

## **Discussion of a Paper on the Effect of Diversity-Valuing Behavior on Evaluations**

Bill Menke, February 18, 2018

This blog is a reflection on a group discussion at Lamont organized by Mayaan Yehudai on the recently published study:

Hekman, D.R., S.K. Johnson, M.-D. Foo and W. Yang, Does Diversity-Valuing Behavior Result in Diminishes Performance Ratings for Non-White and female Leaders? *Academy of Management Journal* 60, 771–797, <https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2014.0538>, 2017.

**Synopsis of Paper:** The authors show that the results of two social-science experiments support their hypothesis that “ethnic minority or female leaders who engage in diversity-valuing behavior are penalized with worse performance ratings, whereas White or male leaders who engage in diversity-valuing behavior are not penalized for doing so”. They then argue that this effect contributes to women and minorities being underrepresented within institutional leaderships.

### **Discussion Questions**

*How did you feel about this paper?*

It’s a timely paper on an important subject.

Over the last few decades, a large number of studies have demonstrated that gender biases decision-making in a wide variety of contexts; this paper identifies another. That’s sad, but knowledge of a problem is the first step towards its solution.

I went through the paper fairly carefully. Overall, I think that the two underlying experiments are well-designed and that the conclusions are well-supported by the data. I did notice two weaknesses in Experiment 1: (A) The peer rating of a leader focuses on the degree to which he or she is perceived as *valuing* diversity and not on any actions that the leader had taken to *foster* diversity (which, besides being more objective, would be better connected to the notion that a leader’s actions are being penalized); and (B) The anti-correlation between a leader’s diversity-valuing rating and his or her competence rating only suggests, but does not prove, a causal connection between the two, especially since no independent assessment of the leader’s competence is available. This possibility is illustrated in the following scenario: Leader A is very socially-distant from all employees and Leader B is very sociable towards all employees. Leader A is judged not to value diversity because peers associate social distance with bigotry, but is judged to be an effective leader because they also associate social distance with being demanding. Leader B is judged to value diversity because he or she is seen socializing with women and minorities, but is also judged to be an ineffective leader because peers perceive socialization to foster leniency. Although perceived diversity-valuing is anti-correlated with perceived competence, the real point of comparison is sociability.

Experiment 2 is more contrived than 1, since the assessments are being made by consultants examining paper dossiers, in contrast to peer evaluating people with whom they actually have worked, but it does not share Experiment 1’s weaknesses.

*Do you feel like this reality exists in academia?*

Academia is part of society and is likely to suffer from the same general deficiencies that affect society as a whole. However, some academic practices are pretty idiosyncratic, and I would expect them to be affected by bias in ways that are somewhat different than, say, in business settings. Furthermore, I would guess that the impact on annual merit reviews might be different than promotional decisions, because of the different processes involved.

Academic promotions are very strongly influenced by outside letters of evaluation, and outsiders are unlikely to know much about the diversity-valuing behavior of the person being evaluated, since this behavior is mostly confined to within the candidate's department. The typical letter is mostly an analysis of the quality of the candidate's scientific publications. I have read literally hundreds of such letters and can recall of none that mention the candidate's service to their department even in general terms, let alone specifics such as diversity-valuing behavior. An external reviewer would have access to a candidate's CV, which might mention diversity-valuing behavior, and could be subtly influenced by it. A scholarly study that attempts to quantify such an effect is warranted.

Annual merit reviews and raise recommendations are made by people, such as the Department Chair, who have first-hand knowledge of the person and who are likely aware of the level of his or her diversity-valuing behavior. However, in academic settings, many of these behaviors occur within officially-sanctioned forums, such as admissions and search committees, participation in which is generally valued by a department. Some universities, including Columbia, sponsor 'diversity searches' that specifically target women and underrepresented minorities. A scholarly study that attempted to assess the women and under-represented minorities were penalized (or under-rewarded) for serving on diversity search committees is warranted.

*Do you feel like this reality exists at Lamont?*

I think that my diversity-valuing behavior (such as it is) has mildly helped, and certainly has not hurt, my career. I think that is also true of other White males in my department, many of whom have served on diversity searches and other searches that have hired women. My experiences are in accord with the article's findings that white men are not hurt by this kind of advocacy.

Several female professors at LDEO have been deeply involved with diversity-valuing activities, including Robin Bell (Advance Program at LDEO, AGU Code of Ethics) and Maya Tolstoy (Columbia Commission on the Status of Women). The fact that they these activities are "officially sanctioned" - Advance was an NSF grant, AGU is a major professional society, the Commission an arm of the Columbia Senate - probably reduced the possibility of penalization. My impression is that these activities have helped them professionally. Certainly many of the White male members of the Lamont community, including me, have voiced admiration for these efforts. Still, you should ask Robin and Maya their own opinions.

I note that within my own Department, Peter deMenocal, an under-represented minority faculty member who was instrumental in pulling off several searches that hired women, was promoted to a dean-level position.

*Am I privileged? What does that even mean?*

Sure, I'm privileged. I'm a White male who was raised in a suburb with superb public school system in era when women were mostly fulltime homemakers who molded and pushed-forward their sons. And I went to an elite college and an elite graduate school.

Nevertheless, I have had some experiences that give me some sense of solidarity with marginalized people. Whether because of my parents' humble working-class Brooklyn roots, or my own 1960-vintage counter-culture, I've always distained the expensive look favored by the New York elite, and consequently I'm occasionally mistaken for a janitor by the folks down on the Morningside Campus. And I've had quite a few academic people make derisive comments about my religion.

*What are the structures that exist that may be maintaining this situation?*

The most visible (and important) diversity-valuing behavior conducted in academia takes place in the context of faculty searches. These searches can be very tense for reasons that have little to do with diversity, per se, and everything to do about competition between members of the department on other arenas. Clashes that are about disciplinary balance and perceptions about just who benefits by bringing in somebody new can exasperate someone trying to promote diversity.

The very high stakes of a tenure review (and especially its being an up-or-out decision) discourages junior scientists from doing anything that might be construed as controversial including discouraging them from participating in diversity-valuing behaviors. Furthermore, a candidate who devotes too much time to diversity-valuing behaviors might garner the criticism that they are not focusing sufficiently on the scholarly productivity that is the "real" focus of the review. (While I've never seen candidates criticized for this reason, I have encountered cases where they are criticized for too much focus on public outreach, so I think it's a possibility).

*What sort of leadership is needed to prevent these kinds of problems?*

The department chairs should make special efforts to appoint female and under-represented minority faculty members to diversity-related committees (such a search committees), because diversity-valuing behaviors expressed in these settings are more likely to be favorably received than if made ad hoc.

Leaders should publicly recognize diversity-valuing behaviors, and especially those of women and minorities. Thus, for instance, when the hard work of a search committee leads to a female or under-represented minority candidate being hired, the department chair should explicitly say at a faculty meeting that the committee did a great job and publicly thank the committee members.

When merit raises are awarded for diversity-valuing behaviors, the reason should be explicitly acknowledged.

*What sort of things can be done on the institutional level?*

The institution must make clear that diversity-valuing behaviors will be rewarded. And, of course, it must make good on the promise.

The institution can give scholars access to information that would enable the scholarly studies referred to below (as it did for the Dutt et al. 2016 bias in letters of recommendation study).

*What sort of things can be done on the personal level?*

We should listen to each other's experiences, be respectful of each other's opinions and acknowledge each other's contributions.