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Title:

Social Bias Blind Spots: Attractiveness-Biased Outcomes are Seemingly Tolerated Because People Fail to Notice the Bias

Abstract:

Discrimination remains a key challenge for social equity. A prerequisite for effective individual and societal responses to discrimination is that instances of it are detected. Yet, prejudice and discriminatory intent are rarely directly observable and the presence of discrimination usually has to be inferred from circumstantial evidence, such as the over- or underrepresentation of certain individuals (i.e., statistical bias). Importantly, some types of discrimination (e.g., based on gender or race) may be more salient than others (e.g., based on physical attractiveness). We test whether this influences how people judge outcomes that are statistically biased along different dimensions. Across five high-powered studies and two supplemental studies (total N = 2,804, five preregistered) with American and Dutch participants, we find that gender- and race-biased outcomes are perceived as much less fair than unbiased outcomes, but we do not observe the same for attractiveness-biased outcomes. Our results suggest that this occurs because when scrutinizing decision outcomes for bias, people spontaneously pay attention to gender and race, but not attractiveness. Thus, people may show muted responses to some biased outcomes not because the bias is tolerated or seen as legitimate, but because the bias went unnoticed.