Are You In or Out? Employment Discrimination in Online and Offline Networks

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In the current focal article, Lindsey, King, Dunleavy, McCausland, & Jones (2013) discuss how organizational scholars and

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practitioners can help eradicate employment discrimination across the employment cycle, focusing primarily on factors directly linked to organizational outcomes. In addition to facing discrimination that is linked to organizational outcomes, marginalized individuals often face subtle forms of discrimination, which may not directly affect organizational decisions

and outcomes but instead may impact one's workplace experiences (e.g., social networking situations). Such negative experiences may indirectly influence organizational decisions and outcomes. Thus, in this commentary we argue that we should not only encourage evidence-based research on eradicating discrimination at the organizational level but ensure that such efforts also examine the social, individual level as well. We discuss manifestations of subtle discrimination that occur within the social aspects of each of the four cycles discussed in the focal article, paying particular attention to social networking situations, and examine steps organizational researchers can take to help reduce discrimination at a more social level as well.

Social networks are a form of social capital and are characterized by the sharing of information and resources (Barnes, 2009). Current technological advancements allow individuals to expand their networks beyond face-to-face interactions, as people are able to connect virtually. Online social networks, however are often replications of offline networks (Papacharissi, 2009), suggesting these connections influence each another and are not separate entities. One common characteristic of social networks is that they are more often homogenous versus heterogeneous in terms of demographic characteristics such as gender, race, age, and educational background (Mollica, Gray, & Trevino, 2003). Such matching may lead to strengthened social group boundaries (Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 1998) and the maintenance of stereotypes (Ridgeway, 1997). As a result, a lack of diversity within social networks may disadvantage individuals from marginalized groups who do not have as many connections with powerful individuals within organizations.

Attraction and Selection

Attraction and selection are both processes that individuals must go through in order to gain entry into an organization. We anticipate that social networks have similar impacts on these processes, and therefore, we discuss them simultaneously. As described by Lindsey et al., a number of previous studies have examined ways to ensure that organizations attract a diverse applicant pool in order to increase the likelihood of hiring candidates from diverse backgrounds (e.g., see Avery & McKay, 2006). One potential shortfall of their review is the absence of mechanisms for reducing bias in the attraction and selection phases of the employment cycle that may be linked to an individual's social network.

One way that social networks influence attraction and selection is through personal recommendations and referrals. Referrals occur when incumbents relay information about a potential job opening to individuals they know or alternatively recommend their friends and acquaintances to hiring managers for open positions. This has been shown to be a popular method for hiring individuals (Breaugh, 2013), and indeed a study by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM, 2008) found that referrals are one of the most common recruiting methods (see Overman, 2008). Further, referrals have been shown to lead to a greater chance of receiving a job offer and being hired than other recruitment methods such as job fairs, college placement offices, and newspaper advertisements (Breaugh, Greising, Taggart, & Chen, 2003). Many people's social networks consist of similar others (Mollica et al., 2003), and some evidence suggests that homogeneity of demographic characteristics influences hiring decisions (Giuliano, Levine, & Leonard, 2009). Other evidence suggests that White men belong to higher status networks than women, Hispanics, and Blacks, and White men also have greater access to social capital resources within these high status networks (McDonald, 2011). When recommendations are based on exclusive social networks that are composed of individuals who share homogeneous characteristics, those belonging to groups with less power and fewer connections are negatively impacted.

Increases in the accessibility and use of technology have brought another layer of complexity to the social network biases that occur in the attraction and selection phases of the employment cycle. Specifically, the use of social networking websites (e.g., LinkedIn, Facebook) provides another mechanism for employee referrals. Current employees may utilize social networks as a resource for recommending individuals for open positions. This can lead to biases in online recommendations. For instance, a recent study showed that Blacks whose physical features were more (vs. less) racially stereotypical were more likely to have fewer non-Black friends in their online social networks and more likely to have online friendship requests rejected by non-Blacks (Hebl, Williams, Sundermann, Kell, & Davies, 2012). When applied to an organizational context, this tendency has a number of implications. Given that organizations also rely on social networking websites to seek out and screen job applicants (Davison, Maraist, & Bing, 2011; Zeinder, 2007), the use of such tools can lead to both the perception of inequity by job applicants (Madera, 2012) as well as actual biases and discrimination based on demographic information (Brown & Vaughn, 2011). For instance, one study found that female job candidates faced more negative consequences than male job candidates when their Facebook profiles were judged by potential employers, and raters were more likely to pursue male versus female candidates who posted inappropriate content online (Karl & Peluchette, 2009).

The social networks of minorities, both online and offline, are less central and possess less social capital than those of majority group counterparts (McDonald, 2011; Mehra, Kilduff, & Brass, 1998), which may negatively impact their subsequent ability to access employment opportunities. Research has shown that Black (vs. non-Black) jobseekers with more segregated social networks were less likely to be hired for desirable, high paying positions (Braddock & McPartland, 1987), and racial

minorities and women are less likely to receive a job lead during everyday conversation compared to their White, male counterparts (McDonald, Lin, & Ao, 2009). These findings suggest that social networks act as an *exclusionary agent* that likely prevents minority group members from gaining entry into the workplace. Given the similar function of both online and offline networks, we predict that the increased use of online social networking sites that aid in the attraction and selection phases of the employment cycle can lead to discrimination for a variety of different groups.

The use of social networking websites in the attraction and selection phases may lead to legal issues related to discrimination to the extent that demographic information that is currently protected is used to influence screening and selection processes (Davison, Maraist, Hamilton, & Bing, 2012). In addition, such practices may also lead to disparate impact as access differences due to socioeconomic status may systematically disadvantage some groups to a greater extent than others (Davison et al., 2012). If minority and majority group members utilize online social networks (particularly employment related social networks) to a different extent, it becomes imperative that organizations develop mechanisms for ensuring that any reliance upon online social networking does not inadvertently discriminate against minority group members. Future research is needed to examine the extent to which online social networks have differential impacts for underrepresented minorities and examine ways to circumvent such effects.

Inclusion and Retention

In addition to impacting the earlier stages of the employment cycle, social networks may have an impact on later stages of the employment cycle. Lindsey et al. discuss two processes that occur after individuals have obtained employment (i.e., retention and inclusion) and provide a number of suggestions for ensuring

that diverse individuals feel valued and remain within organizations. Although the proposed suggestions do provide avenues of improvement, evaluating the offline and online social interactions and networks of organizational members will illuminate what processes take place in order to create feelings of inclusion and increase likelihood of retention.

Social networks are vital to information sharing and exchanging ideas with team members. Such processes directly link to the inclusion process. Subtle discrimination can occur to the extent that marginalized individuals have less access to information via information sharing from coworkers. This can occur through social networks such as the ''old boys network,'' which is a term characterizing an informal network that traditionally been occupied by high status White men (McDonald, 2011). Traditional social networks such as the ''old boys network'' can have detrimental impacts on minorities, women, and other individuals who belong to marginalized groups by isolating these groups from opportunities to tangible and intangible resources and benefits.

Another source of information exchange is mentor interactions, as mentors provide job relevant information, psychological support, and implicit organizational knowledge to mentees. Increased time and interaction with a mentor increases network ties both within and outside of the organization (Feeney & Bozeman, 2008), and mentor relationships have been shown to be efficacious in providing assistance to people belonging to marginalized groups such as women, racial minorities, and gay and lesbian individuals (Hebl, Tonidandel, & Ruggs, 2012; Kalev, Kelly, & Dobbin, 2012). However, as noted by Lindsey et al., some mentoring programs may be problematic as they can lead to perceptions of injustice if not offered to all employees. We agree, and also suggest that mentoring can lead to inequities to the extent that mentors provide different information to different mentees as a result of similarity or dissimilarity. Although majority group (vs.

minority group) mentors have been shown to provide more instrumental types of mentoring leading to more tangible benefits for minority group members (Blancero & DelCampo, 2005), this difference may be the result of differential access to information on the part of the mentors. Thus, subtle discrimination in mentoring may occur due to social network inequalities at the mentor level.

The increased use of technology may also negatively affect social networking between employees and lead to feelings of exclusion and greater intentions to turnover. On a formal level, communicating via technology may impact the success of virtual teams. Virtual teams have the benefit of bringing together people with specialized skills who are not in the same location, but they may also lead to increased biases due to lack of face-to-face interaction and lack of information sharing. Company-specific social networking sites (e.g., Web 2.0) serve as mechanisms for online forms of social networks. Such sites are meant to increase communication between team members; however, they may allow for clique formations within the team. On an informal level, websites such as Facebook and LinkedIn serve as external forms of online social networks, and activity between coworkers on such sites may result in biases against marginalized individuals. Individuals selectively choose who to communicate with on social networking sites, and coworkers may form online groups that can intentionally or unintentionally exclude marginalized individuals. In addition, such sites may allow for continued stereotyping and discrimination as individuals may alter their perceptions of a person based on the ''friends'' within another person's online network (Walther, Van Der Heide, Kim, Westerman, & Tom Tong, 2008).

Social networks serve as potential hubs for subtle discrimination in the inclusion and retention phases of employment. These networks play an integral role in employee inclusion, as coworkers are the people who are directly responsible for making people feel welcomed and respected in

the workplace. Coworkers are also often sources of rich information that is useful to other coworkers. Inequalities in social networks can also directly impact retention by leading to fewer opportunities for learning and development, and training, as well as reduced opportunities to be involved in projects that may lead to promotions and salary increases for those who are excluded from central networking groups. Finally, social networks can serve as an antecedent to the inclusion–retention link and indirectly impact retention, as retention is often seen as a product of inclusion. Future research should examine the extent to which coworkers interact with each other via social networking sites and explore patterns of who is interacting with whom. In addition, organizations should consider methods for increasing the communication between marginalized and nonmarginalized individuals to ensure more equitable access to information.

Using Technology to Reduce Discrimination in Social Networks

As the use of online networks and other forms of computer-mediated communication (CMC) increases, it is important to understand the impact of these platforms on the networks of employees and how CMC may lead to, or reduce, discrimination against marginalized groups throughout the employment cycle. Given that our online networks are often replications of our offline networks, the same effort must be exerted to ensure equality. Social networking sites draw different people from a variety of backgrounds and demographic characteristics together in one place. Thus, it is important to understand how these identities are perceived and how they influence treatment in the workplace. Although we have made the case that social networks can lead to increased discrimination, it is possible that online social networking can also be used to aid in the reduction of stereotyping and discrimination. Despite the potential for exclusion, the increased use of technology may create an opportunity for developing

more diverse social networks that may increase opportunities for marginalized groups throughout the employment cycle. Social networking sites are platforms of identity integration in which individuals share information about themselves with many others (Walther et al., 2008). Access to this myriad of information may provide insights that help to alleviate stereotypes by providing additional information about dissimilar others. Indeed (as noted in the focal article), providing additional information about oneself in offline situations has been shown to reduce perceptions of prejudice and negativity toward marginalized individuals (e.g., see Singletary & Hebl, 2009). In this sense, online social networks are a double-edged sword for organizations that provides both benefits and detriments for employees. Future research should investigate how social networks serve as a means to bridge or tether the identity gap of work and nonwork between marginalized and nonmarginalized employees. In addition, researchers must continue to examine the effects of social networking on equality and discrimination. In the meantime, although organizations cannot force inclusion by mandating that employees interact with individuals from marginalized groups in online or offline social networks, organizations can promote inclusion by creating and fostering social networks that bring together employees from diverse backgrounds and allows them to connect via a common thread.

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