Addressing gender inequality: Stumbling blocks and roads ahead

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Abstract

Despite many positive changes in terms of gender equality in recent decades, women remain under-represented in positions of power and prestige, and continue to shoulder disproportionate amounts of unpaid domestic labor. This special issue brings together an examination of the different ways in which gender inequality can be addressed, the efficacy of such approaches, and the consequences these approaches can have. In this introduction to the special issue, we discuss the focus of past and present gender research and outline issues which have received less attention. We further give an overview over the papers in this special issue, which focus on a diverse range of ways in which gender inequality can be addressed, such as collective action, workplace diversity initiatives and parental leave policies, gender-fair language, and government policies. Taken together, these papers illustrate (a) the importance of ensuring that initiatives are evidence based, (b) the ways in which we can maximize the effectiveness of interventions, and (c) the need to understand when these initiatives may inadvertently backfire.

Keywords: gender, gender equality, gender inequality, sexism, diversity

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The last decades have seen many positive changes in terms of gender equality. Approximately half of all higher education students and half of the workforce are women in most Western countries (European Commission, 2013; Kena et al., 2015; United States Department of Labor, 2015). Moreover, the number of women in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM fields) has increased substantially over the years. For example, the number of women among scientists and engineers has increased more than 20% since 2007 and women now make up about 40% of scientists and engineers in the EU-28 countries (Catalyst, 2018b), although these gains are not equally distributed across STEM fields. Similarly, the number of women in national parliaments worldwide has increased from 14% in 2000 to 24% in 2017 (The World Bank, 2017).

Nevertheless, women remain under-represented in positions of power and prestige such as executive leadership (Sealy, Doldor, Vinnicombe 2016); surgery (ACS Health Policy Research Institute, 2010); professorial academics (Catalyst, 2018a); and, despite the gains, in STEM (NSF, 2017) and politics (Bergh, 2009). Moreover, men's involvement in traditionally female domains has changed much less. For example, the number of male registered nurses in the US, while increasing, was still only 10% in 2011 (Landivar, 2013) and men continue to contribute a disproportionately small amount to household and childcare responsibilities (Blom, Kraaykamp, & Verbakel, 2017; Craig & Mullan, 2010).

Thus, while big gains have been made in terms of gender inequality, many issues remain and need to be addressed. The goal of this special issue is not to describe the nature and magnitude of gender inequality, but rather to bring together an examination of the different ways

in which gender inequality can be addressed, the efficacy of such approaches, and the consequences these approaches can have.

Gender Inequality: Past and Future Research

Gender inequality has been a prominent theme in psychology since the second wave of feminism in the 1960. To illustrate, Eagly, Eaton, Rose, Riger, and McHugh (2012) analyze the number of publications per year on sex differences, gender, and women from 1960 to 2009 in a paper about the history of feminism and psychology. They find a marked rise in popularity in gender articles in the last 50 years when looking at publications about gender as a proportion of all psychology articles, and, relevant to the issue gender inequality, the largest part of these articles are on the topic of "social processes and social issues".

This research has produced a wealth of fascinating findings (a summary of which is, alas, beyond what we can offer in this introductory article), but has predominantly focused on *why* and *when* gender inequality occurs. For example, there has been much theorizing and empirical research on the formation and negative consequences of gender stereotypes (see for example Eagly, 1987; Eagly, Wood, & Diekman, 2000; Heilman, 2001; Koenig, Eagly, Mitchell, Ristikari, 2011; Rudman & Glick, 2001; Spencer, Steele, & Quinn, 1999) as well as different ways in which sexism is expressed, such as ambivalent sexism (Glick & Fiske, 1996, 1999, 2001) and modern sexism (Swim, Aikin, Hall, & Hunter, 1995).

More recently, psychological research has taken greater interest in understanding *how gender inequality can be overcome*, focusing, for example, on women's collective action (e.g., Becker & Wright, 2011; Liss, Crawford, & Popp, 2004; Zaal, van Laar, Ståhl, Ellemers, & Derks, 2011), the effects of female role models (e.g., Cheryan, Siy, Vichayapai, Drury, & Kim, 2011; Dasgupta, 2011; Stout, Dasgupta, Hunsinger, & McManus, 2011), and gender-fair

language (e.g., Gustafsson Sendén, Bäck, & Lindqvist, 2015; Sczesny, Formanowicz, & Moser, 2016; Vervecken, Hannover, & Wolter, 2013). Less work has focused on men's role in the quest for gender equality, such as their involvement in collective action to achieve gender equality or their role in childcare and domestic work (but see, for example, Deutsch, Lussier, & Servis, 1993; Rudman & Mescher, 2013; for notable exceptions).

It is also important to note that research has, for the most part, focused on white, heterosexual, middle-class, cis-women; with the experiences of women with intersecting identities such as women from ethnic minority backgrounds, lesbians, women from lower SES backgrounds, and transwomen receiving far less attention (but see for example Ghavami & Peplau, 2012; Niedlich, Steffens, Krause, Settke, & Ebert, 2015; Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008, for notable exceptions). The same invisibility in the literature is true for those with non-binary identities, including genderqueer or intersex individuals. Almost all discussions of gender inequality in psychology is based on what we would see as overly simplistic, binary definitions of gender in terms of women and men. We argue that this is problematic as it reproduces the invisibility and stigma these groups face in everyday life. As social psychological researchers, we should do better.

While this special issue can in no way address all of the points above, we have selected ten papers that we feel present a range of novel findings that relate to the gaps in the literature outlined above. Below, we give a brief summary of the papers in this special issue and the different problems they address.

Overview of the Papers in this Special Issue

The first three papers in this special issue focus on the different strategies that can be used to bring attention to societal gender inequality in general, examining their effectiveness and

downstream consequences for women and men. In their paper on the effects of exposure to the 2017 Women's March, Saguy and Szekeres (2018) investigate the gender-related system-justification beliefs of men and women, and how these differ before and after the Women's March. In doing so, the authors demonstrate that collective action on behalf of women can be an effective tool to reduce these beliefs. However, the authors also show that this effect is not ubiquitous. Men who highly identified with their gender showed *stronger* gender system justification beliefs with greater exposure to the Women's March. Similarly, Anisman-Razin, Kark, and Saguy (2018) examine how bringing attention to gender inequality can backfire. They find that women who "put gender on the table" are disliked by both men and non-feminist women. Moreover, bringing attention to gender inequality also resulted in more negative attitudes towards gender equality itself among these groups.

Focusing on ways to overcome these barriers, Subašić and colleagues (2018) examine the ways in which men can be encouraged to engage in collective action to achieve gender equality. More specifically, the authors investigate whether framing men as agents of change can have positive effects and find that this indeed increases men's intentions to engage in collective action. Similarly, messages framing gender equality as an issue for both men and women increase men's collective action intentions, although this may only be the case when the the message comes from a male source. In sum, these three papers provide evidence that bringing attention to issues of gender inequality does not unilaterally lead to positive effects. While there are indeed some positive consequences, negative outcomes are also prevalent, particularly among (highly identified) men and when the source of attempted mobilization is female. However, framing these messages in ways that are inclusive towards men may alleviate some of these consequences.

Five papers in this special issue focus on achievement domains such as the workplace and education. In their theoretical paper, Heilman and Caleo (2018) highlight the importance of psychological theory when developing interventions to combat workplace gender inequality. More specifically, the authors build on the lack of fit framework to propose two sets of strategies to increase gender equality in the workplace. The first set aims to change perceptions that women are not suited for male-typed positions, for example, by changing perceptions of male-typed jobs and fields. The second set focuses on reducing the influence that lack-of-fit perceptions can have on evaluative judgments, for example, by eliminating any ambiguity in performance evaluations by setting explicit criteria. The authors also discuss potential unintentional consequences different diversity initiatives can have. The unintended negative consequences of programs that aim to increase gender equality are also the focus of the paper by Cundiff, Sohee, and Cech (2018). They demonstrate that diversity initiatives that clearly target women rather than all employees lead to feelings of discomfort and concerns about being treated negatively and unfairly. Interestingly, this was the case for both men and women. We have also included two papers that specifically focus on interventions in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) domains. Casad and colleagues (2018) provide a review six “wise” (i.e. low-cost, easy-to-implement) psychological interventions that aim to address inequality in STEM education. More specifically, they describe (a) interventions promoting a growth mindset, (b) communal goal interventions, (c) utility-value interventions, (d) values-affirmation interventions, (e) belonging interventions, and (f) role model interventions. They discuss the effectiveness of these interventions and the processes through which they work. They conclude that wise interventions are a promising tool in addressing gender and racial inequalities in STEM education. Hennes and colleagues (2018) also focus on STEM fields and argue that interventions

that focus on the pervasiveness of bias may backfire and *decrease* motivation to confront sexism by creating the perception that bias cannot be changed. They therefore investigate the effectiveness of a newly developed intervention which aims at promoting the mindset that bias is malleable and can be addressed. They find that their module, when used together with a of a successful bias literacy program, decreases beliefs that bias is immutable and increases self-efficacy to address bias. Lastly, in this section, Gloor, Xinxin, and Puhl (2018) focus on an intervention in a domain in which men are under-represented, namely parental leave. In a series of studies, the authors investigate whether co-workers are less supportive of men's, compared to women's, parental leave intentions, and whether obesity (of the person taking parental leave) exacerbates these effects. They find that obesity does indeed decrease coworkers' parental leave support for men, but increases coworkers' parental leave support for women. Gloor and colleagues further show that a simple policy change in which parental leave is made the default option can reduce these inequalities.

Policy change – albeit on a larger scale – is also the topic of a paper by Maitner and Henry (2018), who investigate men's and women's levels of ambivalent sexism in United Arab Emirates. They find that, unlike in other cultures with high levels of gender inequality, Arab women display lower levels of benevolent sexism than men. The authors interpret these findings in light of unusual legal policies that advance gender equality in the public domain while maintaining the oppression of women in the private domain.

The last paper in this special issue looks at ways in which language can be used to change perceptions of gender and advance gender equality. In their review, Gabriel, Gygax, and Kuhn (2018) discuss the effects of the two main strategies that have been suggested as ways to address androcentric language use, that is, feminization, which makes the female gender visible, and

neutralization, which eliminates gender cues from language. The authors review evidence regarding the effect of both strategies on mental representations of gender and associated behaviors as well as which factors facilitate or hinder the implementation of gender-fair language.

In this special issue we have brought together papers that cover a variety of approaches to address gender inequality. Saguy and Szekeres, Anisman-Razin and colleagues, and Subašić and colleagues focus on collective action and the factors that can facilitate, or hinder this ground level calls for social change. Heilman and Caleo, Hennes and colleagues, Casad and colleagues, and Cundiff and colleagues each examine and discuss specific diversity interventions, and the effectiveness (and unintended consequences) of such initiatives. Maitner and Henry as well as Gloor and colleagues investigate the effects that broader level legal and policy changes can have. Gabriel and colleagues discuss gender-fair language, which could potentially be used in collective action efforts, as part of diversity initiatives, and be implemented through policy change, thus spanning all three of these areas.

It is worth noting that when choosing to address gender inequality, there are a range of different desired outcomes that can be pursued – and the papers in this special issue focus on very different ones. The papers by Maitner and Henry, Saguy and Szekeres, and Anisman-Razin and colleagues examine attitudes towards gender and gender relations very broadly, in terms of levels of ambivalent sexism, gender system justification beliefs, and attitudes towards gender inequality respectively. Relatedly, Subašić and colleagues and Anisman-Razin and colleagues discuss men's intentions to engage in collective action and their views of women who endorse gender equality. Heilman and Caleo, Gloor and colleagues, Hennes and colleagues, and Anisman-Razin and colleagues focus ways to address gender equality from the point of view of

the decision maker or evaluator (or perpetrator), for example in terms of those who make hiring and promotion decisions, those that are in a position to judge others as competent , and those who can provide support for parental leave support. In contrast, Cundiff and colleagues and Casad and colleagues focus on the target's perspective (that is, on women themselves) and discuss variables such as feelings of belonging, concerns about how others will treat them, and confidence. Lastly, three of the papers in this special issue (Heilman and Caleo, Gabriel et al., and Casad et al.) focus on the gendered perceptions of jobs or domains and the visibility of women in them.

While the focus of this special issue is *gender* inequality, we are delighted that two of the papers additionally focus on other stigmatized identities, as gender is only one out of many social categories to which one belongs and the intersection of different (stigmatized) identities needs to receive more attention. While Casad and colleagues' paper does not focus on intersectional identities per se, the authors do discuss both gender and race. Gloor and colleagues examine the intersection of gender and weight.

Conclusions

As social scientists, our understanding of the nature of inequality in general, and of gender inequality in particular, has always been an important focus of what we do. More recently, we have risen to the challenge of not just describing the nature of the problem at hand, but also to contributing to addressing that problem. The ten papers we have brought together in this special issue show the importance of applying our knowledge to understanding and evaluating the ways in which gender equality can be addressed. Whether this is through calls for social change, workplace or education interventions, or legal or social policy change, these papers illustrate (a) the importance of ensuring that initiatives are evidence based, (b) the ways in

which we can maximize the effectiveness of interventions, and (c) the need to understand when these initiatives may inadvertently backfire. Taken together, we are excited that the breadth and diversity of the papers in this special issue reflect the myriad of ways in which gender inequality can be addressed.

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