Should That Count? Fairness Judgments of Resource Allocations Accounting for Structural Sexism

Alyssa Tedder-King
*University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, alyssa_tedder-king@kenan-flagler.unc.edu*

Elad Sherf
*University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Elad_Sherf@kenan-flagler.unc.edu*

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At work, equitable allocations, that is, those that align outcomes (e.g., rewards) with inputs or contributions (e.g., effort, performance), are judged as fairest. Consequently, managers often rely on objective performance indicators (e.g., customer satisfaction scores) to align recipients’ outcomes with contributions. However, due to structural inequities, many seemingly objective indicators are biased. In particular, based solely on their gender, women often rank lower on performance indicators, even for otherwise identical levels of performance.

To account for such inequities, a manager may allocate more resources to a woman with lower performance indicators, arguing that the indicator is misrepresenting her true contributions. Would such a decision be judged as fair by observers? On the one hand, as adjusting allocations to account for structural sexism aligns outcomes with true contributions, such adjustments should be seen as equitable and thus judged as fairer. On the other hand, such adjustments are based on statistical abstractions, often only observable in the aggregate, and are out of the control of the recipients of a specific allocation. Thus, such adjustments may be seen as irrelevant in judges’ private equity calculations.

Current formulations based on equity theory do not provide a clear prediction. We propose that fairness judgments of decisions to account (vs. not) for structural sexism in resource allocations are based on judgers’ work success beliefs, that is, implicit theories about the generalized causes of success (cf. Krijnen et al., 2020). We theorize that people vary on three such beliefs: (a) Rewarding, viewing success as caused by internal, controllable, and predictable individual factors, such as hard work, ability, and effort; (b) Random, viewing success as caused by external chance factors, such as luck or accidents; and (c) Rigged, viewing success as caused by external predictable factors, such as discrimination and favoritism. We posit that those who endorse Rewarding beliefs judge managers accounting for structural sexism as less fair than those who do not whereas those who endorse Rigged beliefs judge managers accounting for structural sexism as fairer than those who do not.

We find support for our arguments in a series of pre-registered lab experiments. In Study 1 ($N = 180$), and Study 2 ($N = 633$), participants took on the role of a senior manager (S1: president of a student organization; S2: Senior HR Director of a financial services company) and evaluated an award decision (S1: student scholarships; S2: employee bonus) made by a male junior manager allocating $24,000 among two candidates, one male and one female. Participants were informed that their organization issued a report establishing that over the last 10 years females (vs. males) obtained consistently lower scores on a specific criterion (S1: SAT scores; S2: customer satisfaction ratings). Participants learned the two applicants’ scores on the relevant criteria. In both studies, the two candidates had identical scores on all criteria except the one in the report (S1: SAT scores; S2: customer satisfaction ratings). Participants heard one of three decisions from the junior manager: the allocation based on raw performance condition where the male was awarded more due to a higher score on the key metric, the allocation accounting for structural sexism condition, where the female was awarded more due to structural sexism on the key metric, or a control condition where the female was awarded more due to information learned outside of the review process. We measured people’s generalized beliefs about work success and found interactions between the condition and Rewarding and Rigged beliefs (see example results from Study 1b in Figure 1. We are in the process of conducting additional studies which we hope to present in the conference, including ones that more directly account for
self-interest, rely on within-person designs, and explore the effects of success beliefs on decision to account for structural biases against men.

As research on allies typically focuses on individual acts of encouragement and support (Brown & Ostrove, 2013; Sabat et al., 2014) or on actor-less HR policies and processes (Madsen et al., 2019), our work shifts the focus of allyship research from interpersonal support to active challenge of structural barriers. Moreover, organizational fairness scholarship can only meaningfully advance inclusive and bias-free organizations to the extent that distributive justice discussions are reformulated to acknowledge systemic biases and we take a step in this direction.
References


Figure 1

Interactive effect of rewarding or rigged beliefs and condition on fairness judgments

Note. * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001. Bars represent standard errors.