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COMMENTARY

Can harassment and discrimination training be less WEIRD?

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To enhance the effectiveness of sexual harassment and racial discrimination training, Hayes et al. (2020) suggest that research and practice in this area should adopt the best practices of training design, as well as incorporating the psychological principles of attitude and behavior change. We would like to add to the conversation by surfacing the WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) assumptions and discussing how they are relevant to sexual harassment and racial discrimination training via (a) overemphasizing limited perspectives, (b) biasing the attributions of harassment and discrimination, and (c) distracting the focus from inclusion to separation. We will also suggest directions for overcoming these limitations.

Overemphasis on the limited, WEIRD perspectives

Participants in psychological research tend to have Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) characteristics and do not represent the broad human population (Henrich et al., 2010). According to Henrich et al., some of the WEIRD characteristics lie in the fundamental cognitive processes, such as a more independent than interdependent self-concept, more analytic than holistic reasoning, and more harm/care-based than norm-based moral reasoning.

With regard to understanding diversity, individuals from a non-WEIRD background can hold a different view about what constitutes discrimination versus fairness, harassment versus respect, and how to properly handle discrimination and harassment. For example, individuals with an interdependent social orientation (Varnum et al., 2010) are more likely to value harmony with group members and support achievement of other members even though treatment of individuals is not completely equal.

The implications are twofold. First, using mostly WEIRD participants can restrict the generalizability of research on harassment and discrimination training, especially when considering that the victims of these negative acts are likely to be non-WEIRD individuals. Future research should purposefully recruit diverse, representative participants and directly examine potential psychological differences instead of treating non-WEIRD participants as a source of confound. Second, researchers should seek to validate the understanding of diversity and inclusion across different types of samples. Qualitative methods may be beneficial to help reconceptualize these important terms (i.e., fairness, inclusion, etc.) beyond the WEIRD world.

Biased attribution of harassment and discrimination

At the same time, researchers producing psychological research also often come from a WERID standpoint (Jones, 2010). Thus, they are more likely to seek universality, isolate individual variables

from contextual variables, and reason in a WEIRD way in research and practice. One important bias emerges from researchers' WEIRD reasoning is assuming individual employees' responsibility over discrimination and harassment, and believing we can intervene the problem at the individual level.

According to the focal article by Hayes et al. (2020), many existing training programs consist of improving individual trainees' cognitive and emotional skills or altering their attitudes and behavior. Although we recognize the importance of individual attitudes and behavior, contextual factors, such as organizational and societal cultures, can also heavily affect occurrences of discrimination and harassment. For instance, a study conducted in rural Australia found that the masculine culture of the industry can exacerbate sexual harassment (Saunders & Easteal, 2013). A culture that permits discrimination and harassment can make individual employees to conform, mitigating the positive effects of any training programs, and even cumulating cynicism toward these programs.

Moving forward, researchers and practitioners should look beyond individual-based interventions and seek ways to improve the organizational and societal culture as a whole. Training can still be a viable tool, but the objectives should be tied to cultural change. To achieve this goal, a top-down approach might be more effective where top leadership should be trained to foster an inclusive culture in the organization. Beyond training, other changes in practices (e.g., selection and placement, performance management, company rituals, etc.) should also be in place to enforce the intended change.

Distracted focus from inclusion to separation

WEIRD perspectives can also limit reasoning in a way that focuses on categories of people (e.g., majority, minority) and connects these social categories with individual disposition (Varnum et al., 2010). The social category–focused perception can lead to the belief that we can combat discrimination and harassment by identifying perpetrators, victims, and bystanders. Existing practices, such as perpetrator predation prevention and bystander intervention, are designed based on these ideas, which fail to recognize the fluidity of individual roles in the situation.

In contrast, Varnum et al. (2010) summarized that someone with an interdependent social orientation tends to de-emphasize categories of people and focus on holistic goals of the group. This mindset is more consistent with promoting inclusion, in which individuals are valued regardless of the social labels assigned to them. As discussed in the focal article, training that includes social resilience and empathy can be an effective example of enabling workers to overcome egocentrism and understanding positive behavior in a group. Employees should not be distracted by the unreasonable demand to be the police or judge in the workplace but can be trained to refocus on better working with others toward a common goal.

Conclusion

Starbucks (2018) claimed to ensure "everyone inside a Starbucks store feels safe and welcome." This intention might be better achieved if we move beyond the WEIRD assumptions by examining how the same terminologies (e.g., safe, welcome, etc.) can represent different things to different people, initiating a cultural change that discourages discrimination and harassment, and focusing on the big-picture goals instead of singling out individuals based on their social identity.

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