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Neglected aspects and unsupported claims

April Bleske-Rechek and Rose Mary Webb

ABSTRACT

Comments on the article by M. E. Kite et al (see record 2001-10045-002), which summarized the findings and recommendations of the Task Force on the Status of Women in Academe. The present authors contend that while Kite et al documented the differences in the activities of men and women in academia, it is not clear that "inequalities persist." Kite et al interpreted the observed differences in outcomes between men and women as self-evident indicators of remaining bias and discrimination. The present authors warn of two problems with this interpretation. First, Kite et al neglected important variables that suggest alternative interpretations of these differences. Second, the authors made unsupported claims about the existence of bias and discrimination against women. Here the present authors document specific cases of these errors in reasoning. In conclusion, observed differences between men and women might be partly a reflection of other (neglected) personological variables on which the sexes overlap considerably but differ on average. Just as differential outcomes do not imply differential opportunities, equal opportunities do not necessarily produce equal outcomes.

We resonate with Kite et al.'s (December 2001) concern for women in academe and applaud them for detailing women's many advances over the past quarter century. As they documented, differences in the activities of men and women in the academy persist. It is not clear, however, that "inequities persist" (p. 1080). Kite et al. interpreted the observed differences in outcomes between men and women as self-evident indicators of remaining bias and discrimination. There are two problems with this interpretation. First, the authors neglected important variables that suggest alternative interpretations of these differences. Second, the authors made unsupported claims about the existence of bias and discrimination against women. Below, we document specific cases of these errors in reasoning.

NEGLECTED ASPECTS

Kite et al. (2001) noted that disparities persist between the sexes in rates of tenure and annual salary. They neglected to emphasize at least two variables critical in explaining these differences: professional age and number of hours worked. In the National Research Council's (NRC, 2001) study on gender differences in the careers of doctoral scientists and engineers, for example, controlling for number of years since receiving one's doctoral degree reduced considerably the gap between the sexes in faculty rank and annual salary. In the life sciences, the gender gap in rates of tenure was reversed when career age was controlled (NRC, 2001, pp. 165–170). Recently, Benbow, Lubinski, Shea, and Eftekhari-Sanjani (2000) illustrated why full-time work should not be conceptualized as a categorical variable. In their study, intellectually talented men and women differed in the number of hours they preferred to and actually did work. Benbow et al. found that sex differences in earnings (within specialized area) were nonsignificant after controlling for the number of hours worked.

Kite et al. (2001) reported on advances women have made in number of publications relative to men, emphasizing publication quantity as a measure of female progress. They neglected to comment on publication quality, which has been examined systematically for two decades. Across both scientific and nonscientific domains, men and women manifest comparable citation rates per publication (Cole & Zuckerman, 1984; Persell, 1983). This finding argues against Kite et al.'s conjecture that women's contributions have been consistently devalued relative to men's.

Kite et al. (2001) described Park's (1996) suggestion that "if service activities are viewed as 'women's work,' they are typically devalued; in contrast, service activities viewed as 'men's work' are seen as more complex and difficult and, consequently, of higher status and value" (p. 1083). The authors therefore proposed that certain activities are devalued precisely because they are performed by women. This reasoning fails to take into account actual task complexity. The authors' own findings indicated that men in administrative positions more often serve as department chairs, whereas women more often serve as program heads (p. 1082). Following Park's logic, Kite et al. seem to imply that the position of program head is less valuable than that of department chair simply because it is more often occupied by women. But isn't the position of department chair in fact more complex and demanding than that of program head?

Kite et al. (2001) argued that “feminist scholarship has reduced the rampant mother-blaming” (p. 1087) for the development of disorders such as schizophrenia and autism in their offspring and has expanded the social network of blame for these maladies to “include fathers, peers, the schools, and the media” (p. 1087). Kite et al. neglected to mention that behavioral genetics research has repeatedly documented evidence of a strong genetic influence in both of these disorders. Furthermore, recent molecular genetics studies have shown promising results in the identification of specific genes responsible for autism (Rutter, 2000). The contributions of behavioral and molecular genetics have arguably been much more instrumental in reducing mother blaming than have the contributions of feminist psychology. For Kite et al. to emphasize social explanations to the exclusion of compelling biological advances constitutes a serious error of omission.

UNSUPPORTED CLAIMS

Kite et al. (2001) stated that “sexism is still a deterrent for women leaders” (p. 1085) but provided no evidence to substantiate their claim. They further cautioned women who are considering administrative goals that “hiring bodies may hold them to a higher standard” (p. 1084); again, they offered no evidence. To our knowledge, no evidence exists. But we agree that it is important to collect evidence to ascertain whether standards have been raised—or lowered—for different groups.

Similarly, Kite et al. (2001) discussed the relentless challenge women face in dispelling stereotype threat, and they stated that women “encounter many barriers that their male colleagues never have to confront” (p. 1091). Yet, experimental demonstrations of stereotype threat have not consistently replicated across samples and laboratories. Moreover, its external validity has not been established (Sackett, Schmitt, Ellingson, & Kabin, 2001, pp. 309–310); in fact, failures to replicate it in common real-life testing situations have threatened its tenability (Stricker & Ward, 1998).

Finally, Kite et al. (2001) reviewed several studies documenting differences in students' evaluations of the effectiveness of male and female teachers, and they concluded that these differences reflect gender bias. This interpretation is flawed: The mere observation of a group difference does not imply an actual bias (Sackett et al., 2001); it could simply reflect a real difference between the groups on the attribute in question. To gain evidence of a bias in students' evaluations, one must eliminate this latter alternative by comparing evaluations to some objective measure of actual instructor performance. If comparable differences in instructor performance are not observed, then Kite et al.'s case for bias in student evaluations becomes possible.

CONCLUSION

Kite et al. (2001) presented differences in outcomes between men and women as self-evident indicators of bias and discrimination, yet decades of empirical work have demonstrated that merely documenting group differences on a measure or outcome does not imply bias. We maintain that the observed differences between men and women might be partly a reflection of other (neglected) personological variables on which the sexes overlap considerably but differ on average (e.g., status seeking, interest in people versus things, prioritization of work and family). Just as differential outcomes do not imply differential opportunities, equal opportunities do not necessarily produce equal outcomes.

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