

SWS 2016 FEMINIST LECTURE

Reducing Gender Biases In Modern Workplaces: A Small Wins Approach to Organizational Change

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The accumulation and advancement of gender scholarship over past decades has led us to the point where gender scholars today can leverage our deep understanding of the reproduction of gender inequality to develop and test models of change. In this lecture, I present one such model designed to reduce the negative effects of stereotypic biases on women's workplace outcomes. After synthesizing the literature on stereotyping and bias and showing the limits of past change efforts, I develop a "small wins" model of change. Key to this model is that researchers work with teams of managers to produce concrete, implementable actions that produce visible results. I argue that small wins motivate further action and are the building blocks to larger organizational transformation. Preliminary results from several case studies show that this approach can produce important changes in the short run, such as reducing gender biases in workplace evaluations, and that these small wins can inspire longer run change, such as increases in the rate of hiring women.

Keywords: *gender and work; stereotyping; bias; organizational change*

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When I was invited to give the 2016 Sociologists for Women in Society (SWS) Feminist Lecture, I began reflecting on our cumulative knowledge as a community of gender scholars. In so doing, I was immediately impressed with our theoretical and empirical understandings of how gender inequality is produced, reproduced, and maintained. Indeed, many prior Feminist Lectures have taken up this very topic. Barbara Risman (2004) theorized about how gender is simultaneously embedded in individual, interactional, and institutional dimensions of society and urged us to put this knowledge to use to transform society. Cecilia Ridgeway (2009) explained how gender “frames” our day-to-day interactions in ways that reproduce both gender difference and gender inequality, an interactional theory that builds off of and extends the classic “Doing Gender” paper that was published in *Gender & Society*’s very first volume (West and Zimmerman 1987). Paula England (2010) elegantly demonstrated that our progress toward gender equality is stalled and uneven. And Christine Williams (2013) addressed the durability of gender inequality over macro-level changes to the structure of work and reflected on our growing understanding of intersectionality, a term first coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) and the focus of Joan Acker’s Feminist Lecture (2006). Collectively, the work of these and other gender scholars explains how it has happened that even though our workplaces and other organizations operate differently in the twenty-first century than in the past, these new ways of operating are still built around structures and practices that advantage white men.

Since I started graduate school, my own work also has focused primarily on understanding the reproduction of gender inequality, with an emphasis on how widely shared beliefs about gender and other social categories operate at the interactional level to differentially affect the evaluations and experiences of men and women in ways that are often disadvantaging to women (Correll 2001, 2004; Ridgeway and Correll 2004). Yet, while we have collectively amassed a large body of theory and empirical demonstrations of how inequality is reproduced, we have far less understanding of how to bring about change that promotes the production of gender equality. Such change is what I will focus on in this lecture.

As the director of the Clayman Institute for Gender Research at Stanford University for the past seven years, I have led a team of sociologists and other scholars in assessing and intervening in workplace practices to increase gender equality. My team and I have specifically focused on how to decrease the kinds of stereotypic biases that are disadvantaging to women in modern workplaces. As I embarked on this new line of work, I quickly learned two things. First, understanding a problem is necessary but

not sufficient for affecting positive change. Second—and this is why I think we, as a community, are sometimes reluctant to research change—is that the changes we can realistically make in any one instance are often small and imperfect. I have decided I can live with that. We have to start somewhere.

I will begin by synthesizing research that shows how gender stereotypes lead to biases that negatively affect the evaluations and experiences of women at work. I will then summarize what has been done to date to alleviate these biases and describe why these efforts, while important, have not lived up to their full potential. Next, I will present a “small wins” model of change that aims to decrease gender biases, thereby making our workplaces more inclusive and meritocratic. I will then share some preliminary data from a series of organizational case studies where we deploy and assess the effectiveness of this change model.

GENDER STEREOTYPES AND GENDER BIASES AT WORK

Figure 1 summarizes about 30 years of research in psychology and sociology showing how gender stereotypes bias evaluations, leading equally qualified men and women to be evaluated differently (for summaries, see Correll and Ridgeway 2003 and Jost et al. 2009). A central idea in this research is that stereotypes, or widely shared beliefs about how men and women “are” and how they “should be,” function as cognitive short cuts in decision making, especially under conditions of ambiguity. That is, when individuals lack clear criteria about how to evaluate individuals or when performance information is minimal or ambiguous, gender stereotypes *fill in the gaps* in knowledge, leading decision makers to rate men and women differently (see the example below from Steinpreis, Anders, and Ritzke 1999). This process often occurs at an implicit or unconscious level, although conscious gender biases still exist.

As shown at the top of Figure 1, the process of stereotyping starts with sex categorization. Psychologists have shown that we automatically sex categorize any person with whom we interact, classifying the person as male or female, and we do so in milliseconds (Ito and Urland 2003). In the United States, we also immediately racially classify those with whom we interact. These categorizations occur not only when we interact with someone in person but also when interactions occur on paper or the Internet, such as when employers screen resumes or letters of recommendation.

Automatic sex categorization is important because once a decision maker classifies someone as male or female, they implicitly expect the

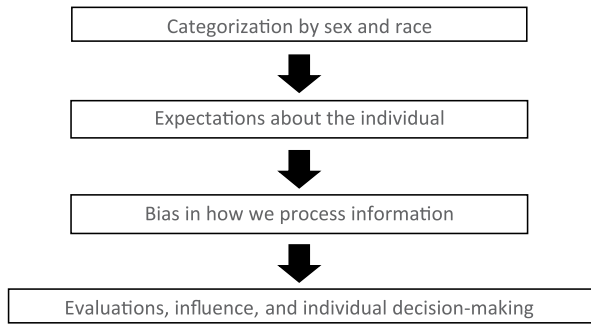


FIGURE 1: How gender stereotypes bias evaluations.

person to exhibit “masculine” or “feminine” traits and behaviors as encoded in gender stereotypes. For example, research shows that, on average, people quickly associate men with leadership traits and with scientific fields while the association of women with these traits and fields is cognitively slower (Eagly and Carli 2007; Nosek et al. 2009). These implicit and quick associations are important because they bias how decision-makers process information, such that the very same performance is understood slightly differently if offered by a man than if offered by a woman. For example, during the 2016 U.S. presidential election, Hillary Clinton was frequently criticized for being too loud during the debates (Khazan 2016). Objectively, she was no louder than Bernie Sanders or Donald Trump, but being loud and forceful are traits we associate with leaders, and leadership is more highly associated with stereotypes of men than women. As psychologists have shown, when we “think manager” we “think male” (V. E. Schein et al. 1996).

The gender bias in how performance information is processed potentially influences how women and men are evaluated at work when hiring, promotion, and project assignment decisions are made. It also affects how much influence individuals have when working in groups or teams, affecting which ideas get taken up by groups and who gets credit for their ideas (Correll and Ridgeway 2003; Thomas-Hunt and Phillips 2004). And on the supply side, stereotypes affect the assessments men and women make of their own abilities at school and work, leading to gender-differentiated career decisions (Correll 2001, 2004). The biasing effects of gender stereotypes, which may be small in any one instance, cumulate over careers as individuals are repeatedly evaluated in both formal and informal settings.

Emerging research in social psychology has begun to take an intersectional approach to understanding how the *simultaneous* classification of sex and race shape both the type and the amount of bias different groups of women and men experience. Building off earlier work that theorized about intersectionality at the macro level (Collins 1990; Crenshaw 1989), Ridgeway and Kricheli-Katz (2013) theorize how the intersections of gender, race, class, and other characteristics affect stereotyping and bias at the interactional level. They then illustrate with several empirical examples. For example, compared to white women, black women are judged by an even harsher performance standard, making it harder for them to achieve higher-level positions at work (Eagly and Carli 2007). However, when black women clear these higher standards, Livingston, Rosette, and Washington (2012) have shown that, compared to white women, black women are more easily able to act authoritatively without incurring backlash for violating prescribed gender roles. Similarly, Alfrey and Twine (2017) find that white and Asian women tech workers who identify as LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and/or queer) and present as gender fluid are perceived as more competent by their male colleagues than conventionally feminine-presenting heterosexual women. However, black LGBTQ women did not experience this competence boost. As this research shows, if white, heterosexual women are the assumed prototype for the category “women,” then women who differ from the prototype (such as black women or queer women) likely encounter different stereotypical expectations for their behavior, affording them either different “freedoms” or different “binds,” to use Ridgeway and Kricheli-Katz’s terms. This is an important development in our understanding of the intersectional nature of stereotyping and bias. It is also an area where much more empirical research is needed.

How Do Stereotypes Disadvantage Women?

There are four primary mechanisms by which stereotypes depress the ratings of women’s evaluations. First, women are subjected to a *higher bar*, requiring more evidence than men to be seen as qualified. For example, Steinpreis, Anders, and Ritzke (1999) conducted an experiment where psychology faculty in the United States were asked to evaluate a fictitious candidate for either an assistant professor or a tenured faculty position after viewing a vita for a person who had just finished his/her PhD (assistant professor) or a vita for a faculty member with more experience (tenured position). Half the faculty was randomly shown one of the two vitas with

a woman's name on it, while the other half rated one of the two very same vitas, but with a man's name on it. For the assistant professor candidates, 72 percent of the faculty who rated the man's vita said he would be hireable in their department, compared to only 44 percent of faculty who viewed the same vita with a woman's name on it.¹ The woman candidate was also less likely to be rated as having adequate teaching and research experience. Further, as is common in studies like these, men and women raters exhibited the same level of bias.² Interestingly, when the faculty raters evaluated the candidate for a *tenured* faculty position, no significant gender differences in ratings were found. With the richer vita of a more advanced scholar, there is less ambiguity in the qualifications of the applicant. Thus, raters are less likely to rely on stereotypes when making evaluations. This result drives home a central point: ambiguity opens the door to bias.

This study also illustrates a second mechanism leading to stereotypic biases: women experience *extra scrutiny* of their accomplishments. Despite no significant gender differences in the judgments of how hireable the tenured candidates were, raters wrote four times more doubt-raising statements on the rating forms for women candidates, such as "I would need to see evidence that she had gotten these grants and publications on her own," and "It is impossible to make such a judgment without teaching evaluations" (p. 523).³ While teaching ability is certainly a valid criterion for evaluating potential faculty, it was primarily raised when evaluating the woman and not the man.

Third, studies have found evidence that gender stereotypes lead to *shifting criteria* where evaluators more heavily weight the criteria evidenced in men. For example, Uhlmann and Cohen (2005) had participants rate a man and woman applicant for a police chief position. In one condition, the man candidate had more education and less police experience than the woman applicant; in a second condition, the situation was reversed so that the woman had more education and less police experience. In both conditions, participants preferred the man applicant, justifying their choice by shifting or redefining the criteria for success at the job. Importantly, the authors found that if raters were asked to commit to hiring criteria before rating applicants, thereby reducing ambiguity in the decision-making process, gender bias was eliminated.

Finally, stereotypes often lead to a *double bind* in which judgments of competence and likability are negatively correlated for women, but not men. For example, Rudman (1998) conducted an experiment where participants watched an applicant interview for a job and then rated the applicant's competence, likeability, and hireability. The experiment varied the

applicant's gender and whether the applicant self-promoted his or her accomplishments or was more modest. Self-promoting candidates were rated as more competent than modest candidates regardless of gender. However the self-promoting woman was judged as less likeable than the modest woman, while the self-promoting man applicant did not experience a decrease in likeability. Also, the self-promoting man was more likely than the modest man to be recommended for hire, not surprising since he was viewed as more competent and equally likeable. But the self-promoting woman was no more likely to be recommended for hire than her more modest counterpart, even though she was judged to be more competent. This study illustrates the difficulty women have in being seen as simultaneously competent and likeable. It also points to a difficulty women face as they move into leadership roles that often require self-promotion and other agentic behaviors associated with leadership, such as being assertive (Rudman et al. 2012). Since leadership behaviors overlap with our stereotypes about men but not women, women who engage in such behaviors often encounter a backlash for violating gender stereotypes.

Workplace Conditions That Amplify Bias

To create change, it will be necessary to change the conditions in the workplace that allow these four patterns of bias to flourish. Whether the mechanism be a higher bar, extra scrutiny, shifting criteria, or the double bind, one condition that amplifies bias is *ambiguity*: gender bias is more likely when decision-making contexts are ambiguous, lacking clear criteria for making decisions or sufficient performance information about the people being evaluated. A second condition that amplifies bias is when *definitions of success are narrow*. Narrow definitions are more likely to be drawn from attributes of groups currently in positions of power. Experiments that find when people “think manager” they “think male” illustrate this point. And third, when a given group is *lower status and a distinct minority* in a workplace, such as women in male-dominated workplaces and racial and ethnic men and women in white-dominated workplaces, stereotypes about the lower status group are more salient. The increased salience of stereotypes leads to greater biases in decision-making. This is especially true when artifacts in the environment are *culturally associated with the dominant group*, such as when technology workplaces embody “frat-boy practices” (Alfrey and Twine 2017, 44) or are saturated with images culturally associated with geeky masculinity, such as Star Trek posters and video games (Cheryan et al. 2009).

SOLUTIONS TO DATE

To date, there have been two main organizational approaches to reducing stereotypic biases: unconscious/implicit bias training⁴ for employees, and formalizing organizational processes that determine how individuals are evaluated, such as hiring, promotion, and compensation processes. As I describe below, both unconscious bias training and formalized procedures have had some success in reducing biases, yet they often fall short of achieving their goal of meritocracy.

Unconscious Bias Training

Organizations are increasingly aware of unconscious or implicit bias. As an *Atlantic Magazine* reporter describes, “Over the last several years, ‘unconscious-bias trainings’ have seized Silicon Valley; they are now de rigueur at organizations across the tech world” (Nordell 2017). Consistent with this observation, in the estimated \$8-billion annual diversity training industry, an explosion of software and unconscious bias training options have emerged recently and have been purchased by companies to eradicate unconscious bias (Huet 2015). These trainings are premised on the idea that if individuals are taught how stereotypes lead to gender and other biases, well-intentioned people who do not wish to be biased will be more thoughtful in their own decision-making and be less affected by stereotypes. There is some evidence that these trainings can reduce bias, at least in the short run. For example, a study conducted at the Stanford University School of Medicine found that when faculty members were trained about implicit bias by their department chairs and senior leaders, faculty members’ implicit associations decreased (Girod et al. 2016). There is also some emerging evidence that unconscious bias training changes short-term behavior when hiring and promotion decisions are being made, as I describe below.

However, many worry that the positive effects of unconscious bias training, like any training, wear off over time. Even more concerning, recent research has shown that under certain conditions unconscious bias training can be perceived as threatening to members of dominant groups, particularly white men (Dover, Major, and Kaiser 2016), and can actually *increase* bias (Duguid and Thomas-Hunt 2015). In my own experience over the past 15 years working with employees charged with improving diversity outcomes in their organizations, I have found that they are quite concerned that bias training will make people, especially white men,

defensive and this will undermine their diversity efforts. To avoid defensive reactions, unconscious bias trainings often go to great length to normalize bias. One tactic is to stress what social psychologists have repeatedly demonstrated, that all of us—women as well as men—are prone to these biases. While this tactic may reduce defensiveness, recent experimental research has shown that stressing the message that “everyone is biased” creates a norm for stereotyping that actually reduces the tendency of people to work to override bias (Duguid and Thomas-Hunt 2015). This experiment found that those exposed to “everyone is biased” messages showed increased biases toward older adults, women, and overweight individuals. Encouragingly, this same study showed that when the “everyone is biased” message was accompanied by a statement that “the vast majority of people try to overcome their stereotypic preconceptions” (pp. 350-51), participants exhibited less bias. Essentially, the norm shifted from the prevalence of bias to the prevalence of individual action to overcome stereotypic preconceptions.

Yet, even when done right, the effects of bias training will be limited because the target of change is the individual decision maker who is tasked with continually monitoring her or his own decision making. There is, of course, nothing wrong with expecting decision makers to avoid acting on stereotypic expectations. Yet, we know that unconscious gender biases affect even well-intentioned people, and they are more likely to do so when decision-making processes are ambiguous, when definitions of success are narrow, and when organizational environments are numerically or culturally associated with men and masculinity. If we can change these organizational conditions, we lessen the likelihood that decision makers will rely on stereotypes when making evaluations. Thus, my main point is:

To create sustainable change, we need to shift the target of change from the individual decision maker to organizational processes.

Others have similarly argued this point. Management professor Edgar Schein famously quipped, “People are the problem—they make mistakes and therefore should be designed out of the system whenever possible” (E. H. Schein 2004, 198). Or, more generously to the role of people as part of change, sociologist Barbara Risman urged in her SWS presidential address, “We must work with activists to understand that real change involves systematic and organizational redesign and not simply fixing broken people” (Risman 2003, 661).

Formalizing Organization Processes

Organizations, with varying levels of success, have long sought to formalize organizational processes so that decisions are based on achievement-related criteria and not gender, race, or other characteristics. Today, around 90 percent of companies report having formal processes in place for evaluating performance (Society for Human Resource Management 2014). Theoretically, formal procedures have the potential to reduce biases based on stereotypes by decreasing ambiguity in how to evaluate performance. Consistent with this idea, research has shown that formal procedures are associated with an increase in diversity outcomes (Baron et al. 2007; Castilla 2015; Reskin and McBrier 2000). For example, Reskin and McBrier (2000) analyzed a probability sample of more than 500 work organizations and found that formalized methods of recruiting were associated with a greater share of women in management positions (compared with informal network-based recruiting).

However, even with formal procedures in place, gender, race, motherhood, and other characteristics continue to influence evaluations of performance (Castilla 2008; Castilla and Benard 2010; Correll, Benard, and Paik 2007; Correll et al. 2017; Ridgeway 2011; Turco 2010). The failure of formal processes to secure meritocracy is often understood to be the result of the decoupling of the *intended* process from how managers actually use performance evaluation tools. In particular, performance evaluations allow for managerial discretion and lack the transparency and accountability required to ensure such a process is fair, balanced, and used as intended (Castilla 2015; Dobbin, Schrage, and Kalev 2015; Williams, Muller, and Kilanski 2012). Feminist scholars have gone a step further in their critique showing that it is not simply that managers use performance evaluation tools poorly, but rather that gender is embedded in their very construction. For example, fire departments around the country previously used height as a criterion when screening applicants.⁵ While height is an objective criterion and adding objective criteria to the hiring process should reduce ambiguity in how hiring decisions are made, a height requirement screens out more women than men. Further, height is not directly related to the ability to perform the job of firefighter. For this reason, fire departments have mostly eliminated this requirement, and the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) advises employers to avoid listing height as a job requirement. As this example shows, to the extent that traits, behaviors, or past experiences (such as military experience) that are more common to men than women are built into evaluation tools, they will disadvantage women as a group, while

appearing to be meritocratic. When this happens, formalized procedures do not eliminate bias; instead they have gender bias built into them. In these cases, bias can be especially hard to root out because it is masked under the cloak of objective criteria.

We have seen that both unconscious bias training and formalized organizational processes have led to some decrease in gender biases and some improvements in gender diversity. Yet neither has been the great leveler. Bias training can backfire, increasing bias; and formal procedures can be misused by decision makers or, worse, have gender biases built into their design. In spite of these limitations, I argue that educating about stereotyping and bias and formalizing evaluation processes are two key building blocks crucial for producing sustainable change. I will now turn to describing the organizational change model that incorporates these two building blocks to help organizations reduce gender bias.

A “SMALL WINS” MODEL FOR REDUCING GENDER BIASES

Figure 2 provides an overview of a model of change that my colleagues and I are currently evaluating in a series of case studies, including several technology companies, a professional services firm, and a nonprofit science organization.⁶ Key to the model of change is that we *work with teams of managers* to co-develop tools to reduce gender biases. These tools are designed to produce *measurable “small wins.”* Small wins are concrete, implementable actions that are of moderate importance and produce visible results (Weick 1984). Actions designed to produce small wins have the advantage of being seen as doable by supporters, while often flying under the radar of detractors. Attempts to solve larger-scale social problems, by contrast, are often seen as impossible to solve by supporters and are attacked by detractors. When a small win is achieved, it often creates new allies and makes visible the next target of change (Weick 1984).

The first step in the model involves educating managers on stereotyping and bias. Doing so equips employees with a gender framework so that they can recognize bias and avoid building gender biases into the new tools or processes that they co-develop. Not surprisingly, some managers resist the idea that they could be biased, while other managers are receptive. A few vocally supportive managers are often enough to normatively pressure their resistant counterparts toward action, as I illustrate below. The next step involves analyzing existing organizational data and collecting additional data to diagnose whether, where, and how gender biases might be entering into the organization’s hiring, promotion, and other



FIGURE 2: Small wins model for reducing gender bias.

evaluation processes.⁷ This diagnosis is important for identifying targets of change, but it also is useful for motivating organizational actors to act. Essentially, the goal is to situate the social science data on stereotyping and bias in the local organizational context. Most social science evidence about bias comes from experiments like the psychology faculty study described earlier. At an abstract level, this evidence is convincing to many (but certainly not all) managers.⁸ Even so, social science evidence often evokes a “but that doesn’t happen here” form of resistance. While accepting the idea that biases exist in many (other) organizations, managers frequently explain to us that they are “data driven” and, therefore, presumably immune to bias. To the extent that local data reveal bias in their own organization, these data can help managers move beyond resistance and motivate change. The third step involves working with managers to develop new procedures or other tools to reduce gender bias. I have found that by involving managers in the co-creation of new tools to reduce biases, we can increase their buy-in and better ensure that new tools are implemented in a way that actually reduces bias.

After developing a new tool with managers, the fourth step is the intervention, which involves rolling out the tool with groups of managers, and the fifth step is evaluating its effectiveness. By rolling out an intervention in groups, we increase peer accountability, whereby more supportive managers put normative pressure on their more resistant counterparts. The tools are designed to produce small, measureable gains. Small wins have the potential to increase the efficacy of managers—they design a tool and

see that it produced its intended effect. Importantly, increased efficacy can lead to “contagion,” whereby one small win inspires a manager to see other small wins as possible. For example, after being part of a group that redefined their *promotion* criteria, one manager in our sample initiated an effort to more clearly spell out the *hiring* criteria for a particular position. Earlier on in my career, I may have overlooked something like this as a single instance that is perhaps encouraging but too minor to note. But over time, I’ve come to appreciate these incremental behavioral shifts—these small wins—as the building blocks of organizational change. In the remainder of this article, I draw on data from the organizations we are working with to illustrate each of the above steps in more detail. Early results from this large project have given me both reasons for optimism and a better understanding of the entrenched barriers to change.

Step 1: Educate

The small wins model is premised on the idea that creating sustainable change requires that we go beyond training managers to changing organizational processes. Nonetheless, I have repeatedly seen that training itself can produce some gains, at least in the short term. I’ll share one example to illustrate. A few days after a training session on stereotyping and bias, a manager from a global software company sent our team this email:

One of our dev [development] teams is hiring an engineer. We had 3 candidates, 2 “*loud*” men and 1 *quiet* woman. The men received higher ratings and the dev manager then said: “The woman is more qualified so why did people rate the men higher than the woman?” They pushed each other, asked more questions and it turns out that they ended up deciding the woman was the better and more qualified candidate and they hired her. (italics added)

Our training had emphasized how definitions of success often contain traits and behaviors common to people already in positions of power. We then urged managers to ask themselves if the criteria they were using during their hiring process might be disadvantaging to women and other groups and, if so, if those criteria were truly necessary for success. We learned that they expected a successful engineer to not only have good ideas but also to be able to convince others of the merits of their ideas. To many, this meant being loud, forceful, and argumentative. We urged them to think about whether loud, forceful behavior is necessary for success. Not surprisingly,

managers had a range of opinions, and our goal was not to push for consensus but instead to *promote a culture of inquiry*. As the quote above illustrates by their use of “loud” and “quiet” as descriptors, encouraging inquiry caused them to pause and ask why they had come up with their initial ratings, which led them to see that the woman applicant was actually more qualified than the men. Hiring one woman will not do much to chip away at the dearth of women in tech, but each additional woman hired does immediately improve gender diversity at the team level, and the team level is where employees experience their workplaces. Further, this small win has the potential to inspire future action.

A second example comes from a different tech company. We had done a training about the double bind that makes it difficult for women leaders to be seen as simultaneously competent and likable. A hiring committee at this company had settled on a woman as their top candidate, but when this woman negotiated for a higher salary, the hiring manager said he was “turned off” by her strong negotiation style, that she seemed “high maintenance,” and, consequently, that he was considering rescinding her offer. A woman who had been at our training saw this reaction as an example of the double bind. She asked the hiring manager to describe how he had negotiated for his job, which led him to see that he was holding the woman to a different standard. This conversation led to the successful hire of the woman candidate and at a higher salary.

Step 2: Diagnose Bias

Diagnosing bias is important for selecting a target of change, creating a baseline for assessing the effectiveness of a change effort, and motivating managers to be a part of the change process. We often start with interviews of leaders to learn what the organization values and how leaders define good and successful employees. We also frequently conduct focus groups with women employees to understand the barriers they face and to gauge which barriers they see as most insurmountable. Next we drill down and collect more data on a specific organizational process that appears to be susceptible to bias. To illustrate the diagnosis phase, I’ll now present some evidence from two tech companies located in the western United States that I will call “Mid-size Tech” and “Large Tech.” In both, we sought to diagnose bias in their performance evaluation processes.

Performance evaluation processes vary across companies, but most follow a process whereby managers periodically (e.g., every six months or year) provide written evaluations of the employees who report to them, assign numeric ratings to employees’ performances, and then enter

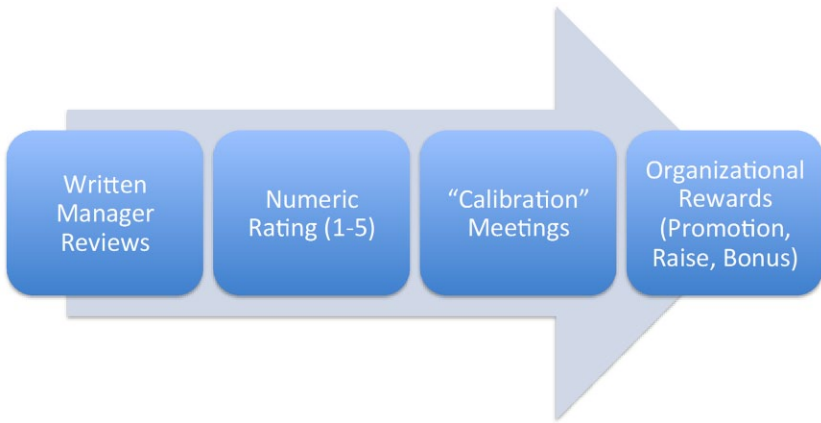


FIGURE 3: Typical performance evaluation process.

a calibration process, whereby teams of managers meet to discuss and align their ratings. The latter process is designed to smooth out differences between easy and hard “graders.” Once calibrated, the new ratings are used when making pay and promotion decisions (see Figure 3). In both companies, we decided to focus on the performance evaluation process because managers viewed the process as subjective and highly ambiguous, and ambiguous processes increase the likelihood of bias. For example, a survey at Large Tech found that only 15 percent of women managers and 24 percent of men managers agreed with the statement “The criteria for promotion are objective.” And our early interviews with managers at Mid-size Tech revealed that there was no clearly defined process for evaluating employees. This is not to say that individual managers did not have a process. Instead, there was not a common process, so managers imported processes in from their previous jobs, relying on “the Yahoo process” or “the way we did this at Intel.”

At Large Tech, our diagnosis involved analyzing the text of managers’ written performance reviews. We obtained a random sample of manager reviews, redacted gender from the text by removing names and pronouns, and then analyzed the language of the reviews across 93 themes (see Correll et al. 2017). One key finding is that reviews of men were more likely to contain specific feedback on how to improve, where reviews of women were more likely to contain vague feedback and negative comments about their personality (Correll and Simard 2016). Further, we found that employers rewarded men more for “taking

charge” (i.e., leading change, making game-changing contributions, and exerting heroic efforts) than they did for women. With equal amounts of “taking charge” language, men received higher numeric ratings than women did (Correll et al. 2017).

At Mid-size Tech, our main data come from participant observations of a series of calibration meetings and an analysis of the numeric ratings that emerged from these meetings. Employees at Mid-size Tech are evaluated and ranked using a “9-box” system, a commonly used assessment tool for identifying potential leaders (Society for Human Resource Management 2012). In general, 9-box systems create a 3×3 matrix by rating employees as low, medium, or high based on their *performance* (on the x-axis) and their *potential* (on the y-axis). Those in the upper right corner, scoring “high” on both performance and potential, are deemed “top talent” employees and are more likely to be promoted and to experience more employer investment in their careers. During the period of our observation, men were significantly more likely to be rated as top talent, whereas women were significantly more likely to be placed in the middle box. Middle box employees are average, solid performing employees. They receive far less discussion in calibration meetings and for that reason do not gain the kind of visibility among managers that they need to advance. We observed some ways that these gender disparities emerged during the calibration process. Since employees placed in the “top talent” box are most likely to be promoted and to receive bigger raises, there is budgetary pressure to move employees out of the highest-ranked box. However, managers were reluctant to move men out of the “top talent” box, in some instances expressing a worry that men would complain or leave the company if they were not getting top ratings. As this shows, ratings were not solely based on merit. Instead, gender affected ratings at this important stage of decision making.

After diagnosing these processes, we shared our findings with managers and leaders in both companies. For some, the internal data elicited a somber response, suggesting that they were coming to realize, perhaps for the first time, that gender biases exist not only in the world at large but in *their own* organizations as well.

Step 3: Develop tools

A feminist tension? The next step in our change model involves working with managers to develop new procedures or other tools to reduce gender bias in organizational processes. The language of “tools” may bring to

mind the famous Audre Lorde quote that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (1983, 94), especially if those tools are being designed with those in positions of power. On the other hand, feminist researchers have urged us to conduct research *with* people, not *on* people. As Reinharz (1992) notes in her feminist research methods book, change happens by empowering women through involving them in research and by distributing information gleaned from that research to change the actions of others. This is exactly my goal: to educate managers (women and men) and empower them to create change in their own environments. I realize this change will be neither perfect nor complete, but if we cannot work with those in powerful positions, we dramatically limit the potential impact of our work on the institutions that shape the future of our society, including the educational institutions where many of us are employed. This stance reflects my belief that as gender scholars, we have the intellectual frameworks to both educate and empower thoughtful action that can reduce inequalities in our workplaces. We can produce change.

Typology of organizational change agents. The organizational actors I have encountered in this work are not a monolithic group. Some are deeply and personally motivated to increasing diversity and often openly challenge the norms and practices of their workplaces. These “employee activists” are often involved in broader social justice movements outside the workplace and expect their organizations to be at the forefront of creating inclusive spaces. Others, whom I label “reluctant change agents,” have been officially tasked by their organizations with improving diversity and inclusion outcomes as part of their jobs, but they show little personal commitment to this goal. And many others are what Meyerson (2001) calls “tempered radicals.” They have a deep personal commitment to advancing diversity and inclusion, but unlike employee activists, they work primarily within the system to advance these goals. Their strategy is to “rock the boat without falling out of it” (92).

Tools to reduce bias. The tools we co-design with these change agents are intended to reduce gender biases by (1) defining and clarifying the criteria for assessing employee performance in order to reduce ambiguity; (2) ensuring that criteria do not have gender biases built into them and that definitions of success are not unduly narrow; and/or (3) ensuring that criteria are equally applied to men and women to reduce the likelihood that stereotypes will drive decision making. I’ll illustrate by

drawing on our research at Mid-size Tech and a nonprofit science organization.

We worked with Mid-size Tech to develop new procedures for assessing performance in both written evaluations and in the calibration process. We began this process by interviewing 23 employees who had been involved in identifying the leadership values that were currently used to assess employee potential. We wanted to understand the motivation for identifying these particular values, the relative importance of each of the values, and how managers operationalized them for assessment purposes. We also wanted to gain buy-in for making change from these critical players in the organization. When we shared what we learned from the interviews, it became clear that some of the leadership values, such as “be phenomenal,” were hard to define and measure, so they decided not to include these values in the new assessment tool they created. They decided to create a “scorecard” that managers would fill out for each employee and bring to the annual calibration meeting. For each company value, the manager was prompted to “provide specific examples of what [the employee] did or how [the employee] did or could have done better” on a given value. We also urged them to appoint a “criteria monitor” or someone charged with ensuring that criteria were being equally applied during the calibration process. They instead decided to encourage managers to voluntarily serve in this role. I honestly did not think a volunteer system would work, but in our observations more than 40 percent of the senior leadership team served as *de facto* criteria monitors, speaking up when a new criterion was raised for only some employees and raising criteria that were being overlooked when evaluating others. They also decided to use a timer so that a consistent amount of time was allotted for discussing each employee.

A second example comes from a nonprofit science organization whose top leader was concerned with improving the representation of women in both their applicant pools and among those hired. After we provided unconscious bias training to the leadership team, the leader decided to customize the training before rolling it out more broadly to emphasize the neuroscience behind bias. The leadership team of scientists then worked with Human Resources (HR) to improve their search and selection processes. They realized that their implicit criteria for success had been too narrow and this narrowness was reflected in the way they crafted their job ads. To remedy these overly narrow criteria, the leadership team worked with HR to write job ads designed to attract a diverse slate of candidates. To reduce ambiguity, they also created an evaluation process with clear criteria that they could use to systematically rank candidates.

Steps 4 and 5: Intervene and evaluate

After designing new tools, the next steps are to roll them out and assess their effectiveness at producing small wins. Whenever possible, we implement interventions in groups—teams of managers, multiple departments—to increase the likelihood of contagion and accountability, as we did with Large Tech, described above. This group- or team-based approach has been used effectively by other scholars including Phyllis Moen, Erin Kelly, and their colleagues when they implemented an intervention to provide employees with more control of their work schedule (Kelly et al. 2014; Kelly, Moen, and Tranby 2011), and Molly Carnes and colleagues (2015) when they evaluated an intervention to reduce biases in faculty hiring by randomly assigning some academic departments to receive the intervention while others did not.

We design the interventions to include measures of small wins, along with longer-term measures of change. The small wins often include increased confidence among managers that they are able to more fairly evaluate employees. For example, at Large Tech, we worked with managers to clarify performance criteria and created a checklist to be used when managers wrote their performance reviews. Ninety percent of managers involved in the intervention told us that they felt the process helped them be fair and consistent. One manager said, “Before I was lost, I admit. Now I had clear criteria and I was judging everyone the same.” Increased confidence can inspire contagion where an improvement in one process, such as performance evaluation, spreads to another, such as hiring. For example, another manager at the same company remarked, “We are hiring right now and I find myself talking about the position and . . . our expectations [using] terms from the checklist.”

At Mid-size Tech, we observed several small wins during the first calibration meeting after the new scorecard was put in place. First, every manager who participated in the calibration meeting had thoughtfully completed a scorecard for each of their employees, and the majority of men and women employees’ scorecards contained specific feedback on their performance, their success in living up to the company values, and how they could improve. Second, there was a dramatic decrease in comments related to personality in the calibration discussion from the prior year when 14 percent of women had been criticized for being “too aggressive” and 8 percent of men for being “too soft.” After the intervention, those figures dropped to zero and 1 percent, respectively. And third, there was greater consistency in the criteria used when discussing employees during the calibration meeting. A culture of peer accountability became apparent, with managers asking

one another for clarification when seemingly unclear or inconsistent criteria were applied during the evaluation of specific employees. In addition, and most importantly, we observed a larger, longer-term win: the intervention significantly reduced and in some cases eliminated the prior gender gaps in ratings. Specifically, the previous overrepresentation of women in the middle performance-rating category was eliminated, and the overrepresentation of men in the top category decreased significantly.

Finally, the changes the nonprofit science organization made to their search and selection processes produced a small but immediate increase in the number of women scientists hired. In the year the intervention was rolled out, 20 percent of their hires were women, up from 13 to 15 percent over the prior 30-year period. (The pool of women graduating with PhDs in the fields of interest is estimated to be 20 percent). This small win was motivating because, even though members of this organization described themselves as interested in improving gender diversity, in the 30 years prior they had seen very few improvements. The second year following the intervention, 45 percent of the scientists they hired were women, and they named seven women to senior leader positions. This organization has an extremely supportive top leader, which has undoubtedly contributed to this large gain. However, even with this leader in place, prior diversity efforts had not produced similar improvements. As he stressed to his employees, earlier efforts had likely not been as successful because they had not changed their hiring and recruiting practices. As these case studies demonstrate, to create sustainable change we need to shift the target of change from the individual decision maker to organizational processes. And for process changes to be effective, we need to involve those who will be using the new processes in their design.

CONCLUSION

It is my conviction that we as gender scholars and researchers can effectively leverage our deep understanding of the reproduction of gender inequality to develop and test models that promote gender equality in modern workplaces. The model of change I propose involves working with organizational actors to develop interventions that produce small, measurable wins. While small wins are often underappreciated precisely because of their smallness, our research shows that a small wins approach can produce important changes in the short run, such as reducing the biases women experience during workplace evaluations, and that this

change can inspire larger change, such as increases in the rate of hiring women. Further, by educating and involving organizational actors in the small wins process, I have observed that many come to understand how their own everyday interactions at work, including the language they use when describing men's and women's performance, are critical to the change process.

As I have stressed, the change we can realistically expect to produce in any one instance will be small, imperfect, and incomplete. Many gains will be eroded. But some changes will stick, and those that do have the potential to inspire more positive change. Step by step, I believe that these small wins are the path to achieving our larger goal, which is the transformation of our organizations. To get there, we will need more research on the change process, including research addressing intersectionality within the small wins approach and uncovering the barriers that different groups of women and men experience at work. We need to ask whether specific interventions disproportionately benefit some groups, such as white women, while being less effective or even counterproductive for other groups, such as women of color. At the Clayman Institute, we recently secured a new research site that will provide sufficient data to allow us to begin this important task. More research is also needed to test the small wins model in different types of workplaces, such as universities, other nonprofits, and nonprofessional settings, and to understand both the resistance to change within organizations and the factors that compel some actors to be active change agents in their workplaces.

For reasons we understand all too well, progress toward gender equality has been slow, uneven, and often met with resistance. However, our scholarly community is well poised to intervene, empowering people who desire to be agents of positive change to better achieve their goals. In fact, the most heartening part of this work for me has been discovering just how many organizational actors are deeply committed to equality. If we, as academics, can find ways to collaborate with those organizational actors then together we can jumpstart progress toward gender equality.

NOTES

1. These values are my calculations from the data the authors presented in their paper.

2. When I present this study in corporate settings, people often express disappointment that women "are just as bad" as men. Yet, this should not surprise us

since stereotypes affect judgments at an implicit level. They are widely shared beliefs in our culture, and men and women both live in that culture.

3. While this study was published in 1999, a more recent experiment (Moss-Racusin et al. 2012) had science faculty in the United States rate either a male or female resume for a science lab manager position and found a similar effect: men applicants were rated higher (and offered higher salaries) than women applicants with the very same resumes.

4. I use the terms *implicit* and *unconscious* bias interchangeably. While *implicit* is often preferred among psychologists, *unconscious* is more frequently used by practitioners. In Silicon Valley, *UBT* is commonly used to refer to unconscious bias training.

5. Mie Lewis, "Why So Few Female Firefighters, NYC?," *Speak Freely* [blog], December 18, 2013, <https://www.aclu.org/blog/speakeasy/why-so-few-female-firefighters-nyc>.

6. Research agreements with these organizations stipulate that their names as well as other identifying information, such as their exact geographic location and size, will be kept confidential.

7. Often the education and diagnosis stages begin in parallel. We start working with existing data at the same time we are educating managers.

8. Handley et al. (2015) find, in an experiment involving faculty at one university, that men faculty rate research revealing bias as less meritorious than women faculty, and this gender difference is greatest among science and engineering faculty.

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