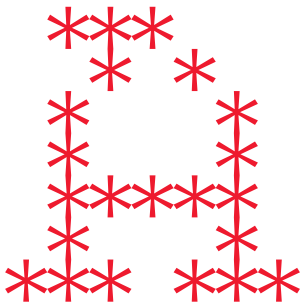


by BARBARA RESKIN

even if we could  
completely eliminate  
intentional  
discrimination,  
unconscious bias  
would still  
remain

# unconsciousness raising



ALTHOUGH WOMEN HAVE MADE unprecedented headway in the work world over the last 30 years, it has been slow going. The pay gap between the sexes has narrowed by about a half a cent a year, the decline in sex segregation stalled in the 1990s, and women's share of executive jobs has only been inching up. In short, equal opportunity remains out of reach for most women.

In the past, discrimination against employed women was commonplace. No doubt, several bushels full of bad apples still intentionally discriminate, but overt, intentional discrimination almost disappeared after it was outlawed. Unfortunately, a second type of discrimination, one outside the reach of the law, persists across American workplaces. This discrimination originates in unconscious mental processes that systematically distort the way we see other people. In order to deal with a constant barrage of stimuli, our brains are wired to reflexively categorize and stereotype people, often in ways that we would consciously reject. All but impossible to detect in ourselves, these unconscious reactions are normally outside of our control. While they are largely invisible, their consequences are not: They systematically disadvantage women—and minorities—at work.

Although individuals cannot banish the automatic unconscious distortions that limit women's careers, employers can minimize their discriminatory effects

**Our brains are wired to reflexively categorize and stereotype people, often in ways we consciously reject as false**



through personnel policies that reduce managers' discretion, such as formalizing hiring and promotion practices, holding managers accountable for fair decisions, encouraging employees to identify with groups in which membership is not associated with gender, and actively compensating for unconscious biases. Many employers would readily implement these reforms if they understood the consequences when cognitive errors go unchecked. However, most employers do business as usual unless something in their external environment forces them to change. Until we change the environment in which businesses operate, our unconscious biases will block women's and minorities' rise to the top.

### **Automatic stereotyping**

Unconscious distortions harm the career prospects of working women (and minorities) through stereotyping and ingroup favoritism. Stereotypes automatically associate in our minds group membership (e.g., male) and traits (e.g., aggressive). While most people consciously stereotype some groups (for example, the assumption that someone with a youthful or unsophisticated appearance lacks savvy about the world, or that someone from the South harbors conservative racial attitudes), automatic stereotypes occur outside our conscious awareness and may involve beliefs that we consciously reject.

Societies pass on a body of shared cultural "knowledge" to their members, and this knowledge includes the content of stereotypes associated with particular groups (e.g., skinheads, fundamentalists, immigrants, politicians). As a result, most people can accurately describe the content of stereotypes, regardless of whether or not they accept them as accurate. And apparently simply knowing these stereotypes leads our unconscious minds to draw on them, linking group membership with stereotypical attributes or behaviors. These automatic implicit associations have survival value. Because we cannot consciously consider each new bit of information our senses pick up, responding without conscious thought to some categories of stimuli (e.g., the sudden appearance of a snarling dog or a person who looks dangerous) frees up cognitive resources for other tasks. Similarly, automatic stereotypes about the sex or color of a person we encounter may help us to quickly size up a situation. Of course, to the extent that our stereotypes are not valid, we will size it up incorrectly.

The cognitive efficiency of automatic stereotyping makes it all the more tenacious. We process stereotype-consistent information more readily than inconsistent information. And anything that taxes our attention—multiple demands, complex tasks, time pressures—increases the likelihood of our stereotyping. For example, research subjects assigned to complete a sentence could obey an instruction to avoid sexist statements when they had ample time. But under time pressure (or more generally, with multiple cognitive demands), their statements were more sexist than those of a control group. The experimenter's admonition against sexism actually "primed" the subjects' unconscious sexist stereotypes, making them especially likely to come to mind. Similarly, we tend to believe and recall evidence consistent with our stereotypes (including untrue "evidence")

and dismiss evidence that challenges them. Thus, automatic cognitive distortion in our evaluation of evidence makes it hard for us to sort out valid from mistaken beliefs.

The unconscious beliefs most people harbor about women cast doubt on women's suitability for high-level jobs. For example, women are stereotypically viewed as less oriented to their careers and more oriented to their families than men are. They are also seen as too nurturing to effectively manage subordinates or head-to-head competition and too risk-averse to succeed in business. Automatic sex stereotypes block women's access to high-level jobs, especially in predominantly male work settings, by affecting the tasks supervisors assign to women and men, biasing their evaluations, and influencing the attributions they make for the successes and failures of workers of each sex.

For women who hold or aspire to customarily male positions, stereotyping is especially problematic because sex stereotypes for women are inconsistent with stereotypes about ideal job holders. As a result, predominantly male work settings put women in a double-bind. Conforming to societal stereotypes about how women should behave prevents their fitting the stereotype of the ideal worker, while satisfying the stereotype of the ideal worker violates prescriptive stereotypes about how women should behave. For example, Ann Hopkins, who successfully sued Price Waterhouse for denying her partnership despite her exemplary performance, was described by one partner as "overly aggressive, unduly harsh, and difficult to work with," while another encouraged her to adopt a more feminine appearance. In sum, Price Waterhouse did not promote her because she could not fill the mutually exclusive stereotypes of woman and Price Waterhouse partner.

### **Ingroup favoritism**

The machinations of our unconscious minds create another hurdle for women's access to top jobs. Within seconds of meeting a person, our brains automatically categorize them as someone like ourselves (a member of our ingroup; "us") or unlike ourselves (a member of our outgroup; "them"). Like stereotyping, automatically categorizing others is functional in a complex world. Because we categorize people immediately, we do so based on visible, and often surprisingly irrelevant, attributes. (People's inclination to classify all others into ingroups and outgroups was first observed among boys whose only visible difference was whether their shirt was red or blue.) Thus, whether we view others as "us" or "them" often depends on their sex.

Two processes associated with "us-them" categorization pose problems for women's advancement. First, having categorized someone as like or unlike us, we extrapolate to other characteristics, assuming that ingroup members generally resemble us and outgroup members differ. Second, we automatically favor ingroup members. We trust them more than other persons, attribute positive traits to them while ignoring their negative characteristics, prefer to cooperate rather than to compete with them, evaluate them more positively than others, cut them more slack when their performance falls short, and favor them when distributing rewards.



## Stereotypes of women are inconsistent with stereotypes of ideal executives, casting unconscious doubt on whether women are suitable for top positions

In settings in which men hold most top-level positions, ingroup favoritism limits women's likelihood of advancement. The career benefits from belonging to the "old boys' network" involve both conscious and unconscious ingroup favoritism. For example, when one female CEO asked her previous boss for a promotion, "he looked...flabbergasted" and then explained, "The guy I've got up there now has been my running partner, and it's taken me two years to get him to that position." Her boss's explanation suggests that he implicitly assumed that someone who shared his gender and interest in running also shared his executive ability. In similar situations in which women who were passed over for promotion sued (for example, *Foster v. Dalton* in 1995 and *Brandt v. Shop 'n Save Warehouse Foods* in 1997), the courts have acknowledged that "such actions are unfair from the standpoint of the plaintiff and persons of [their] sex," but concluded that they do not violate antidiscrimination laws. Because the courts interpret antidiscrimination law as applying only to intentional discrimination, it is legal for men to favor their buddies (usually male) over people they don't socialize with (almost all women and people of color).

Another upshot of the assumption that ingroup members resemble us and outgroup members don't is that the latter are

unlikely to come to mind for career-building opportunities. And if they do, they bring the baggage of "themness" with all its implicit associations. As another CEO told a researcher, "We [had] talked about having a woman [on the bank's board]...but had been unable to settle on someone who we thought could make a major contribution."

The daily effects of automatic stereotyping and ingroup favoritism may be small: being excluded, passed over, or denied credit. But over time, micro acts of unintentional discrimination lead members of ingroups to accumulate advantages not available to outgroup members. The disparities this produces are as consequential as those of intentional, overt acts of discrimination.

### Stemming discrimination through structure

The unconscious, reflexive nature of stereotyping and ingroup favoritism makes unequal opportunity for women an everyday occurrence. But when the laws of nature or of the mind lead to predictable, but undesirable outcomes, we often try to prevent it ahead of time. For example, because we know that automobile accidents can lead to serious injury or death, we require manufacturers to install seatbelts. Similarly, to sup-



press the bias that predictably results from automatic cognitive distortions, employers need to implement personnel practices that are analogous to seatbelts in preventing unintended disparate outcomes.

My favorite example of a preventive structure comes from a study of how symphony orchestras started to include women. Until the 1970s, Claudia Goldin and Cecilia Rouse report, virtually all the musicians in major symphony orchestras were male. In the auditions that symphonies used to select musicians, judges could see as well as hear the candidates. Moreover, the auditions were unapologetically subjective: Judges were not constrained by prespecified criteria. And those selected were almost always male. We can't know why this happened, but when symphony orchestras began to put auditioners behind a screen, thereby concealing their sex, symphonies increasingly hired women. The screen both curbed intentional discrimination and prevented any unconscious stereotypes and ingroup favoritism from having discriminatory effects on women applicants.

Although there are few settings in which applicants' sex can be concealed, the impact of blind auditions illustrates the importance of structures for reducing discrimination. The subjective and unstructured decision-



### The impetus for change usually comes not from altruism or self-interest but from pressure outside the firm in the form of lawsuits, regulations, or adverse publicity

making invites bias. Consider Home Depot, which began as a close-knit, predominantly male company in which people hired or promoted their buddies. The company's hiring and promotions practices remained informal as it expanded, and women's exclusion from management eventuated in a class-action lawsuit. In keeping with the consent decree that settled the lawsuit, Home Depot completely revamped its hiring and promotions practices. The new employment structure included computer or telephone kiosks in every store for people to apply for jobs and specify their qualifications and job preferences. When managers posted openings, they automatically received a list of all qualified applicants. By standardizing all facets of the matching process, Home Depot curtailed managers' discretion, reducing the likelihood that managers' conscious or unconscious ingroup favoritism or sex stereotypes would affect job assignments or promotions.

Simply reducing managerial discretion by formalizing personnel practices does not ensure a level playing field, however.

Accountability is another key factor in reducing biases in judgments. Managers must know they will be held accountable for the criteria they use, the accuracy of the information they use in personnel decisions, the procedures by which they make those decisions, and their consequences for gender and race equality. For instance, experimental subjects charged with recommending teaching assistants were less likely to recommend candidates of their own race and sex when they had been told that the decision-making process would be public than when they believed their decisions would be kept secret. But, importantly, when decision-makers are under time pressure (which is presumably most of the time), knowing that they will be held accountable does not suppress automatic cognitive biases. For accountability to be effective, departing from specified procedures must have tangible consequences. Home Depot, for example, fired managers who hired staff outside the computerized system.

Employers can also reduce the discriminatory impact of ingroup favoritism by promoting the formation of mixed-sex



ingroups by employees. One option is integrating work teams, thereby encouraging workers to categorize coworkers on bases other than their sex, such as teams, projects, or divisions. Organized competition between work groups, for instance, encourages team-based ingroups, which then discourages stereotyping because people tend to see their teammates as individuals.

In sum, micro acts of discrimination occur every day in most workplaces as a result of automatic cognitive processes that are largely outside of our awareness, much less our conscious control. The pervasive and automatic nature of these unconscious biases makes it almost impossible to prevent their helping men's careers and harming women's, even when firms implement structures to minimize bias and hold managers accountable for using them. This means that ensuring an equal-opportunity workplace may require consciously taking gender into account in job assignments and promotions. This could take the form of gender-conscious recruiting, such as targeting traditionally female labor pools or proactively identifying women who are likely candidates for advancement; or gender-conscious hiring, which explicitly treats sex as a "plus factor" in deciding among qualified applicants. The latter approach is legal only for firms that have admitted past exclusionary treatment (see article on page 38).

### External pressure

The *raison d'être* of work organizations is not to prevent discrimination, but to produce a service or product. And few organizational leaders, particularly in the private sector, take their positions primarily to create a more just society. As a result, reducing the discriminatory effect of automatic cognitive errors almost always takes a back seat to productivity and the career growth of top executives.

Widespread problems within a firm—such as high turnover among women professionals—can lead firms to change their personnel policies (see article on page 42). But usually the impetus for change comes from outside the firm, in adverse publicity regarding its treatment of women or minorities, lawsuits charging discrimination, or oversight by regulatory agencies. For example, the

further reading

**"Implicit Stereotyping in Person Judgment,"** by Mahzarin R. Banaji, Curtis Hardin, and Alexander J. Rothman, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1993.

**"Minimizing Workplace Gender and Racial Bias,"** by William T. Bielby, *Contemporary Sociology*, 2000.

**"Rethinking Employment Discrimination,"** by Barbara F. Reskin, in Mauro F. Guillen, Randall Collins, Paula England, and Marshall Meyer (eds.), *The New Economic Sociology: Developments in an Emerging Field*, Russell Sage, 2001.

**"Second Generation Employment Discrimination: A Structural Approach,"** by Susan Sturm, *Columbia Law Review*, 2001.

Office for Federal Contract Compliance Programs monitors and regulates employers' compliance with presidential executive orders mandating nondiscrimination and affirmative action by federal contractors. Although the likelihood of losing a contract is minuscule, employees of federal contractors look more like America than those of noncontractors. Likewise, the outcome of discrimination lawsuits can influence the personnel practices not only of the firm under consent decree—like Home Depot—but also of other firms in the same industry or labor market. It is not easy to prevail in sex discrimination cases, however. Ann Hopkins succeeded in her lawsuit against Price Waterhouse only because the partners in the firm expressed conscious sex stereotypes. If their decision had been distorted only by their unconscious stereotypes, she would not have been able to prove sex discrimination.

The legal environment can also make a difference on women's outcomes in more subtle ways. For instance, a study by Doug Guthrie and Louise Roth showed that the more equal employment opportunity laws in a corporation's home state and the more progressive the federal appellate courts in the corporation's district, the more likely it was to have a female CEO. The policy stance of a region, a state, or a local labor market can affect women's access to top jobs through the message it sends to corporations about the consequences of disobeying discrimination laws. It can also affect women's representation in the candidate pool by encouraging or discouraging them from pursuing opportunities in various kinds of careers. And because women, like men, pursue the best jobs open to them, a favorable legal and regulatory environment will attract women to opportunities.

The logical conclusion of this analysis—that regulatory agencies should require firms to curb the consequences of automatic stereotyping and ingroup favoritism—is likely to be controversial. But organizations rarely implement genuine reform without external pressures; and in the absence of a political sea change along with a broader legal conception of discrimination, equal opportunity is likely to take place one firm at a time. Leveling the playing field more quickly will require pressure on lawmakers and regulators to address both conscious and unconscious barriers to women's inclusion. \*

*Barbara Reskin is the S. Frank Miyamoto Professor of Sociology at the University of Washington. She has written six books and several dozen articles and book chapters on gender and race inequality in the workplace, sex segregation, discrimination, and affirmative action. She is a past president of the American Sociological Association and a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.*

### Testing assumptions

**A group of psychologists has developed an online test to study the prevalence and impact of unconscious beliefs about stereotyped groups such as women, blacks, Arabs, the elderly, and the overweight. The test shows the impact of our own unconscious stereotypes, even those we consciously reject as untrue. To take the test, visit <http://implicit.harvard.edu/>.**