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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

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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

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

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Joyce C. He iD and Sonia K. Kang

Metrics

Abstract

Commentary

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

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

	DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/S0140525X23001115	Check for updates
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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.

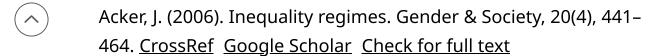
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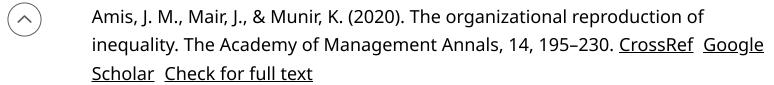
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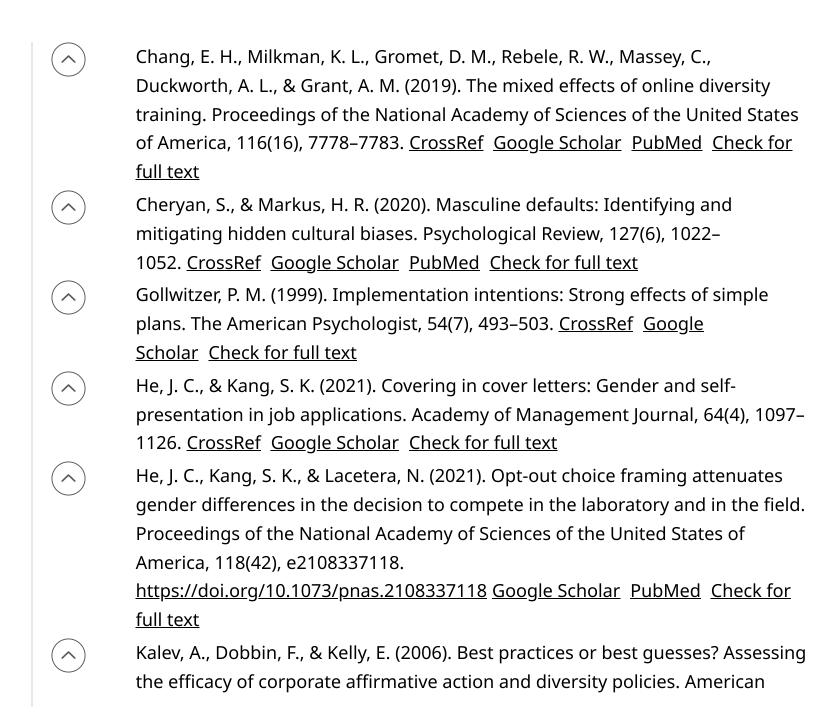
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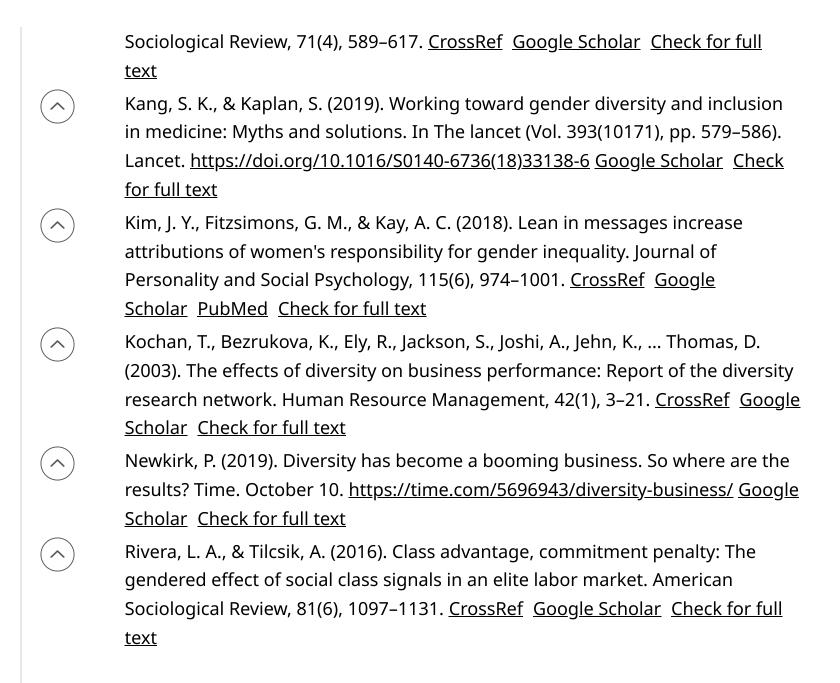
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