In response to: **The i-frame and the s-frame: How focusing on individual-level solutions has led behavioral public policy astray**

Related commentaries (33) Author response

Behavioral and Brain Sciences

Article contents

Moving from i-frame to s-frame focus in equity, diversity, and inclusion research, practice, and policy

Published online by Cambridge University Press: **30 August 2023**

In response to: **The i-frame and the s-frame: How focusing on individual-level solutions has led behavioral public policy astray**
Related commentaries (33) Author response

Joyce C. He and Sonia K. Kang

Commentary Related commentaries Metrics

Abstract

Meaningful and long-lasting progress in equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) continue to elude academics, practitioners, and policymakers. Extending Chater & Loewenstein's arguments to the EDI space, we argue that, despite conventional focus on individual-level solutions (i-frame), increasing EDI also requires a systemic focus (s-frame). We thus call for the design, testing, and implementation of multipronged s-frame interventions.

Information

Type	Open Peer Commentary
Information	Behavioral and Brain Sciences, Volume 46, 2023, e159

DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/S0140525X23001115

Despite decades of research and intervention, social inequality remains stubbornly persistent and effective solutions continue to elude academics, practitioners, and policymakers. In the target article, Chater & Loewenstein (C&L) highlight the distinction between individual and systemic (i.e., i-frame and s-frame) approaches to behavioral change and challenge the emphasis and overreliance on i-frame interventions. We extend their arguments to organizational policies and initiatives designed to increase equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI), a theoretically and practically important domain of behavioral change. Using the frameworks described in the target article, we argue that, despite conventional focus on individual-level solutions (i-frame), behavioral policy and initiatives for increasing EDI are particularly well-suited to a systemic focus (s-frame).

A myriad of research and policy has attempted to mitigate inequality and improve EDI, but has focused almost exclusively on i-frame change – attempting to change discriminatory and exclusionary behavior by focusing on *individuals*. For example, the $8 billion/year diversity training industry claims to improve EDI outcomes by teaching individuals about their unconscious biases, with the hope that this will translate to behavioral change (Kochan et al., 2003; Newkirk, 2019). Similarly, workshops and trainings advocating for the "lean in" approach also target individuals, encouraging women and minorities to take personal responsibility for overcoming bias and advancing their careers (Sandberg, 2013).

Each of these approaches aim to “fix” individuals, either those who perpetuate bias and discrimination (e.g., via unconscious bias), or the women and minorities who suffer the consequences.

Although i-frame policies and practices are popular and lucrative, rigorous research demonstrates their limited effectiveness. For instance, although diversity training can improve attitudes toward EDI, there is very little empirical evidence of resulting behavioral change (Chang et al., 2019). Rather, seminal research points to negative repercussions including backlash and reactance (Kalev, Dobbin, & Kelly, 2006). Similarly, although the “lean in” approach aims to empower women to take control and overcome discrimination by diligently pursuing ambition and achievement, a wealth of theory and evidence documents backlash against women who behave in counter-stereotypical, assertive ways (He & Kang, 2021; Rudman & Glick, 2001; Rudman & Phelan, 2008).

These unintended consequences make sense against the backdrop of i-frame policy effectiveness described by C&L: i-frame interventions often generate null, mixed, or modest effects. For EDI, the limitations of i-frame interventions are compounded because the psychological biases that drive inequality and discrimination are often difficult to control with conscious effort, and because converting attitudes (intention) to behaviors (implementation) is extremely challenging (Gollwitzer, 1999).

Effectiveness aside, a more pernicious consequence of an i-frame focus in EDI is that it ultimately impedes progress by shifting responsibility away from organizations to make

systemic changes. For instance, exposure to “lean in” messages creates and reinforces the belief that women can and *should* take responsibility for overcoming bias and closing gender gaps, ultimately undermining support for system-level change (Kim, Fitzsimons, & Kay, 2018). Worse, this focus has spurred on entire industries dedicated to expanding and capitalizing on i-frame approaches, thus further entrenching the policies and systems that create and perpetuate these very problems.

The predominant i-frame focus in EDI research and practice seems especially misguided when one considers the wealth of scholarship illustrating that inequality is a *structural* problem arising from unequal access to opportunities, and seemingly “meritocratic” processes that advantage certain identities and marginalize others (Acker, 2006; Amis, Mair, & Munir, 2020; Cheryan & Markus, 2020; Kang & Kaplan, 2019). By focusing on i-frame solutions, the root of the problem remains buried; individuals are unjustly forced to figure out how to navigate a system that is stacked against them and, at times, designed in ways that underpin their failure. Inequality is not an individual-level issue, but rather a *systemic* problem that requires *systemic* solutions. Absent any other supporting systemic intervention, changing individual behaviors is unlikely to close inequality gaps; the systems in which individuals are nested must be fundamentally altered.

Our aim is not to eliminate i-frame solutions to EDI, but to echo C&L by asserting that i-frame solutions alone are unlikely to solve the problem. Rather, we underscore the need for a complementary focus on s-frame approaches. An emerging body of research has begun this shift by applying behavioral science tools such as framing and choice

architecture to change organizational policies, processes, and structures that create and perpetuate bias (s-frame). For instance, Rivera and Tilcsik (2016) find that changing evaluation ratings from 10-point to 6-point scales help to mitigate evaluation bias against women. High-performing women were less likely than their male counterparts to receive 10 out of 10 (a number associated with brilliance, which is associated with men), but just as likely as men to receive 6 out of 6 (a number that is not associated with brilliance). In our own work, we demonstrate how changing defaults can mitigate gender inequality in competition and opportunities for advancement. We found that although women are less likely than men to compete and apply for promotions under a traditional "opt-in" frame that requires self-nomination, using an opt-out choice frame (i.e., competing or being considered for promotion by default with the choice to opt-out) substantially attenuated and, at times, eliminated the gender gap (He, Kang, & Lacetera, 2021). Research and policies building on this body of work require organizations to re-examine their seemingly meritocratic and neutral policies, processes, and structures to determine whether and how their current systems advantage certain identities over others, and to experiment and re-design environments where bias and inequality are less able to hide.

An s-frame approach to behavioral science opens a new door of possibilities for behavioral change. Beyond the examples we provide here, other macro, structural perspectives must also be applied to design effective EDI interventions that foster more inclusive organizational outcomes and environments. Social inequality is a persistent, pressing issue for policymakers, scholars, and practitioners, the complexity of which calls

for the design of multipronged interventions that shift away from overreliance on i-frame factors toward an s-frame mindset.

Acknowledgments

We are grateful to the Institute for Gender and the Economy (GATE) and the Behavioral Economics in Action Research Centre at Rotman (BEAR) for the continued support of our work at the intersection of behavioral change and equity, diversity, and inclusion.

Financial support

This comment received no specific grant from any funding agency, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Competing interest

None.

References

Acker, J. (2006). Inequality regimes. Gender & Society, 20(4), 441–464. CrossRef Google Scholar Check for full text

Amis, J. M., Mair, J., & Munir, K. (2020). The organizational reproduction of inequality. The Academy of Management Annals, 14, 195–230. CrossRef Google Scholar Check for full text

Chang, E. H., Milkman, K. L., Gromet, D. M., Rebele, R. W., Massey, C., Duckworth, A. L., & Grant, A. M. (2019). The mixed effects of online diversity training. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America, 116(16), 7778–7783. CrossRef Google Scholar PubMed Check for full text

Cheryan, S., & Markus, H. R. (2020). Masculine defaults: Identifying and mitigating hidden cultural biases. Psychological Review, 127(6), 1022–1052. CrossRef Google Scholar PubMed Check for full text

Gollwitzer, P. M. (1999). Implementation intentions: Strong effects of simple plans. The American Psychologist, 54(7), 493–503. CrossRef Google Scholar Check for full text

He, J. C., & Kang, S. K. (2021). Covering in cover letters: Gender and self-presentation in job applications. Academy of Management Journal, 64(4), 1097–1126. CrossRef Google Scholar Check for full text

He, J. C., Kang, S. K., & Lacetera, N. (2021). Opt-out choice framing attenuates gender differences in the decision to compete in the laboratory and in the field. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America, 118(42), e2108337118. https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2108337118 Google Scholar PubMed Check for full text

Kalev, A., Dobbin, F., & Kelly, E. (2006). Best practices or best guesses? Assessing the efficacy of corporate affirmative action and diversity policies. American

Sociological Review, 71(4), 589–617. CrossRef Google Scholar Check for full text

Kang, S. K., & Kaplan, S. (2019). Working toward gender diversity and inclusion in medicine: Myths and solutions. In The lancet (Vol. 393(10171), pp. 579–586). Lancet. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(18)33138-6 Google Scholar Check for full text

Kim, J. Y., Fitzsimons, G. M., & Kay, A. C. (2018). Lean in messages increase attributions of women's responsibility for gender inequality. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 115(6), 974–1001. CrossRef Google Scholar PubMed Check for full text

Kochan, T., Bezrukova, K., Ely, R., Jackson, S., Joshi, A., Jehn, K., … Thomas, D. (2003). The effects of diversity on business performance: Report of the diversity research network. Human Resource Management, 42(1), 3–21. CrossRef Google Scholar Check for full text

Newkirk, P. (2019). Diversity has become a booming business. So where are the results? Time. October 10. https://time.com/5696943/diversity-business/ Google Scholar Check for full text

Rivera, L. A., & Tilcsik, A. (2016). Class advantage, commitment penalty: The gendered effect of social class signals in an elite labor market. American Sociological Review, 81(6), 1097–1131. CrossRef Google Scholar Check for full text

Rudman, L. A., & Glick, P. (2001). Prescriptive gender stereotypes and backlash toward agentic women. The Journal of Social Issues, 57(4), 743–762. CrossRef Google Scholar Check for full text

Rudman, L. A., & Phelan, J. E. (2008). Backlash effects for disconfirming gender stereotypes in organizations. Research in Organizational Behavior, 28, 61–79. CrossRef Google Scholar Check for full text

Sandberg, S. (2013). Lean in: Women, work, and the will to lead. Random House. Google Scholar Check for full text

Related content

Book

The Cambridge Handbook of Intercultural Training

The Cambridge Handbook of Intercultural Training

Published online: 18 September 2020

Chapter

The Laundered Workplace

Tristin K. Green

Discrimination Laundering

Published online: 27 January 2017

Article

The Role of Exploitation in Abuse under Article 82 EC

Pinar Akman

Cambridge Yearbook of European Legal Studies

Published online: 27 October 2017

Book

The Cambridge Handbook of Applied School Psychology

The Cambridge Handbook of Applied School Psychology

Published online: 18 September 2020

Article

The evolutionary psychology of men's coercive sexuality

Randy Thornhill and Nancy Wilmsen Thornhill

Behavioral and Brain Sciences

Published online: 19 May 2011

Article

Does rape equal sex plus violence?

Aurelio J. Figueredo

Behavioral and Brain Sciences

Published online: 19 May 2011

Article

Mating tactics are complex and involve females too

John Archer

Behavioral and Brain Sciences

Published online: 19 May 2011

Article

Psychological mechanisms versus behavior: Does the difference really make a difference?

Craig T. Palmer

Behavioral and Brain Sciences