Bias against research on gender bias

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Video Abstract

Abstract

There's a new contender in the battle for gender equality. An international team of researchers has recently uncovered an obstacle that those working in academia have unknowingly endured for decades: a bias against _research_ on gender bias. Just as female academics must navigate underrepresentation, wage gaps, and difficulties in obtaining grant funding, it seems that individuals _researching _these topics also face a lack of appreciation for their work. To reach this conclusion, the team performed an extensive analysis of articles on gender discrimination published between 2008 and 2015. For each article, they assessed two criteria related to peer review: the impact factor and whether grant support was received. To truly understand how these articles fared amidst the broader context of social science research, however, the team needed a suitable point of reference in the field. For this, they turned to articles on racial bias, which use methods and paradigms similar to those employed in gender studies. The results showed that articles on gender discrimination faced worse outcomes than those on racial discrimination: they were not only funded less often, but also published in less prestigious journals. Importantly, the percentage of female authors on a given paper didn't seem to affect either parameter, which suggests that the bias the team uncovered is against the very topic of gender bias. What are the possible causes for this effect? Considering that both gender and race discrimination are investigated using similar approaches, it's unlikely that the articles differ markedly in quality. Both fields are also well established, so researchers studying gender should have just as much experience and knowledge as those studying race. This suggests that the bias against research on gender bias is likely a reflection of the topic's lower prestige. The implication is that there's a powerful force potentially threatening well-meaning initiatives aimed at breaking down barriers related to gender. If the very studies that are looking into gender bias are themselves subjected to social discrimination, then true understanding of the depth of the problem will remain out of reach. Without this, existing gender arrangements – both in academia and beyond – aren't likely to change. It's only by exposing the so-called meta-bias that those working at the frontlines of social science research can start taking measures to overcome it.