Hiring committees that don't believe in gender bias promote fewer women

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Is gender bias in hiring really a thing? Opinions vary, but a new study by a UBC psychologist and researchers in France reveals that hiring committees who denied it's a problem were less likely to promote women.

"Our evidence suggests that when people recognize women might face barriers, they are more able to put aside their own biases," said Toni Schmader, a UBC psychology professor and Canada Research Chair in social psychology. "We don't see any favourability for or against male or female candidates among those committees who believe they need to be vigilant to the possibility that biases could be creeping in to their decision-making."

The study was unique in that findings were based on actual decisions made by 40 hiring committees in France, charged with filling elite research positions with the National Committee for Scientific Research (CNRS) for two consecutive years. Past research in this area has relied mostly on hypothetical scenarios, such as presenting a large sample of participants with identical resumés bearing either male or female names and asking who they would hire. By contrast, the decisions made during this study had real impact on scientists' careers.

With cooperation from the CNRS, the researchers were able to first measure how strongly hiring committee members associated men with science. They did this using an "implicit association test" that flashes words on a computer screen and measures how quickly participants are able to assign those words to a particular category. People who make a strong association between men and science have to think a bit longer, and react more slowly, when challenged to pair female-related words

with science concepts.

Both men and women on the hiring committees tended to show the science = male association, which is difficult to hide in such a test.

"There's research suggesting that you can document a 'think science, think male' implicit association showing up with kids as early as elementary school," Schmader said. "We learn associations from what we see in our environment. If we don't see a lot of women who are role models in science, then we learn to associate science more with men than women."

These implicit associations are distinct from people's explicit beliefs about women in science. In a separate survey that asked panellists directly whether women in science careers are impacted by such things as discrimination and family constraints, some hiring committees minimized those issues. Others acknowledged them.

When the researchers compared these implicit and explicit beliefs with the actual hiring outcomes, they learned that committees attuned to the barriers women face were more likely to overcome their implicit science/male associations when selecting candidates for the job. Among committees that believed "science isn't sexist," those which implicitly associated science more with men promoted fewer women. The difference was especially pronounced in Year 2 of the study, when committee members would have been less conscious of the fact that their selections were being studied.

The findings show that awareness and acknowledgement of the barriers women face might be key to making sure implicit biases don't affect hiring decisions. They also point to the importance of educating hiring committees about gender bias and how to guard against it, Schmader said.

The study was published today in *Nature Human Behaviour*.

More information: Committees with implicit biases promote fewer women when they do not believe gender bias exists, *Nature Human Behaviour* (2019). DOI: 10.1038/s41562-019-0686-3 , nature.com/articles/s41562-019-0686-3

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