Removing masculine defaults in the hiring process

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Women are underrepresented in many occupations globally (1). This underrepresentation prevents many women from accessing lucrative and high-status job opportunities (2). Furthermore, society is missing out on women's valuable contributions (e.g., ref. 3).

One reason for this continued underrepresentation is the existence of masculine organizational cultures in which masculinity is embedded in institutional practices and ideas (4). Though a great deal of research documents the form and existence of these masculine organizational cultures, much less work has examined how to successfully change them.

He and Kang (5) identify a concrete strategy to change masculine organizational cultures in the hiring process. Their intervention replaced stereotypically masculine language in job postings (e.g., "entrepreneurial spirit") with more gender-neutral language (e.g., "willingness to pursue new and creative ideas"). They aimed to "un-do gender" (6) by removing masculine defaults. Masculine defaults are a form of bias in which characteristics, traits, and behaviors associated with the male gender role are valued, rewarded, or viewed as standard (7). Stereotypically masculine language in job postings is a masculine default because it conveys that the organization rewards and values characteristics commonly associated with men.

Significant Strengths

He and Kang (5) empirically show that some men may be harmed by masculine defaults. Previous work on masculine defaults demonstrated negative effects of masculine defaults for many women (e.g., refs. 8 and 9). He and Kang (5) similarly find that women perceived an entry-level job at an investment company to be less appealing and reported feeling a lower sense of belonging in it when the job posting used more stereotypically masculine compared to when it used more gender-neutral language. However, He and Kang (5) additionally find that some men were also less likely to apply for the job when the posting used stereotypically masculine language. These findings are consistent with other work demonstrating that certain masculine defaults in organizations, such as inflexible work hours and family unfriendly policies, predict worse outcomes for some men as well as women (10).

He and Kang (5) look beyond categorical gender to demonstrate that applicants who had less stereotypically masculine qualities, regardless of their gender, were deterred by the stereotypically masculine job posting. In one study, after replacing the stereotypically masculine language with more gender-neutral language in the job postings, applications from women and men with less typically masculine names increased. In another study, women who identified more strongly with their gender rated the stereotypically masculine job posting as less appealing than the more gender-neutral job posting. This difference between job postings was not significant for the women who were more weakly identified with their gender. Some women may not be negatively affected or may even benefit from masculine defaults at times, though they may experience social and economic sanctions if they engage in stereotypically masculine behaviors (11). Majority-male organizations may more effectively reduce gender disparities and support employees if interventions consider gender on a spectrum rather than focusing solely on categorical gender.

Another significant strength of the He and Kang (5) article is that they partnered with a large corporation and tested whether altering live job postings increased applications. Gaucher et al. (9) showed the effect of altering hypothetical job postings in controlled laboratory experiments. Effects obtained in a controlled hypothetical setting—though important to establish causality—do not always replicate when conducted in less controlled and more complex settings. The findings from He and Kang (5) will hopefully be noticed by other organizations that may benefit from revising their stereotypically masculine job postings.

He and Kang (5) reduced gender disparities in application rates by using more gender-neutral language in job postings. Masculine defaults are a subtle and often unquestioned form of bias and thus can be difficult to identify and intervene upon (7). There are two documented strategies to address masculine defaults: dismantling them and balancing them by adding feminine defaults (7). He and Kang (5) implemented a form of the dismantling strategy by replacing the stereotypically masculine with more gender-neutral language, rather than with stereotypically feminine language (e.g., ref. 9). Masculine defaults need not be replaced by stereotypical femininity to attract a broader pool of applicants.

Future Directions

One important future direction is to further probe whether masculine defaults in the hiring process have different effects for distinct subgroups of women and men. Intersectionality recognizes how identities interact with each other within systems of power and oppression (12, 13). Studies using an intersectional lens have found that Black and Asian American women may at times have more leeway

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than White American women to engage in stereotypically masculine behaviors (e.g., refs. 14 and 15). Associations with masculinity and femininity also differ across cultures (e.g., ref. 16). Future work could investigate whether gender interacts with race to shape responses to job postings and whether gendered language in job postings and their effects differ across cultures.

> ## He and Kang (5) identify a concrete strategy to change masculine organizational cultures in the hiring process.

Another future direction is determining how to best address masculine defaults in hiring. What are the costs and benefits of dismantling masculine defaults for organizations and individuals? What is the best way to address masculine defaults when leaders call for more of them (e.g., Mark Zuckerberg's desire for more masculinity in organizations; (17))? When should organizations replace masculine language with more gender-neutral versus feminine language? When should cultural balancing (i.e., keeping masculine defaults but adding feminine defaults) be used instead of dismantling? Ideally, organizations could try various strategies and observe effects. If certain masculine defaults are too challenging to eliminate (e.g., attempts to remove them have failed), balancing masculine defaults by adding feminine defaults may be a preferred strategy.

Organizational leaders could also consider whether current masculine defaults in job postings are inadvertently hindering organizational goals. For example, an organization may value collaboration among its employees but foster the opposite by including requirements such as "independent" and "competitive" in job postings. Many stereotypically masculine qualities that are assumed to predict competence and good leadership (e.g., confidence, dominance) are less effective than more stereotypically feminine qualities (e.g., relational skills; (18, 19)). As a result, dismantling masculine defaults may help organizations better align with their values and goals and increase organizational effectiveness.

Future research can investigate how job postings relate to the broader organizational culture. Masculinity is embedded on many levels of organizations, from values to daily practices to employee beliefs (7). If masculine defaults in job postings are removed or balanced, but other aspects of the organizational culture continue to be highly masculine, some employees may perceive this as hypocritical and experience negative outcomes (20, 21). On the other hand, changing job postings may be a route to broader culture change. If revising job postings encourages employees who do not fit the masculine culture to join the organization, perhaps the new job postings can start a cycle of culture change.

Conclusion

Understanding the consequences of masculinity in organizations for all employees—not just women—represents an important step forward in our knowledge of how masculine defaults function and for whom they may be most problematic. Dismantling masculine defaults by replacing stereotypically masculine language with more gender-neutral language in job postings can bring in wider applicant pools of women and men. Results provide organizations with actionable information they can use to revise their own hiring processes to their benefit and the benefit of their potential future employees. Creating inclusive cultures will involve a continued focus on how masculinity in organizations functions and how it can be best addressed.

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