2018). Men do not face negative perceptions when they become fathers because the breadwinner figure is still masculine (Burgess 2013; Morgenroth, Ryan and Sønderlund 2021). Research suggests that there may be a *parent advantage* for both men and women in leadership yet with a more significant benefit to fathers (Morgenroth, Ryan and Sønderlund 2021). There is also some evidence that fathers requesting family leave are taken to signal low ambition (Rudman and Mescher 2013) and may have lowered career identity (Ladge et al. 2015), but that this negative effect is offset by perceived managerial support (Ladge et al. 2015). Moreover, male leaders tend to be celebrated for *leaning out* of work temporarily to take care of their children. At the same time, women are judged as *leaning in* too much when taking short leaves (Just and Remke 2019). Thus, fatherhood only reinforces the already positive correspondence between manhood and the ideal leadership figure (Meriläinen, Tienari and Valtonen 2015). Some studies even suggest that fathers would be more likely to seek responsibility in order to live up to expectations of being the primary income earner—assuming that positions with higher and extended responsibilities are compensated with higher salaries or bonuses (Borchorst and Siim 2008; Burgess 2013). Contrary to mothers and men without children, fathers may thus benefit from a positive bias toward fatherhood and derive positive effects of fatherhood in their work lives. Accordingly, we hypothesize that:

Hypothesis 2 (H2): Parental status interacts with gender such that fathers will self-report higher leadership aspirations than men without children.

Methodology

Study context: A key element in implementing gender equality in Danish society has been high-functioning childcare institutions and paid parental leave. Such initiatives have made OECD highlight the Scandinavian model as an excellent solution to problems regarding family-work balance (Borchorst and Siim 2008). A visible gain from this model has been Danish women's participation in the labor force, which is among the highest in the world. However, when it comes to closing the gap between men and women in management and leadership roles, Denmark—where women occupy 27% of management and leadership positions—lags behind other Scandinavian countries, many Southern European countries, and the OECD mean of 32% (World Economic Forum 2020). This may partially be due to a highly gender-segregated labor market and a traditional perception of gender (Bloksgaard 2011). Denmark upholds a free choice of dividing maternal and paternal leave between parents, but Danish mothers still tend to be the primary caregivers during parental leave. In comparison, legislation on earmarked paternity leave has made for a more gender-equal division of leave in Norway, Sweden, and Iceland (Haagensen, Agerskov and Vestergaard 2017).

Moreover, despite Denmark's worldwide reputation for gender equality, Danes show low confidence in women's leadership aspirations compared with other Europeans. An EU survey found that 50% of Danes agree that women are not as interested in positions of responsibility in the workplace as men. In contrast, less than 20% of the participants shared this belief in Spain, Sweden, and France (European Commission 2012). Thus, the Danish context is characterized by a paradoxical combination of equality before the law, with highly developed policies and institutions related to childcare and parental leave, and a relatively conservative culture concerning gender roles at home and work.

Sample: A survey of careers and work-family balance of Danish leaders was conducted by the international research institute YouGov and shared with us for research purposes. Data were collected online among members of the union *Lederne*. The union has more than 100,000 members in management positions, ranging from project management to executive-level leadership positions (Jørgensen 2009; Lederne 2020), in line with the name of the union. In Danish, *leder* refers both to persons occupying management positions (ledelse) and exercising leadership (lederskab). Unions in Denmark provide legal and counseling services to their members and negotiate compensation levels with employers, including employers in the public sector; they also usually offer attractively priced packages with unemployment insurance.

A total of 2,335 union members filled out the questionnaire (97 responses were incomplete), of which 84% were employed in the private sector, 9.4% were employed in the public sector, and 6.6% were self-employed; 1,250 respondents reported having children (M_{age} = 44.91, *SD* = 7.12), of which 35% were women (with a gender distribution of 431 women and 819 men); 1,050 respondents reported having no children (M_{age} = 51.15, *SD* = 9.54), of which 42% were women (with a gender distribution of 451 women and 634 men). The age distribution was similar for men and women, and 83% of all participants were within an age range of 35–59 years.

Dependent variables: We measured leadership aspirations with two variables: aspiration for greater leadership responsibilities and aspiration for top leadership responsibilities. These items relate to the survey questions about leadership aspirations. *Aspiration for greater leadership responsibilities* is a measure of participants' ambition to ascend the hierarchy and extend their leadership duties. The question in the survey translates to: Would you like to have a job with greater leadership responsibilities? *Aspiration for top leadership responsibilities* is a measure of participants' ambition for an executive-level position. The related question in the survey was: Is it your ambition to become a top executive in your current workplace or elsewhere? This constitutes a variation of the previous item with a focus on top jobs. The items were rated on a five-point scale.

Results

Descriptive statistics and correlations appear in Table 1. Correlations followed expected directions. Aspiration for greater leadership responsibilities and aspiration for top leadership responsibilities were moderately to strongly correlated (**ρ** = 0.45, *p*< 0.01), and both followed similar patterns of correlations with gender (**ρ** = -0.10, *p* < 0.01 and **ρ** = -0.14, *p* < 0.01, respectively) and parental status (**ρ** = 0.19, *p* < 0.01 and **ρ** = 0.11, *p* < 0.01, respectively). In addition to the control variables, age, marital status (married/cohabitating or single), educational level (ranging up to masters or a higher = 5, with a baseline of 0 = primary education), current leadership level (ranging up to 4 = CEO, with a baseline of 0 = no line responsibility), workplace sector (private or not), and region (Copenhagen or not), we also report the variables number of children and perceived competence for top leadership, which we employed in auxiliary analyses.

Several sets of analyses were performed to test the hypotheses. First, a series of t-tests was carried out to compare men and women and parents and non-parents. Both in terms of taking on greater leadership responsibilities and attaining top leadership positions, women (*M* = 2.64, *SD* = 0.05; *Mean* = 1.57, *SD* = 0.04, respectively) reported significantly lower leadership aspirations than men (*M* = 2.92, *SD* = 0.04; *Mean* = 1.93, SD = 0.04) (*t*(2236) = 4.56, *p* < 0.01 and *t*(2236) = 6.55, *p* < 0.01). Parents (*M* = 3.07, *SD* = 0.04 and *M* = 1.92, SD = 0.04) reported significantly higher leadership aspirations than non-parents (*M* = 2.53, *SD* = 0.04; *M* = 1.64, *SD* = 0.04) for both types of leadership aspirations (*t*(2236) = 9.18, *p* < 0.01; *t*(2236) = 5.31, *p* < 0.01, respectively). Considering gender and parental status together, the type of aspirations in question was relevant. In terms of greater leadership responsibilities, women with children (*M* = 2.77, *SD* = 0.07) reported higher aspirations than women without children (*M* = 2.52, *SD* = 0.07) (*t*(864) = 2.56, *p* < 0.01), as was also true of men with children (*M* = 3.23, *SD* = 0.05) compared to men without children (*M* = 2.53, SD = 0.06) (*t*(1370) = 9.48, *p* < 0.01). This offers preliminary

Table 1. Summary statistics and correlations

	Variable	Mean	SD	Min	Max	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1	Aspiration for greater leadership responsibilities	2.81	1.41	1	5	1											
2	Aspiration for top leadership responsibilities	1.79	1.27	1	5	0.45	1										
3	Perceived competence for top leadership	2.52	1.25	1	5	0.32	0.52	1									
4	Gender (1 = woman, 0 = man)	0.38	0.48	0	1	-0.10	-0.14	-0.11	1								
5	Parental status (1 = parent; 0 = non-parent)	0.54	0.50	0	1	0.19	0.11	0.07	-0.07	1							
6	Number of children	0.95	1.05	0	5	0.19	0.11	0.08	-0.08	0.85	1						
7	Leadership level	0.93	0.85	0	3	0.05	0.12	0.16	-0.13	0.05	0.04	1					
8	Educational level	3.21	1.28	0	5	0.14	0.10	0.18	0.14	0.08	0.09	0.01	1				
9	Age	47.81	8.89	20	64	-0.33	-0.24	-0.10	-0.09	-0.35	-0.35	-0.03	-0.05	1			
10	Marital status (1 = married or cohabitating, 0 = single)	0.85	0.36	0	1	0.00	0.03	0.03	-0.12	0.11	0.13	0.06	0.03	0.03	1		
11	Sector (1 = public or self-employed, 0 = private)	0.16	0.37	0	1	-0.05	-0.01	0.05	0.11	-0.01	0.00	0.04	0.13	0.09	-0.05	1	
12	Region of employment (1 = capital region, 0 = other)	0.32	0.47	0	1	0.04	0.02	0.05	0.05	-0.03	-0.04	-0.04	0.13	-0.07	-0.09	-0.03	1

Note: N = 2170–2335; correlations of 0.06 and above are significant at $p < 0.01$

support for H2 but not for H1. In terms of top leadership, there were no significant differences between female parents (*M* = 1.60, *SD* = 0.05) and non-parents (*M* = 1.54, *SD* = 0.05) ($t(864) = 0.74$, n.s.), failing to support H1. In support of H2, again, men with children (*M* = 2.10, *SD* = 0.05) reported higher aspirations for top leadership responsibilities compared both to men without children (*M* = 1.71, *SD* = 0.05) ($t(1370) = 5.43$, $p < 0.01$) and women with children ($t(1186) = 6.24$, $p < 0.01$). Figure 1 (Appendix) illustrates these findings.

Second, regression analyses were performed where we controlled for the confounding effects of age, marital status, educational level, current leadership level, workplace sector, and region. Table 2 summarizes the results of an ordinary least squares analysis of the two types of leadership aspirations (we found no indication of multicollinearity, as mean-variance inflation factors ranged between 1.08 and 1.45, depending on the model). Models 1 and 4 include the control variables only, Models 2 and 5 add to this the main effects of gender and parental status, and Models 3 and 6 present the results of our hypothesis testing. As Models 3 and 6 show, women's leadership aspirations were lower than men's, both in terms of greater aspirations more broadly and in terms of top leadership aspirations (**β** = -0.21, $p < 0.01$; β = -0.26, $p < 0.01$). Meanwhile, parental status was positively related to leadership aspirations (β = 0.26, $p < 0.01$; β = 0.19, $p < 0.01$). As the interaction term Gender x Parental status shows, however, having children was associated with lower aspirations for women more so than men (**β** = -0.35, $p < 0.01$; β = -0.28, $p < 0.01$). Simple slope tests show that parental status did not matter as much for women (the effects were in the expected direction but not significant; dy/dx = -0.09, n.s.; dy/

dx = -0.09, n.s.), but that being a parent was related to higher aspirations men held for both types of leadership roles (dy/dx = 0.26, $p < 0.01$; and dy/dx = 0.19, $p < 0.01$). Figure 2, panels A and B in the Appendix illustrate these findings. Once again, these findings lend support to H2, but not H1.

Supplementary analyses

To further explore these effects, we replaced parental status with the number of children in a similar set of analyses. We do not report the results here (they are available upon request), but as Figure 2, panels C and D (Appendix) illustrate, there are no significant gender differences between non-parents and parents of three or more children; however, the gender differences are substantial for parents of one child and two children. This is true for both types of leadership aspirations. Also, the relationship between the number of children and aspirations seems to follow a U-shape for women, but an inverted U-shape for men, and levels off at three or more children.

Moreover, we conducted a supplementary analysis with the survey item *Perceived*

Table 2. OLS regression analysis of leadership aspirations

	Aspiration for greater leadership responsibilities			Aspiration for top leadership responsibilities		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
	b (se)	b (se)	b (se)	b (se)	b (se)	b (se)
Leadership level	0.08*	0.05	0.05	0.17***	0.14***	0.14***
	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Educational level	0.13***	0.15***	0.15***	0.09***	0.11***	0.11***
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)
Age	0.03	0.02	0.01	-0.11***	-0.11***	-0.11***
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Age-squared	-0.00**	-0.00*	-0.00*	0.00**	0.00**	0.00**
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Marital status (1=married or cohabitating, 0=single)	0.01	-0.07	-0.06	0.12	0.05	0.05
	(0.08)	(0.08)	(0.08)	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.07)
Sector (1 = public or self-employed, 0 = private)	-0.13	-0.07	-0.08	-0.01	0.05	0.05
	(0.08)	(0.08)	(0.08)	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.07)
Region of employment (1 = capital region, 0 = other)	0.03	0.04	0.04	0.01	0.02	0.02
	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.06)
Gender (1 = woman, 0 = man)		-0.40***	-0.21*		-0.41***	-0.26***
		(0.06)	(0.08)		(0.05)	(0.08)
Parental status (1 = parent; 0 = non-parent)		0.12	0.26***		0.07	0.19**
		(0.07)	(0.08)		(0.06)	(0.07)
Gender x Parental status			-0.35**			-0.28**
			(0.11)			(0.11)
Constant	3.00***	3.32***	3.31***	4.43***	4.65***	4.64***
	(0.59)	(0.60)	(0.60)	(0.55)	(0.56)	(0.56)
R-squared	0.13	0.15	0.15	0.08	0.10	0.11

Note: N = 2238; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.00$.

competence for top leadership. Following the literature, we expected self-evaluation of leadership aspirations to be influenced not only by objective lack of opportunity but also by social perception of normative fit to given professional roles, not least in terms of gender. *Perceived competence for top leadership* is a measure of how competent respondents assess to be as a match or fit for top jobs. The related question in the survey was: To what extent do you perceive yourself competent enough to be considered for a top executive position? This measure allowed us to investigate whether gender and parental status (both dichotomous variables in the following analysis) relate to differences in self-perceived competence as they do to differences in leadership aspirations.

Consistent with other regressions, the expected patterns were discovered for the outcome of perceived competence: overall, women (M = 2.35, SD = 0.04) perceived their competence to be lower than men did (M = 2.62, SD = 0.03) ($t(2168)$ = 5.00, $p < 0.01$), and parents (M = 2.60, SD = 0.04) perceived their competence to be higher than non-parents did (M = 2.43, SD = 0.04) ($t(2168)$ = 3.19, $p < 0.01$). Mothers (M = 2.35, SD = 0.06) and women without children (M = 2.35, SD = 0.06) ($t(828)$ = 0.04, n.s.) did not perceive their competence any differently from each other, but fathers (M = 2.73, SD = 0.04) felt they were more competent than men without children (M = 2.48, SD = 0.05) ($t(1338)$ = 3.66, $p < 0.01$). Furthermore, gender differences among parents ($t(1153)$ = 5.18, $p < 0.01$) were larger than among non-parents ($t(1013)$ = 1.64, $p < 0.05$).

Discussion

While we had hypothesized a difference in leadership aspirations between women with and without children, we did not find evidence for such differences in our sample. In contrast, our analyses lend support to the hypothesis that fathers hold higher aspirations than men without children. Overall, the findings of our exploratory study suggest that differences in leadership aspirations across gender categories and parental status are driven mainly by the higher aspirations of fathers. These findings have several implications for research and practice and open avenues for future research.

First, in our findings, we see little difference between women without children and mothers, which is *contra* to our theory-based hypothesis. This is intriguing because it recasts the assumption that there is an *addition* of negative bias (gender + motherhood) that results in a difference between women and mothers (i.e., in terms of the heightened priority mothers would give to caregiving versus climbing the corporate ladder). An explanation could be related to the *specter of motherhood* (Thébaud and Taylor 2021), a term coined to describe the fact that women already take into account the future expectations of them as mothers—and thus the contradictions with particular career aspirations—before they become mothers. This means that women without children may self-assess based on their current and potential future life situations. This also aligns with studies showing that the potential for future pregnancy negatively affects women's hiring and promotion prospects (Becker, Fernandes and Weichselbaumer 2019), while effects of parenthood for men may only arise when they become fathers.

Our research thus adds to the body of work by showing that bias about gender (but not motherhood per se) negatively affects not only women's leadership career prospects (Bierema 2016; Doldor, Wyatt, and Silvester 2019) but also women's self-evaluations and leadership aspirations (Hoyt et al. 2010). Our conjecture that women internalize bias is reinforced by our supplementary analysis with a survey item related to perceived competence for leadership, and for which results were similar to our primary analyses. The additional analyses further implied that the effects we detected were not based solely on a *rational* interpretation of opportunities as observed in one's context (i.e., respondents were adapting their aspirations to observing leaders who shared their social identity). Instead, biases also extended to self-evaluations of one's competence in leadership roles. In other words, one can theoretically feel competent for a leadership role but not aspire to it if it seems unlikely to achieve it; but if a social group displays systematic patterns across both aspiration and competence, this suggests some degree of internalized bias.

Thus, *observed* inequality is not sufficient to explain why women would self-evaluate lower and with similar patterns both for aspiration to leadership and leadership competence. This is consistent with the findings of Sánchez and Lehnert (2019), who find that competent women's leadership aspirations decrease as they acquire more work experience. This also complements previous work arguing that bias is not only applied to us by others but also pervades our self-evaluations (Hoyt and Murphy 2016). Furthermore, these findings are in line with other studies indicating that women's ambition regarding leadership responsibility is far from fixed, but rather a response to social and organizational contexts, such as stereotypes for occupational fit (Peters et al. 2012; Peters, Haslam and Ryan 2015), feedback on leadership (Steffens et al. 2018) and gendered cultural expectations for parental roles (Eagly and Steffen 1984; Kmec 2011).

In line with H2, we see a significant difference between men with and without children, with fathers reporting higher leadership aspirations. This could suggest that the *breadwinner* stereotype is activated when fatherhood is realized. However, as we do not work with panel data, it could also be the case that men who aspire to leadership roles are more likely to be fathers. The reader will have noted that men self-evaluate higher than women; this may suggest a possible *specter of fatherhood*, although showing in a different order of magnitude before and after men become parents. Finally, we note that our supplementary analysis shows minor differences between parents with three children or more. Future research could thus take an interest, potentially by employing qualitative methods, in the particulars of such families, including career patterns in the household and socioeconomic status (Hoyland et al. 2021).

While the results confirm the second theory-based hypothesis about differences between men with and without children, our findings can seem surprising in the context of Denmark, not least to readers to whom the Nordics are role models for gender equality. Even though Denmark was among the first countries globally to establish gender equality legislation (Borchorst et al. 2012), many Danes still have a surprisingly traditional perception of gender, and the Danish labor market is highly gender-segregated, both horizontally across occupations and vertically within occupations (Bloksgaard 2011). Denmark's unique combination of family-friendly policies and free choice of parental leave thus creates a particular blend of legal opportunities and societal pressures. This illustrates that gender norms and associated biases are potent and may be difficult and complex to change even in the most egalitarian societies (Koenig et al. 2011; Wood and Eagly 2002). Also, this aligns with the view that women's way to leadership as a labyrinth rather than as a simple glass ceiling (Eagly and Carli 2007).

We note that management and organization research tends to focus on women and motherhood; we hope for future research to focus more on men and fatherhood. In terms of practical implications, we suggest not only promoting careers in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics for women (Thébaud and Taylor 2021) but also helping men and boys be more reflexive about the reasons for their study choice (i.e., highlighting the influence of expected status and foreseeable income in line with future breadwinner expectations). Future work could also investigate how to mitigate both gender and parenthood bias in practice. We know that aspirations for leadership become more similar across genders when firms have more family-friendly policies (Fritz and van Knippenberg 2018), and there is also work suggesting that an increased focus on flexibility is key to increasing equality (Goldin 2014). However, we also know that there is a negative bias against individuals, including men, who use such flexibility (Rudman and Mescher 2013). In other words, while we can only support workplaces in developing tools and policies that make them more inclusive, there appears to be an even more profound need to change organizational cultures vis-a-vis the question of who is perceived as a leader, what they look like, and how they behave—including but not limited to work presence patterns.

Moreover, we acknowledge that since our sample is composed of managers and leaders who are members of a union that emphasizes these particular social identities, we may have an overrepresentation of women with some degree of aspiration to higher leadership responsibilities. Furthermore, only some members of the union chose to answer the survey, and respondents may have a potentially higher interest in the topic or higher aspirations compared to non-respondents. The potential range limitations here may explain why we failed to find significant differences between women with and without children. More generally, we acknowledge the limitations of surveying members of a union; however, we note that unionization is very high in Denmark, and about 70% of wage-earners are members of a union related to their occupation, industry, or education background. This is the case even though one can obtain unemployment insurance separately from union membership by joining an independent unemployment insurance fund. Furthermore, in line with the name of the union, members—and particularly those who responded—may be more likely to have (some) leadership aspirations compared to a broader sample of the working population. That said, we find it of value to explore such a sample precisely, as we would expect respondents to have reflected on the topic of leadership regardless of their current position. Overall, we believe we put forward a conservative test, ensuring that any differences we find are meaningful and speak to internalized bias even among individuals with high leadership aspirations. While we do not claim our findings to be statistically generalizable to the Danish workforce in general or to international contexts, we hope to add nuance to and extend existing theory about gender, parenthood, and leadership aspiration, and pave the way for future work (including in other contexts) on the topic. Finally, we should note that due to the structure of the survey data we use in this article, our exploratory study relied on only two items to assess leadership aspirations (and considered an additional item for perceived competence in a supplementary analysis). Future research should consider using more developed scales, such as the often used six-item scale developed by Gray and O'Brien (2007) or its extension to nine items by Fritz and van Knippenberg (2018).

Conclusion

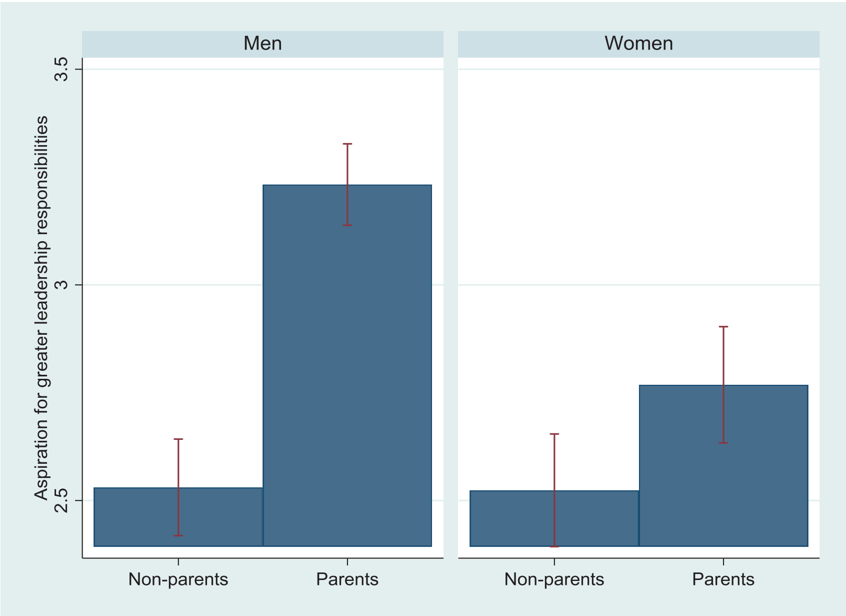
In this study, based on the argument that internalized bias might account for differences in aspirations at work, we hypothesized about how gender and parental status relate to leadership aspirations and tested our hypotheses on the self-evaluations of members of the Danish union *Lederne*. We find that women with and without children self-evaluate similarly. We also find significant differences between men with and without children, with fathers reporting higher leadership aspirations. These findings give a finer-grained picture compared to examining the effects of gender and parenthood separately, where women are generally found to report lower aspirations than men, and parents report higher aspirations than non-parents.

As we pointed out in the discussion, further studies are needed to establish if the current results differ from patterns in other Scandinavian countries with a more gender-equal division of parental leave in practice. Moreover, it will be interesting to conduct similar studies outside of the Scandinavian setting and compare findings across societal and legal contexts. Our findings are consistent with the idea that perpetuating bias is something to which we all contribute, even when this has negative consequences for members of sociodemographic groups to which we belong. We thus hope that researchers and practitioners start paying increased attention to ways of mitigating bias in self-evaluation, perhaps starting with awareness raising.

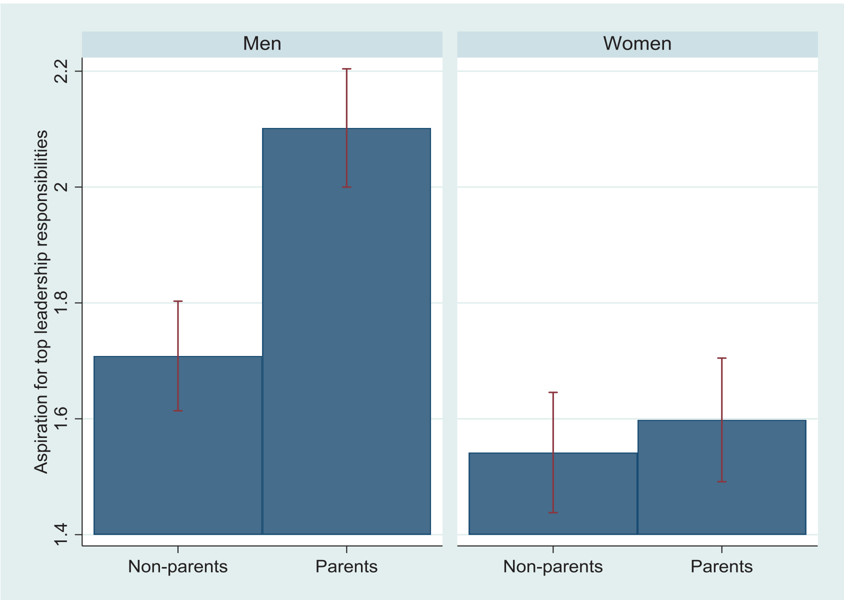
Beyond self-evaluations of leadership aspirations, the focus of this study, it is also essential to conduct studies about the perceptions of recruiters and human resource professionals—professions where we find many women—about the leadership competencies and leadership potential of candidates across gender and parenthood status. Indeed, research shows that women enforce bias against mothers, and perhaps even more strongly than men (Benard and Corell 2010). We thus concur with Kossek, Su, and Wu (2016), who argue that, given the difficulty to disentangle bias fully, career preferences, and work-family explanations, changes in practice must focus simultaneously on changes in policy, workplace interventions, and open discussions of bias.

Appendix

Figure 1. Leadership aspirations by gender and parental status

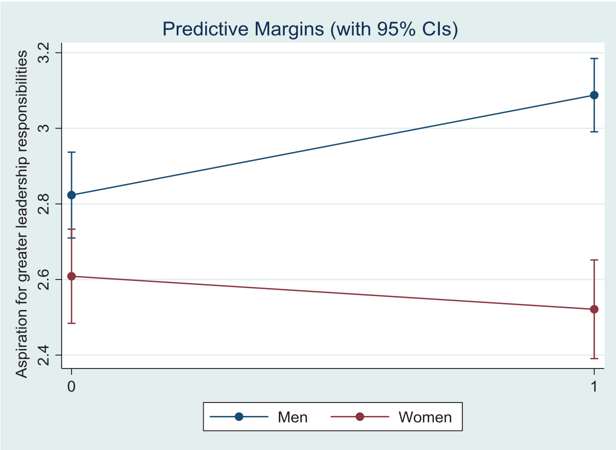


A. Aspiration for greater leadership responsibilities

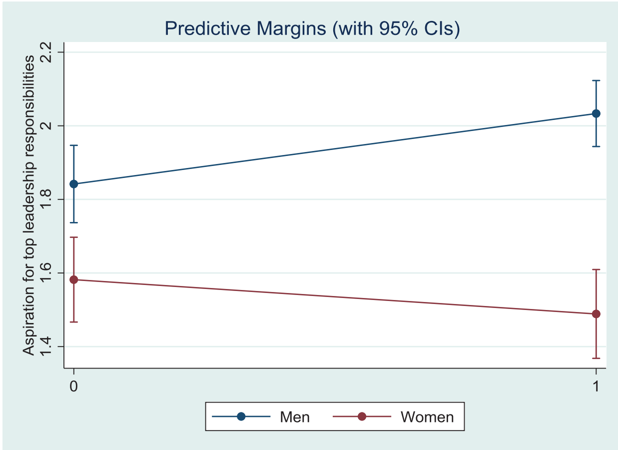


B. Aspiration for top leadership responsibilities

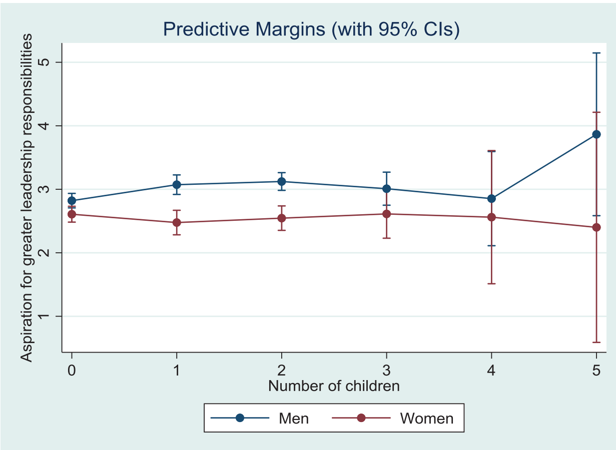
Figure 2. Marginal effects of parental status (number of children) and gender on leadership aspirations



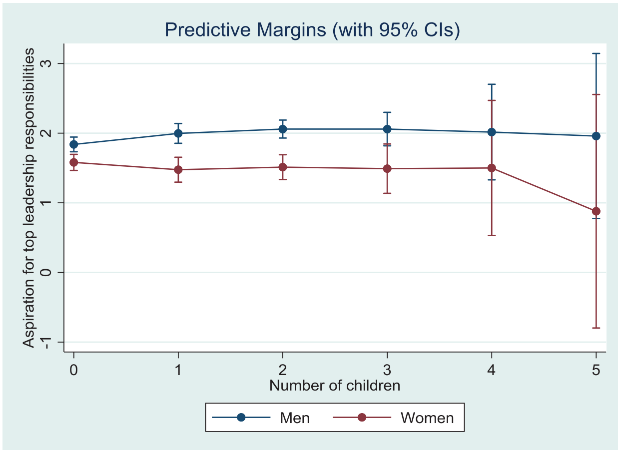
A. Parental status and aspiration for greater leadership responsibilities



B. Parental status and aspiration for top leadership responsibilities



C. Number of children and aspiration for greater leadership responsibilities



D. Number of children and aspiration for top leadership responsibilities

Note: Panels A and B plot results reported in Table 2 (Models 3 and 6, respectively). Panels C and D plot results not reported in the text (available upon request).

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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.

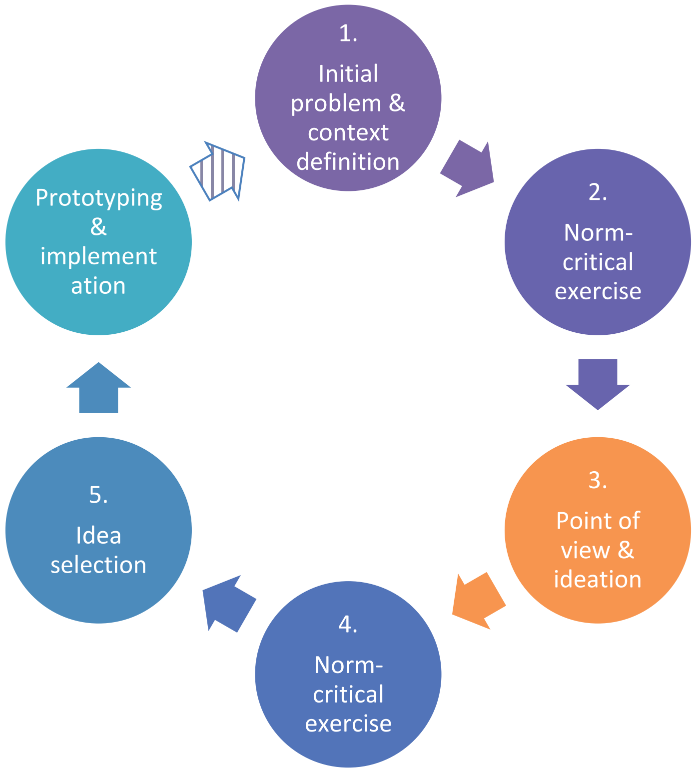

Figure 2: Cyclical workshop format. The striped arrow after prototyping and implementation indicates that you can go back to any prior step depending on the need. For example, if testing produces new ideas, it might be relevant to skip the first two steps and repeat the ideation step.

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 setup 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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Man behøver ikke at følge meget med i politik for at have bemærket, at der længe har været en meget stærk modreaktion imod kvinders øgede ligestilling. Mange mennesker forholder sig meget kritisk til, at kvinder opnår mere og mere selvstændighed - særligt hvis kvinderne benytter denne øgede selvstændighed til at tage afstand fra traditionelle kønsroller og heteronormative familiemønstre.

Valget af Donald Trump som amerikansk præsident er nok det klareste eksempel på en sexistisk bevægelse mod højre i politik. I Europa har vi set, hvordan Polen har fjernet kvinders abortrettigheder og lavet LGBT-frie zoner. Mens Ungarn har fjernet kønsstudier fra universiteterne. Herhjemme har højreorienterede politiske kræfter haft succes med at problematisere køns- og minoritetsforskning i en sådan grad, at et bredt folketingsflertal i maj 2021 indskærpede over for alle danske universiteter, at de burde regulere disse forskeres forskningsfrihed noget mere for at begrænse netop den form for forskning.

Dette gør Mikkel Thorups bog ”Antifeminisme – Kvindehad i lighedens tidsalder” højaktuel for alle, der gerne vil forstå denne ekstremt sexistiske bevægelse. Thorup beskriver denne antifeministiske højredrejning fra en idéhistorisk vinkel. I bogen bedriver han, hvad han kalder ”samtidsidéhistorie” ved at undersøge idéer, begreber, metaforer og argumenter for at forstå, hvorfor feminisme opfattes som samfunds- eller civilisationsnedbrydende. Der er ingen tvivl om, at Thorup placerer sig på feministernes side, men han forsøger at afdække, hvordan antifeminister forstår verden – og hvorfor de opfatter feminister som en trussel mod en (for dem) “naturgiven” samfundsorden.

Selv beskriver han bogens målsætning som følger:

> *”Denne bog handler om den frygt og de reaktioner, som egalisering skaber blandt de privilegerede. Det er frygt, der manifesterer sig på mange måder, måske mest udtalt som racisme og nationalpopulisme, men her vil jeg se på nogle mænds frygt for at blive lig kvinden” (8).*

Så er scenen sat.

Hele bogen kredser om den frygt, det har udløst hos de antifeministiske mænd at indse, at de rent faktisk altid har været afhængige af kvinder. Deres rolle og forståelse af sig selv som uafhængige mænd er blevet undermineret, fordi kvinderne nu ikke automatisk indtager deres underdanige rolle i relation til mændene. Kvinderne er blevet "unaturligt" selvstændige, og det har skabt en - i deres optik - usund magtbalance mellem kønnene.

Men hvis man er overbevist om, at mænd er kvinder "naturligt" overlegne, hvordan er vi så kommet hertil, hvor kvinder har opnået en så stor grad af selvstændighed?

> *"Den aktuelle antifeminisme kan kort fortalt forklares med, at den sexistiske påstand om kvindens mindreværd bliver modbevist hver eneste dag. Forestillingen om, at kvinder er naturligt disponeret til at blive hjemme, og hvis de vover sig ud, så klarer sig ringere end mænd, bliver systematisk modbevist hver dag af et utal af kvinder. Så hvad gør man(d)? Man hævder, at det ikke er kvinder, det handler om, men feminister, denne ukvindelige uhyrlighed påduttet alverdens kvindelige træk." (35-36)*

Dvs. kategorien kvinde deles op i to: (a) dem der fortsat opretholder "naturens" hierarkiske kønsorden ved at underlægge sig manden, og (b) feministerne, der helt "unaturligt" er ved at nedbryde samfundsordenen. Den første kategori af kvinder skal selvfølgelig beskyttes af de "rigtige mænd", mens den sidste kategori – feministerne – bør tvinges til at indordne sig igen ved hjælp af verbal eller fysisk vold.

Antifeministerne retfærdiggør disse radikale tiltag ud fra en forståelse af, at biologien er ens skæbne. Køn skal forstås binært – der findes kun mænd og kvinder. Og de to køn er af "natur" hierarkisk ordnet, således at manden er (og bør forblive) kvinden overlegen:

> *"Denne pop-biologisme, der har meget lidt med reel evolutionsteori at gøre, baserer sig på en slags snusfornuftig hulemandslogik, der kan opsummeres i tre hovedpåstande: 1) sådan er det bare: biologi er skæbne; 2) mænd er mænd, kvinder er kvinder: en forskelslogik, der ikke tillader overtrædelser eller overskridelser, (…); og 3) dengang er nu: savannen og i dag er basalt set det samme, al adfærd i dag kan (og kan kun) forklares ud fra hulemandens overlevelses- og reproduktionsforhold." (60-61)*

Derfor fortolkes "lighed (…) som tab [af mænds privilegier], egalisering som katastrofe, og nivellering af kønshierarkier som altings opløsning" (44). Og løsningen er selvfølgelig, at kvinders rettigheder rulles tilbage, så den kønshierarkiske verdensorden kan genetableres. Rent politisk kommer det fx til udtryk ved at:

> *"skilsmisser skal gøres sværere, aborter og prævention skal forbydes, kvinder belønnes for mange børn og opfordres til at gå hjemme, støtte til bekæmpelse af hustruvold reduceres, kvinde- og kønsstudier fratages støtte" (77).*

Kort sagt, kvinders rettigheder skal rulles tilbage, så verdensordenen kan genetableres.

En af dem, der har haft exceptionel stor succes med at skabe en karriere, som både youtube-stjerne og selvhjælpsguru (for mænd der gerne vil genetablere denne hierarkiske verdensorden) er Jordan Peterson. Han har instrumentaliseret disse mænds angst og usikkerhed omkring deres rolle som mænd, og skabt en hel selvhjælpsindustri omkring dette tema. Derfor dedikerer Thorup en stor del af bogen til at fremstille Petersons idéer. Og ikke overraskende er Thorup meget kritisk over for hans verdensforståelse:

> *"Den er en uskøn blanding af religiøs mysticisme, evolutionær psykologi, personlige indfald og politiske udfald tilsat lidt lommefilosofi og selvhjælps-platituder." (145)*

Hvorefter Thorup konkretiserer sin kritik yderligere:

"Bogens [Petersons selvhjælps bog: "12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos"] slet skjulte budskab er således, at mænd ikke længere er mænd, men nu bliver undertrykte af kvinder til at stoppe deres udvikling på drengestadiet. (...) Kun mandens lidelseshistorie interesserer ham, for manden repræsenterer Orden. Kan du gætte, hvad kvinden repræsentere? Nemlig. Kaos." (151)

Kort sagt, opfordrer Peterson mænd til at kæmpe for en genetablering af kønshierarkiet, hvor mænd dominerer kvinder. Det er et mål at fastholde kønsulighed, netop fordi dette opfattes som et værn mod kaos. I sin fremlæggelse afdækker Thorup, hvordan Petersons argumentation bestræber sig på at ophøje biologiske forskelle mellem kønnene til et moralske ideal ved at tillægge naturen det, som han gerne vil tale frem i hans samtid.

Thorup trækker derefter en vigtigt parallel mellem Petersons verdensforståelse, og mange mænds reaktioner på MeToo-bevægelsen:

"Peterson' s moralske svigt (…), er at beskrive lighed som uretfærdighed og egalisering som tyveri. Han fortæller igen og igen, at marginaliserede personer ikke skal kræve eller forvente særlig assistance, at deres problemer og historier ikke er væsentlige, (…). Men der er én gruppe, som han mener, har et legitimt og afgørende krav på hjælp: unge mænd. Der er her en perfekt parallel til den syndflod af mænd, der i kølvandet på Metoo-bevægelsen følte trang til at advare mod en heksejagt og at udtrykke frygt for de anklagede mænds retssikkerhed, uden at man nogensinde før havde hørt dem sige noget om kvinders udsathed for seksuelle krænkelser eller om deres ringe retsbeskyttelse, når de rejser sager om seksuel krænkelse. Det demonstrer med al tydelighed, at det hverken for Peterson eller for disse Metoo-kritikere handler om retsbeskyttelse, men om mænds beskyttelse. " (165)

Citatet koger en tidstypisk feminisme kritikken ind til benet: verden bør indrettes af og for mænd – ingen andre bør kræve samme grad af rettigheder eller friheder som (hvide, heteroseksuelle, cis) mænd. Det opfattes med andre ord som urimeligt, at forlange at blive behandlet ligeværdigt hvis man er kvinde. Alle kvinder bør indtage en traditionel kvinderolle og føje manden og hans behov. Alternative måder at leve eller være på hævdes at skabe kaos.

Opsummerende kan man sige at Thorups bog bidrager til at tegne et vigtigt tidsbillede af en sexistisk højredrejning i politik som vi er vidne til over hele verden. Efter at have læst "Antifeminisme – Kvindehad i ligheds tidsalder" kan man ikke være i tvivl om, at det altid er vigtigt at stille kritiske feministiske spørgsmål, når nogen påstår at have fundet sandheden omkring køn og den "naturlige" verdensorden. Spørgsmål som: Hvilke køn og kønsroller fremstilles som de rigtige og hvilke fremstilles som de forkerte? Hvem opnår fordele ved at definere kønnene således, og hvem marginaliseres? Og, måske vigtigst af alt: Hvem skal denne verdenorden tjene? Hvis man er interesseret i et feministisk indspark i den debat, så er Thorups bog et godt sted at starte.