

Research Article

Constructed Criteria

Redefining Merit to Justify Discrimination

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ABSTRACT—*This article presents an account of job discrimination according to which people redefine merit in a manner congenial to the idiosyncratic credentials of individual applicants from desired groups. In three studies, participants assigned male and female applicants to gender-stereotypical jobs. However, they did not view male and female applicants as having different strengths and weaknesses. Instead, they redefined the criteria for success at the job as requiring the specific credentials that a candidate of the desired gender happened to have. Commitment to hiring criteria prior to disclosure of the applicant's gender eliminated discrimination, suggesting that bias in the construction of hiring criteria plays a causal role in discrimination.*

For traditionally male jobs, such as manager or corporate leader, women are less likely to be hired than men. They are also paid less, given less authority, and promoted less often (Biernat & Kobrynowicz, 1997; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Glick, Zion, & Nelson, 1988; Rudman & Glick, 1999). Conversely, male applicants are discriminated against for jobs that are considered feminine (Glick et al., 1988; Kalin & Hodgins, 1984).

Discrimination arises, in part, from ambiguity in the qualifications of job applicants. When an applicant's credentials are ambiguous, stereotypes are used to "fill in the blanks" (Darley & Gross, 1983). For example, when little is known about a woman applying for a job as factory manager, she may be viewed as lacking the masculine qualities, such as assertiveness, needed for success. Conversely, a man applying to be a nurse may be viewed as lacking the nurturing qualities that the job demands. However, although ambiguity in the target person's credentials encourages discrimination, it is not necessary. For example, when Glick et al. (1988) provided some participants with unambiguous information about the qualifications of male and

female job applicants, stereotyping in terms of personality assessments was eliminated. However, participants continued to discriminate against female applicants for traditionally male jobs (e.g., manager) and against male applicants for traditionally female jobs (e.g., secretary).

We argue that discrimination can persist when ambiguity exists not in the target of judgment but in the appropriate criteria of judgment. Even without ambiguity in applicants' credentials, the criteria used to assess merit can be defined flexibly in a manner congenial to the idiosyncratic strengths of applicants who belong to desired groups (see also Hodson, Dovidio, & Gaertner, 2002; Norton, Vandello, & Darley, 2004; Steele & Green, 1976). For example, decision makers may view the credentials of a specific male applicant as essential to job success and view his areas of weakness as nonessential. Alternatively, they may downplay the importance of a female applicant's areas of expertise and inflate the importance of her areas of weakness. Three phenomena are relevant to this prediction. First, people define merit self-servingly, asserting criteria of excellence that put their own idiosyncratic credentials in a positive light (Dunning, Leuenberger, & Sherman, 1995; see also Dunning & Cohen, 1992; Kunda, 1987). Second, racially prejudiced individuals emphasize those indices of academic merit that happen to favor an individual White college applicant over an individual Black applicant (Hodson et al., 2002). Third, in concurrent research by Norton et al. (2004), evaluators were found to justify prejudicial hiring and admissions decisions by appealing to different performance criteria. In the present research, we examined whether people shift their very definition of merit to advantage certain groups, and whether this process plays a causal role in gender discrimination.

Another novel aspect of the present research is that we assessed how much people believe that their hiring decisions are objective and free of bias. Constructing criteria in a biased manner may allow decision makers to feel objective and fair despite being discriminatory. Although gender stereotypes encourage discrimination, egalitarian norms oblige people to judge others on the basis of their merit rather than their group memberships. By defining merit in a manner tailored to the

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idiosyncratic strengths of an applicant from the desired group, however, decision makers can justify a discriminatory decision by appealing to ostensibly “objective” criteria.

EXPERIMENT 1

In this experiment, participants evaluated either a male or a female candidate for the traditionally male job of police chief. The applicant’s areas of strength and weakness (i.e., his or her credentials) were also manipulated. We hypothesized that evaluators would (a) define criteria of merit (i.e., change the credentials they viewed as important to the job) in a manner that favored the male applicant but not the female one and (b) provide male applicants with more favorable hiring evaluations than female applicants. We also assessed the relationship between gender bias and measures of self-perceived objectivity and sexism.

Method

Participants and Design

Seventy-three undergraduates (31 male, 41 female, 1 unspecified) participated. The study featured a 2 (participant’s gender) \times 2 (applicant’s gender) \times 2 (applicant’s credentials: streetwise vs. educated) between-subjects design.

Materials and Procedure

A written description presented the applicant as either male (“Michael”) or female (“Michelle”) and as either *streetwise* or *formally educated*. (All the experiments we report here featured two important but distinct clusters of credentials associated with the job, and participants’ ratings of the applicants confirmed the success of the credentials manipulation.) The streetwise applicant was tough, had worked in rough neighborhoods, and got along with fellow officers. This applicant was also poorly educated and lacked administrative skills. In contrast, the educated applicant was well schooled and experienced in administration. However, he or she had little street experience and got along poorly with fellow officers. These profiles evoked the general images of the streetwise and educated types. The streetwise applicant was a risk taker, in physical shape, and lived alone, whereas the educated applicant was politically connected, communicated well with the media, and had a spouse and child.

Participants rated the strength of the applicant for a series of streetwise characteristics (e.g., *tough, risk taker, physically fit, gets along well with fellow officers*) and a series of educated characteristics (e.g., *well educated, has administrative skills, has political connections, able to communicate with media, family oriented*). The rating scales ranged from 1 (*extremely weak*) to 11 (*extremely strong*).

Next, participants indicated their hiring criteria by rating the importance of each of the characteristics to success as a police

chief (1 = *makes success as a police chief much less likely*, 11 = *essential to success as a police chief*).

Participants also evaluated whether the applicant should be hired. They evaluated whether the applicant “would be successful as a police chief” (1 = *not successful at all*, 9 = *extremely successful*), was “a good fit” for the job (1 = *an extremely bad fit*, 9 = *an extremely good fit*), and “should be hired” (1 = *should definitely not be hired*, 9 = *should definitely be hired*). Two additional items assessed self-perceived objectivity (“My judgments in this study were based on a logical analysis of the facts,” “My decision-making in this study was rational and objective”), and eight items were drawn from the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (Glick & Fiske, 1996) to assess hostile and benevolent sexism (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*).

Results

Stereotyping of Applicants?

Ratings for the streetwise and educated characteristics formed reliable indices ($\alpha = .96$ and $.98$, respectively). The applicant’s gender had no significant effect on the perceived strength of the applicant’s credentials. In both credential conditions, female applicants were rated as being as streetwise ($M = 6.53$) and as educated ($M = 5.90$) as male applicants ($M_s = 6.57$ and 6.14 , respectively), $F_s < 1$, $d_s = 0.22$ and 0.15 , respectively.

Hiring Criteria

The perceived importance of streetwise and educated characteristics formed reliable indices ($\alpha = .81$ and $.87$, respectively). Although no significant interaction emerged for the streetwise index, $F < 1$, $d = 0.14$, a highly significant Applicant’s Gender \times Applicant’s Credentials interaction emerged for the educated index, $F(1, 65) = 8.52$, $p = .005$, $d = 0.72$. As displayed in Figure 1, educated characteristics were rated as more important when the male applicant possessed them ($M = 8.27$) than when he did not ($M = 7.07$), $t(31) = 2.95$, $p = .006$, $d = 1.02$. By contrast, no such favoritism toward the female applicant was evident. If anything, educated characteristics were viewed as less important when the female applicant possessed them ($M = 7.51$) than when she did not ($M = 8.01$), $t(34) = 1.21$, $p = .24$, $d = 0.41$. Even stereotypically feminine traits (such as being family oriented and having children) were defined as more important when the male possessed them ($M = 6.21$) than when he did not ($M = 5.08$), $t(33) = 2.00$, $p = .05$, $d = 0.86$; there was no corresponding effect for the female applicant ($M_s = 5.37$ and 5.58 , respectively), $t < 1$, $d = 0.12$.

Both male and female participants tended to construct criteria favorable to the male applicant, and, as a result, the three-way Participant’s Gender \times Applicant’s Gender \times Applicant’s Credentials interaction was not significant, $F(1, 60) = 1.08$, $p = .30$, $d = 0.27$. However, the predicted Applicant’s Gender \times Applicant’s Credentials interaction reached significance only

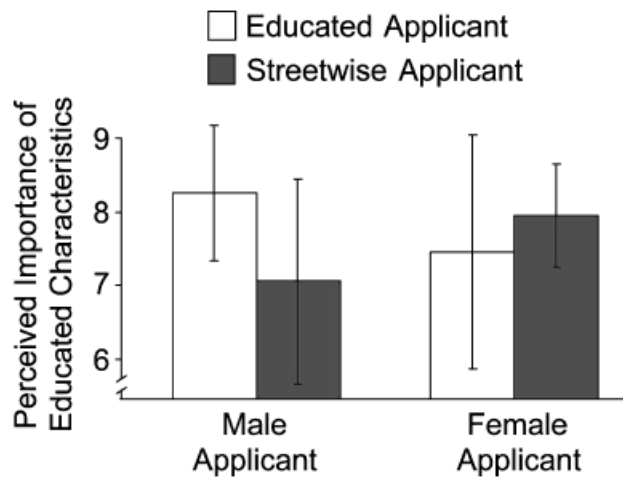


Fig. 1. Results from Experiment 1: perceived importance of “educated” characteristics for the job of police chief, as a function of the applicant’s gender and characteristics. Higher numbers indicate greater perceived importance of educated characteristics. Error bars represent ± 1 standard deviation.

among male participants, $F(1, 26) = 6.99, p = .014, d = 1.04$, not female participants, $F < 2, p = .19, d = 0.46$.

Hiring Discrimination

The three hiring-evaluation items formed a reliable index ($\alpha = .72$). In both credential conditions, the female applicant ($M = 5.01$) was evaluated less positively than the male applicant ($M = 5.71$), $F(1, 67) = 4.27, p = .043, d = 0.43$. However, an interaction between applicant’s gender and participant’s gender emerged, $F(1, 67) = 6.92, p = .011, d = 0.64$. Male participants favored the male applicant ($M = 6.16$) over the female applicant ($M = 4.33$), $t(29) = 3.22, p = .003, d = 1.20$. In contrast, female participants gave similar evaluations to the male and female applicants ($M_s = 5.22$ and 5.43 , respectively), $t < 1, d = 0.13$.

Predicting Individual Differences in Gender Bias From Self-Perceived Objectivity and Sexism

To assess how much each participant constructed hiring criteria congenial to the applicant, we calculated, for each participant, a within-subjects correlation between the applicant’s perceived strength for each characteristic and the perceived importance of that characteristic. Higher values signify more pro-applicant bias in the criteria. We transformed the correlations into z scores for all analyses (but report all mean scores as correlation coefficients). We used regression to assess how much participants low versus high in self-perceived objectivity displayed gender bias along this index. Because of the small sample, the regression included only the focal predictors—applicant’s gender (female = -1 , male = $+1$), self-perceived objectivity ($\alpha = .85$), and the interaction between them. (Self-perceived objectivity was first centered on 0 and was also found to be unrelated to participants’ gender, $t < 1$.)

There was a marginal effect of applicant’s gender, $\beta(69) = .19, p = .098$. However, it was qualified by an interaction with self-perceived objectivity, $\beta(69) = .23, p = .048$. As displayed in Figure 2, participants low in self-perceived objectivity displayed no favoritism on the basis of the applicant’s gender, $\beta(69) = -.04, p = .79$. By contrast, participants high in self-perceived objectivity constructed criteria more favorable to the male applicant than the female applicant, $\beta(69) = .43, p = .011$.

Analyses of hiring evaluations yielded the same marginal effect of applicant’s gender, $\beta(68) = .20, p = .079$, and significant interaction with self-perceived objectivity, $\beta(68) = .32, p = .006$. Participants low in self-perceived objectivity did not discriminate, $\beta(68) = -.14, p = .41$, but participants high in self-perceived objectivity did, $\beta(68) = .53, p = .001$.

Although self-perceived objectivity predicted gender bias, sexism predicted neither biased hiring criteria nor biased hiring evaluations, $p_s > .15$.

Discussion

For the traditionally male job of police chief, evaluators defined merit in a manner that favored male over female applicants. When considering an educated, media-savvy family man, participants inflated the importance of those qualities to success at the job. But when considering a male applicant who lacked these qualities, they devalued them. No such favoritism was extended to the female applicant. Male participants tended to exhibit this bias more than female participants. Men also gave more positive hiring evaluations to the male applicant than to an otherwise identical female applicant, whereas women gave male and female applicants equivalent hiring evaluations. These latter findings are consistent with research showing that men

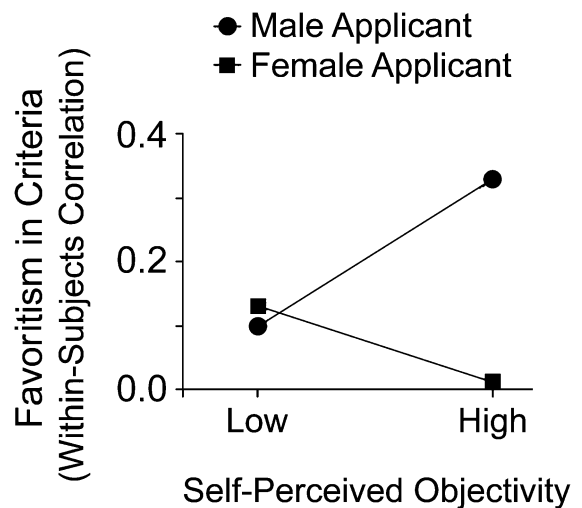


Fig. 2. Results from Experiment 1: the interaction of applicant’s gender and self-perceived objectivity in predicting biased criteria. Low self-perceived objectivity is defined as one standard deviation below the mean; high self-perceived objectivity is defined as one standard deviation above the mean. Higher numbers indicate greater favoritism toward the applicant.

view leadership roles as more masculine than do women and are less comfortable with female leaders (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

Remarkably, perceiving one's judgments as objective and free of bias predicted greater gender bias. Participants were, apparently, under an illusion of objectivity (Armor, 1998; Proinin, Linn, & Ross, 2002; Pyszczynski & Greenberg, 1987)—discriminating against women while convinced that their judgments were objective. This result is consistent with the hypothesis that constructed criteria of merit enable evaluators both to discriminate and to feel objective while doing so. Indeed, by defining merit in a manner tailored to the idiosyncratic strengths of an applicant of the desired gender, evaluators who practice gender discrimination may feel especially convinced that their selected candidate is the obvious and objective choice.

EXPERIMENT 2

In Experiment 2, we examined whether hiring criteria are also constructed to exclude men from traditionally female jobs. To avoid confounding the status of the job with its stereotypicality, we asked participants to evaluate male and female candidates for the job of women's studies professor, a position with status comparable to that of police chief. Questions of interest were (a) whether evaluators would discriminate against a male applicant, (b) whether evaluators would construct criteria in a manner congenial to the female rather than the male applicant, and (c) whether male and female evaluators would differ in their degree of gender bias.

Method

Participants and Design

One hundred twelve undergraduates (49 male, 63 female) participated. The study featured a 2 (participant's gender) \times 2 (applicant's gender) \times 2 (applicant's credentials: activist vs. academic) between-subjects design.

Materials and Procedure

A written description presented the applicant as either male or female (the names "Tom" and "Patricia" were used; Kasof, 1993) and as either a pure *academic* or an *activist*. The academic applicant had attended Columbia University, published many scholarly articles, and presented papers at national conferences, but had done little for women's causes in his or her personal life. By contrast, the activist applicant had a record of public advocacy and volunteerism on behalf of women's causes, but had attended a lesser-known school and had few academic publications.

Participants evaluated the applicant's academic characteristics (e.g., *graduated from a prestigious school, publishes in leading academic journals, presents research at national conferences*) and activist characteristics (e.g., *volunteers on behalf of women's causes, writes op-ed pieces, known for activism on women's*

issues). They also rated the importance of each characteristic to success as a women's studies professor, and then indicated whether the applicant should be hired. The numerical scales were identical to those used in Experiment 1. (Because of time constraints, measures of self-perceived objectivity and sexism were excluded both in this study and in Experiment 3.)

Results

Stereotyping of Applicants?

Ratings of the applicant's academic and activist characteristics formed reliable indices ($\alpha = .95$ and $.96$, respectively). No significant stereotyping was observed. In both credential conditions, the female and male applicants were rated similarly for academic characteristics ($M_s = 5.77$ and 5.63), $F < 1$, $d = 0.05$, and activist characteristics ($M_s = 4.84$ and 4.54 , respectively), $F(1, 103) = 2.31$, $p = .13$, $d = 0.09$.

Hiring Criteria

The perceived importance of academic and activist characteristics formed reliable indices ($\alpha = .72$ and $.74$, respectively). Although no effects emerged for the academic index, $F_s < 1$, a significant Participant's Gender \times Applicant's Gender \times Applicant's Credentials interaction emerged for the activist index, $F(1, 100) = 5.72$, $p = .019$, $d = 0.48$. Male participants did not define merit in a significantly biased manner; they did not rate the importance of activist credentials as a function of whether the male or female applicant possessed them, $F(1, 42) = 1.99$, $p = .17$, $d = 0.44$. By contrast, female participants did, $F(1, 57) = 3.81$, $p < .056$, $d = 0.52$. They rated activist characteristics as more important when the female applicant possessed them ($M = 7.58$) than when she did not ($M = 6.34$), $F(1, 26) = 15.74$, $p = .001$, $d = 1.50$. They showed no such favoritism toward the male applicant ($M_s = 7.48$ and 7.12 , respectively), $F(1, 30) = 1.22$, $p = .28$, $d = 0.45$.

Hiring Discrimination

As expected, the male applicant ($M = 5.42$) was evaluated less positively than the female applicant ($M = 6.07$), $F(1, 107) = 6.03$, $p = .016$, $d = 0.47$. Although the interaction between participant's gender and applicant's gender was not significant, $F < 1$, $d = 0.01$, the preference for the female over the male applicant was significant only for women, $F(1, 60) = 4.88$, $p = .031$, $d = 0.57$, not for men, $F < 1.7$, $p > .20$, $d = 0.34$.

Discussion

In summary, Experiments 1 and 2 show that people assign men and women to gender-stereotypical jobs rather than exclude women from all occupations. A reluctance to discriminate against members of one's own gender group, however, tempers this bias. In Experiment 1, men constructed biased criteria and discriminated against female applicants for the job of police

chief, but women generally did not. In Experiment 2, women constructed biased criteria and discriminated against male applicants for the job of women's studies professor, but men generally did not. Because not every higher-order interaction involving participants' gender achieved statistical significance, more research is needed before drawing strong conclusions on this latter point. The results clearly demonstrate, however, that criteria are constructed to exclude not only women, but also men.

EXPERIMENT 3

Defining merit in a biased manner provides a defensible justification for discrimination—"objective" theories about the credentials needed for success. When decision makers cannot find a justification for a desired conclusion, however, they may reach a less biased judgment (Kunda, 1990). If so, having evaluators commit to hiring criteria before learning the applicant's gender may reduce discrimination. Having committed to unambiguous criteria, they will be unable to define merit to the benefit of specific job candidates. To test this prediction, we had some participants rate the importance of streetwise and educated characteristics to the job of police chief before reading the description of the applicant and learning his or her gender. We expected that these participants would discriminate less than participants who rated the importance of the characteristics after reading about the applicant. We thus used an experimental manipulation to test a causal role of constructed criteria in discrimination (Taylor & Fiske, 1981).

Method

Participants and Design

One hundred seventeen visitors to a local beach and town fair volunteered to participate (63 male, 51 female, 3 unspecified). The study featured a 2 (participant's gender) \times 2 (applicant's gender) \times 2 (prior commitment to criteria vs. no prior commitment) between-subjects design.

Materials and Procedure

The experimental materials and procedure were generally the same as in Experiment 1, with a few changes. Half the participants—those in the commitment condition—completed their importance ratings prior to reading the description of the applicant and learning his or her gender. To simplify the design, we presented all participants with an uneducated (i.e., streetwise) applicant. The names "Brian" and "Karen" were used to signify the applicant's gender (Kasof, 1993).

Results and Discussion

Stereotyping of Applicants?

No significant stereotyping was observed. The female and male applicants were rated as similarly streetwise ($M_s = 8.99$ and

8.95, respectively) and educated ($M_s = 3.79$ and 3.48, respectively), $F_s < 1$, $d_s = 0.03$ and 0.16, respectively.

Hiring Criteria

Analysis of the importance ratings was restricted to participants in the no-commitment condition, as participants in the commitment condition were unaware of the applicant's gender when they made these ratings and therefore could not alter their hiring criteria in light of this information. As in Experiment 1, analyses identified no significant effect for the streetwise index ($M_s = 8.02$ for the male applicant and 7.87 for the female applicant), $t < 1$, $d = 0.11$, but a significant effect for the educated index, $t(57) = 2.11$, $p = .04$, $d = 0.55$. Educated characteristics were rated as less important when the applicant (who, as noted, was uneducated) was male ($M = 8.45$) rather than female ($M = 9.17$). Although no significant Participant's Gender \times Applicant's Gender interaction emerged, $F < 1$, $d = 0.20$, as in Experiment 1 it was men, $t(30) = 1.94$, $p = .06$, $d = 0.71$, not women, $t < 1$, $d = 0.29$, who constructed criteria congenial to the male applicant.

Hiring Discrimination

Evidence of the causal role of constructed criteria in gender discrimination was provided by the theoretically predicted three-way interaction involving participant's gender, applicant's gender, and commitment condition, $F(1, 107) = 4.29$, $p = .04$, $d = 0.40$. In the no-commitment condition, there was an interaction between participant's and applicant's gender, $F(1, 54) = 5.96$, $p = .018$, $d = 0.66$. Men favored the male applicant ($M = 6.06$) over the female applicant ($M = 4.53$), $t(30) = 2.81$, $p = .009$, $d = 1.00$. Women showed no significant hiring discrimination ($M_s = 5.35$ and 5.85, respectively), $t < 1$, $d = 0.31$.

By contrast, in the commitment condition, the interaction between participant's and applicant's gender was reduced to nonsignificance, $F < 1$, $d = 0.16$. Men gave male and female applicants similar hiring evaluations ($M_s = 5.07$ and 5.31, respectively), as did women ($M_s = 5.77$ and 5.50, respectively), $t_s < 1$, $d_s = 0.14$ and 0.16, respectively. As displayed in Figure 3, the commitment intervention eliminated gender discrimination.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Men were favored for the traditionally male job of police chief, and women were favored for the traditionally female job of women's studies professor. In neither case, however, did decision makers stereotype the applicants (Glick et al., 1988). Instead, they defined their notion of "what it takes" to do the job well in a manner tailored to the idiosyncratic credentials of the person they wanted to hire (see also Hodson et al., 2002; Norton et al., 2004; Steele & Green, 1976).

This effect differs from other biases in hiring standards. For example, as Biernat and Kobrynowicz (1997) found, female

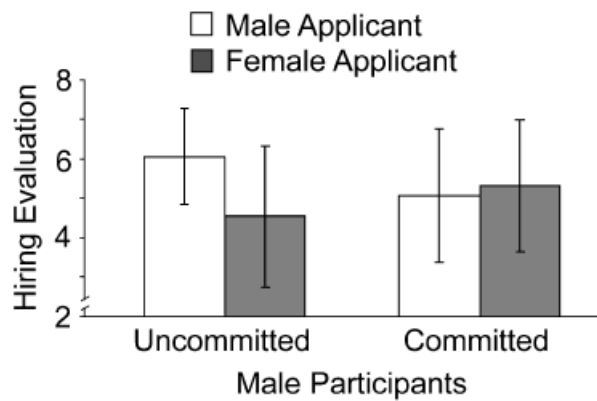


Fig. 3. Results from Experiment 3: male participants' hiring evaluations as a function of applicant's gender and commitment condition. Higher numbers indicate more positive evaluations of the applicant. Error bars represent ± 1 standard deviation.

applicants are sometimes judged relative to other women (e.g., "she's competent, for a woman"). Although this may make it easier for women to be perceived as meeting a minimum standard, it may also make it difficult for them to prove that they are highly qualified (Biernat & Kobrynowicz, 1997). Additionally, as Eagly and Karau (2002) argued, women may be viewed as lacking the masculine qualities (e.g., competitiveness, assertiveness) needed for high-status jobs (see also Heilman, 2001). However, in the present studies, evaluators did not simply define merit in a manner that advantaged men in general or women in general. On the contrary, they tailored their criteria to favor whatever qualities the individual applicant of the desired gender happened to have—regardless of whether those characteristics were stereotypically masculine or feminine. Indeed, in Experiment 1, even stereotypically feminine qualities (such as being family oriented) were redefined as more important when the male applicant possessed them than when he did not. Our results highlight a novel and pernicious source of discrimination: definitions of merit designed to fit the idiosyncratic qualifications of applicants who belong to favored groups.

Experiment 3 suggests that bias in the construction of hiring criteria plays a causal, enabling role in discrimination. Men who had not committed to hiring criteria prior to disclosure of the applicant's gender gave more favorable evaluations to a male applicant for police chief than to a female applicant. By contrast, men who had committed to criteria prior to disclosure of the applicant's gender gave equivalent evaluations to the male and female applicants. Our research thus demonstrates the efficacy of a method to reduce job discrimination: the establishment of standards of merit prior to the review of candidates. Our intervention echoes the finding that structured interviews, in which interviewees are asked predetermined questions in a fixed order, decrease discrimination (Bragger, Kutcher, Morgan, & Firth, 2002). Given the small number of scientifically established interventions to reduce discrimination, such results are encouraging.

Bias in the construction of job criteria allows evaluators both to discriminate and to maintain a personal illusion of objectivity. Although gender stereotypes encourage discrimination, egalitarian norms compel making hiring decisions on the basis of applicants' merit rather than their group membership. These conflicting pressures can be reconciled by defining and redefining merit in a manner that justifies discrimination. Indeed, in Experiment 1, participants who exhibited the most pro-male bias in their hiring criteria also proved the most confident in the objectivity of their decision. They, perhaps, felt that they had chosen the right man for the job, when in fact they had chosen the right job criteria for the man. Our research thus dovetails with work on aversive racism (Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986; Hodson et al., 2002) in suggesting that prejudice often expresses itself in rationalizable ways that allow people to maintain an image of themselves as objective and principled. Meritocratic principles are violated, however, when merit is flexibly defined to the advantage of certain groups.

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