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Biases in the Workplace

In the workplace, employees are typically assessed based on their performance, and often provided a salary based on their individual skillset. In an ideal meritocratic system, human capital—the education, social skills, part-time or full-time preference, and other individual tendencies in the workplace—would be the only factor in assessing a person’s performance and salary. In this system, any disparities between employees would be based on skill and preference alone. Unfortunately, this is not how the modern workplace functions. Human capital plays only a minor part in assessing performance and pay. Other facets of life, like gender, parenthood status, social class, and race greatly influence how a person is treated in the workplace, thusly shaping their life chances immensely.

Men and women are often treated differently in the workplace, even when they show the same skills and talent. Padavic and Reskin discuss how the sexual division of labor is problematic. With female-dominated occupations earning less than male-dominated ones, the sexual division of labor creates inequality (Padavic and Reskin). Additionally, by segregating labor by sex, certain occupations become labeled as male or female work (Padavic and Reskin). This enforces the cultural structure of prescriptive bias: what jobs are and are not appropriate for certain genders (Williams and Dempsey). For example, orthopedic surgeons are a predominantly male field. Some argue being in orthopedics requires male strength to physically move bones in patients. This misconception leads to stigmatizing women in orthopedics. Meanwhile, pediatricians are the only predominantly female physician sub-field, and they receive the lowest pay out of all physicians (Padavic and Reskin). The sexual division of labor ultimately leads to a devaluation of women and their work. The more female-dominated an occupation is, the less both female and male workers in that field earn. The social structure of sex segregation leads to this difference in pay.

Women also experience glass ceilings in attaining high-level positions. In fact, women make up only 3.6% of fortune 500 CEOs (Williams and Dempsey). A small number of women are CEOs because of the hurdles women face in attaining those positions. Women must prove their worth repeatedly and balance between being too masculine and too feminine.

Women in the workplace are often forced to prove their competence over and over again, while men are given the benefit of the doubt (Williams and Dempsey). When men make mistakes, it is seen as no big deal. However, when a woman makes the same mistake, it is seen as her fault and shortcoming (Williams and Dempsey). Women are less likely to take risks because of these implications, whereas men have the privilege to take risks and make mistakes with no occupational harm. Because of the increased punishment for women and lax rule for men, women are often not offered the same promotions as men (Williams and Dempsey). One example of perceiving men and women differently is seen through swearing. Williams and Dempsey interviewed a high-level female CEO who talked about workplace swearing. The woman explained her firm is a place where “’the f-bomb was heard every other word,’” yet when her employee questioned her seniority, and she swore at him, she was reprimanded for her tone (Williams and Dempsey 34). She continued, “it’s exactly the same action the males are taking, and the same words,” but because of gender, her attitude and tone is perceived differently (Williams and Dempsey 36). This situation can be replicated with a variety of interactions in high-level occupations. Women are frequently undermined and simultaneously held to higher standards than their male associates, forcing female workers to prove their worth repeatedly.

Women in the workplace are not allowed to be too feminine or too masculine, falling into either category harms the treatment and assessment of women in high-level positions. Williams and Dempsey coin this balancing act the “tightrope,” for the constant monitoring and recalibrating that women must do so that they never appear too feminine or too masculine (Williams and Dempsey). This prescriptive bias tells women how society believes they should act in the workplace. Feminine women often are not taken seriously (Williams and Dempsey). They are seen as soft-spoken and are given the office “housework” instead of the high-stakes glamour work (Williams and Dempsey). In the academic world, the “housework” women usually are asked to do is the teaching and serving on committees. Meanwhile, the glamour work—the primary focus of men—is publishing in research journals (3-9 lecture).

At the same time, while women are chastised because of their soft-spoken personalities, women are also expected to hold some feminine traits close. For example, women are expected to be modest and self-effacing despite their competence level (Williams and Dempsey). To illustrate the feminine side of the tightrope, one woman offered a situation about her work attire with her boss. Their conversation follows: “‘do you think I dress appropriately?’ ‘You’re just very attractive…you dress beautifully, but that means people aren’t focused on you. They’re focused on the way you look,” (Williams and Dempsey 81). Statements like these are perplexing for women in the workplace; regardless of the content of a women’s speech, objectification occurs. While women must be self-effacing, they cannot be beautiful or appear feminine if they want to be taken seriously.

At the same time, women who are too masculine are told to soften their masculine traits (Williams and Dempsey). A woman who is confident and assertive can be off-putting to employers (Williams and Dempsey). Often employers will deem these women intimidating and overbearing, even if the same assertiveness is admired in male employees. Employers misapply general rules to justify a certain behavior for men, while blaming women for the same behavior; this is defined as casuistry. Sometimes when employers believe they are being objective in decision-making, they are modifying criteria based on their own unconscious bias (Williams and Dempsey 29). An example of this is when a woman applies for a position, but seems “too assertive,” (Williams and Dempsey 75). Often, employers will say that these candidates are “less hirable than comparable men and [have] … relatively low social skills,” despite male equivalents possessing the same assertiveness and maintaining high social skils (Williams and Dempsey 75). The male applicant is often hired.

The tightrope is a minefield for women; women must constantly tiptoe around femininity and masculinity. This conundrum leaves women either seeming like a bitch or a doormat, but either way less competent than equivalent males (Williams and Dempsey). Williams and Dempsey emphasize that “there’s no right or wrong way to be a woman,” while giving suggestions for balancing this tightrope that have worked for female CEOs (Williams and Dempsey 90). Both the prove-it-again and tightrope biases illustrate the gender essentialism cultural structure at work; women are not associated with the workplace and must prove their worth to employers to fight this cultural structure.

Another identifier that can cause a difference in treatment between employees is parenthood status. Mothers are often penalized for their parenthood status, while fathers are given a bonus (Turco). Turco illustrates this pattern of penalized mothers in the leveraged buyout industry. The leveraged buyout industry is extremely lucrative, competitive, and high-stakes. In the industry as a whole, less than 10% are female, and even fewer are employees of color (Turco). In fact, there are virtually no African American women at all in the industry (Turco). The industry is all about ego and confidence, which is a precarious tightrope between femininity and masculinity for female employees. However, the bias against women is amplified for mothers.

In the leveraged buyout industry, mothers are seen as less devoted and less committed (Turco). This is especially true for women who go on pregnancy leave and then return to work. Employers are often angry that a woman’s priority is her family and not their business, granting mothers fewer opportunities than other workers (Turco). Mothers who return to work after their pregnancy are transferred to non-deal roles—positions that are low-risk and do not have the intensity of other higher-level positions (Turco). Mothers are forced to prove their competence and commitment over and over again because employers are set in their mindset that mothers are not committed (Turco).

This tension between work and family illustrates the work and family devotion schemas that women face. On one hand, children are viewed as needing a mother’s undivided care to thrive, while on the other hand, employers seek employees with no outside commitments (Blair-Loy). These schemas collide because work and family are seen as exclusive categories that require a person’s full attention. The devotion schema cultural structure makes it especially hard for women to remain in high-level positions without judgment or demotion. Typically, women are forced to choose between family and work, or are stigmatized as not committed to either their children or to their occupation.

Additionally, tokenism is a large part of the problem at firms in the leveraged buyout industry. As a male-dominated industry, a single woman can serve as the token woman in the office. If that one woman decides to quit to raise a family, the employer will become skeptical of future female employees. Tokenism “echoes the experiences of people of any kind who are rare and scarce,” (Turco 896). Because of this, employers type women as potential mothers, regardless of each individual woman’s feelings towards becoming a parent. Similarly, employers’ perspectives are shaped by anecdotal experiences with these token employees.

Correll quantifies this disparity between non-mothers and mothers. Her research proves that the pay gap most women face is even larger for mothers (Correll). Additionally, human capital accounts for no more than one-third of the motherhood pay penalty (Correll). The majority of the motherhood penalty comes from the cultural structure that mothers are less productive than non-mothers because mothers need to save energy for their children after hours (Correll). Employers often implicitly use motherhood to guide their employment decisions because of this salient cultural structure.

Correll created an experiment in which she sent fictitious resumes to companies. In this project, Correll discovered that competency is perceived as 10% lower for mothers (Correll). Mothers were held to higher punctuality and performance standards than their male counterparts (Correll). Out of the comparable resumes Correll sent, 47% of mothers were recommended for positions, while 84% of non-mother applicants were recommended. Just like Turco unveiled, this form of penalty is statistical discrimination; employers base their decisions off anecdotal experiences with mothers who are not committed, using low commitment as a defining characteristic of mothers in the workplace. While being a mother is seen as culturally incompatible with working, this is not the case for fathers. In fact, fathers are often rewarded for their fatherhood status; it shows commitment and compassion to be a father (Correll).

Social class yields disparities because of the familial division of labor. The concentration of job loss in 2008 was migrant male work, such as manufacturing and construction. Meanwhile, there is still ample caretaking and domestic work in the United States (Schmalzbauer). Schmalzbauer describes the 2008 recession as having a “distinctly gendered impact on migration,” (Schmalzbauer 443). To support their families, many migrant women are moving to the United States to work. However, the work these women seek reaffirms the gendered occupations of female caretaking and childcare.

The breadwinner shift from men to women in migrant families often creates tension and stress. In low-income families, gender essentialism is more salient in the division of labor (Schmalzbauer). Because of this strong cultural structure, migrant men feel emasculated and weak when they are not supporting their family; this sometimes leads to domestic violence (Schmalzbauer). Schmalzbauer researched this phenomenon by interviewing 30 male and 30 female migrants. Schmalzbauer found that despite the shift in breadwinner, families were hesitant to embrace a non-nuclear family structure (Schmalzbauer). The shift could easily allow for a more egalitarian approach to the division of labor in the family. Yet, the migrant women interviewed often continued to do all the housework despite their increased work schedules (Schmalzbauer). In fact, some husbands even constrained their wives from seeking work despite the knowledge that more jobs in the service sector exist than in the construction or manufacturing sectors (Schmalzbauer). This cultural structure limits migrant women despite their own individual abilities. Additionally, the division of labor conflict often leads to depression and isolation for many women. Women who are scolded by their husbands often feel guilty when money is tight and they are not working (Schmalzbauer). Social class greatly affects the social structure of the familial division of labor. In classes that earn less money, tension is placed on the men to provide, despite widespread job loss. The familial division of labor creates workplace tension between migrant women and men.

Finally, race affects the treatment of employees in high-level positions.While women have to deal with the tightrope and prove-it-again dilemmas, women of color have a whole separate sphere of bias to deal with (Williams and Dempsey ch 11). Many high-level women of color claimed that once you surpass co-workers of color, you are in “bleak isolation” at your job level (Williams and Dempsey 225). Additionally, women of color do not have the structural support needed to get to and maintain high-level positions. One interviewed woman said she isolated herself from coworkers to avoid the risk of being put in a subservient position due to her gender and race (Williams and Dempsey ch 11). The top is especially lonely for high-achieving women of color.

As women of color, many workers felt they represented their entire race and were often lumped into generic racial categories. A woman described this as doing “more to describe stereotypes than it does to describe identities experienced by individual people,” (Williams and Dempsey 226). As a minority in high-level positions, women of color face tokenism and stereotype biases.

Non-white workers often have to prove their competency even more than white women. Because employees of color are tokens, they often feel “success is so precarious…[that] performance pressure becomes a ‘self-fulfilling negative prophecy,’” (229). Women of color are surrounded by prescriptive bias that dictates how they should act and behave in a workplace. When surrounded by these thoughts, women of color find themselves “over-efforting” to avoid falling victim to stereotypes (Williams and Dempsey 229). This intense self-prescribed pressure often leads to decreased performance, solidifying the stereotypes the woman was working so hard to avoid. This phenomenon is called the stereotype threat and is unfortunately common for women of color.

Unlike white women, Black women face different masculinity and femininity tightropes. Black women have more leeway to behave in a masculine way because of the cultural structure that masculinity that is associated with blackness (Williams and Dempsey ch 11). However, Black women are also seen as less threatening because they are so marginalized (Williams and Dempsey ch 11). The stereotype that Black women must confront is that of the angry Black woman. If a Black woman gets agitated, it is likely that her coworkers will attribute this to “sassiness” (Williams and Dempsey 233). In fact, one woman said “there’s a certain amount of sassiness, if you will, that is oddly enough even expected,” (Williams and Dempsey 233). Because blackness is marginalized in the workplace, employers do not have problems with women of color being aggressive (Williams and Dempsey ch 11). However, this stereotype still unfairly categorizes women of color solely based on their race.

Additionally, Black women are often given office “housework” tasks to make companies appear diverse. As tokens of diversity, people of color are forced to serve on committees and do other work with the public image of the company (Williams and Dempsey ch 11). Non-white races often experience an amplified bias in the workplace because of their race.

Gender, parenthood status, class, and race all influence the treatment of an employee in the workplace. Women often face obstacles in the workplace surrounding proving their competence and walking the line between too masculine and too feminine. Because of gender essentialism, women are expected to be soft-spoken and modest. On top of this constraint, mothers are given an even larger parenthood penalty. Employers often assume that mothers are less committed and devoted because of their motherhood status. The tension between devotion to work and devotion to family splits workingwomen between their two commitments. Class brings new issues into the mix. When a family is struggling to be self-sufficient, the division of labor in the household can bring tension. This tension can create marital problems and even lead to domestic abuse. Finally, people of color experience amplified hardship in obtaining high-level positions. Additionally, people of color often hold themselves to incredible expectations to avoid racial stereotypes, and unfortunately, this can lead to overworking oneself and failing. Many of these problems stem from the cultural structure of gender essentialism, the belief that male and female persons are inherently different. Additionally, social structures like sex segregation in the workplace and the division of labor in the family can limit certain persons despite their own individual abilities.

Even though an employee’s performance should be objectively evaluated, that simply is not the case. Many meritocratic institutions truly are not meritocracies; instead favoring a certain gender, parenthood status, class, or race over others. This favor unfairly limits the life chances of women, mothers, low-class workers, and people of color.