Google's Ideological Echo Chamber

How bias clouds our thinking about diversity and inclusion

[Link: go/pc-considered-harmful]

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For longer form discussions see [Link: g/pc-harmful-discuss]

Reply to public response and misrepresentation
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Reply to public response and misrepresentation

I value diversity and inclusion, am not denying that sexism exists, and don’t endorse using stereotypes. When addressing the gap in representation in the population, we need to look at population level differences in distributions. If we can’t have an honest discussion about this, then we can never truly solve the problem.
Psychological safety is built on mutual respect and acceptance, but unfortunately our culture of shaming and misrepresentation is disrespectful and unaccepting of anyone outside its echo chamber.
Despite what the public response seems to have been, I've gotten many personal messages from fellow Googlers expressing their gratitude for bringing up these very important issues which they agree with but would never have the courage to say or defend because of our shaming culture and the possibility of being fired. This needs to change.
TL;DR

- Google's political bias has equated the freedom from offense with psychological safety, but shaming into silence is the antithesis of psychological safety.
- This silencing has created an ideological echo chamber where some ideas are too sacred to be honestly discussed.
- The lack of discussion fosters the most extreme and authoritarian elements of this ideology.
  - Extreme: all disparities in representation are due to oppression
  - Authoritarian: we should discriminate to correct for this oppression
- Differences in distributions of traits between men and women may in part explain why we don't have 50% representation of women in tech and leadership.
- Discrimination to reach equal representation is unfair, divisive, and bad for business.

Background

People generally have good intentions, but we all have biases which are invisible to us. Thankfully, open and honest discussion with those who disagree can highlight our blind spots and help us grow, which is why I wrote this document. Google has several biases and honest discussion about these biases is being silenced by the dominant ideology. What follows is by no means the complete story, but it's a perspective that desperately needs to be told at Google.

Google's biases

At Google, we talk so much about unconscious bias as it applies to race and gender, but we rarely discuss our moral biases. Political orientation is actually a result of deep moral preferences and thus biases. Considering that the overwhelming majority of the social sciences, media, and Google lean left, we should critically examine these prejudices:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Left Biases</th>
<th>Right Biases</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Compassion for the weak</td>
<td>Respect for the strong/authority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disparities are due to injustices</td>
<td>Disparities are natural and just</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humans are inherently cooperative</td>
<td>Humans are inherently competitive</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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1 This document is mostly written from the perspective of Google's Mountain View campus, I can't speak about other offices or countries.
2 Of course, I may be biased and only see evidence that supports my viewpoint. In terms of political biases, I consider myself a classical liberal and strongly value individualism and reason. I'd be very happy to discuss any of the document further and provide more citations.
Neither side is 100% correct and both viewpoints are necessary for a functioning society or, in this case, company. A company too far to the right may be slow to react, overly hierarchical, and untrusting of others. In contrast, a company too far to the left will constantly be changing (deprecating much loved services), over diversify its interests (ignoring or being ashamed of its core business), and overly trust its employees and competitors.

Only facts and reason can shed light on these biases, but when it comes to diversity and inclusion, Google’s left bias has created a politically correct monoculture that maintains its hold by shaming dissenters into silence. This silence removes any checks against encroaching extremist and authoritarian policies. For the rest of this document, I’ll concentrate on the extreme stance that all differences in outcome are due to differential treatment and the authoritarian element that’s required to actually discriminate to create equal representation.

Possible non-bias causes of the gender gap in tech

At Google, we’re regularly told that implicit (unconscious) and explicit biases are holding women back in tech and leadership. Of course, men and women experience bias, tech, and the workplace differently and we should be cognizant of this, but it’s far from the whole story.

On average, men and women biologically differ in many ways. These differences aren’t just socially constructed because:

- They’re universal across human cultures
- They often have clear biological causes and links to prenatal testosterone
- Biological males that were castrated at birth and raised as females often still identify and act like males
- The underlying traits are highly heritable
- They’re exactly what we would predict from an evolutionary psychology perspective

Note, I’m not saying that all men differ from all women in the following ways or that these differences are “just.” I’m simply stating that the distribution of preferences and abilities of men and women differ in part due to biological causes and that these differences may explain why we don’t see equal representation of women in tech and leadership. Many of these differences are small and there’s significant overlap between men and women, so you can’t say anything about an individual given these population level distributions.

3 Throughout the document, by “tech”, I mostly mean software engineering.
Personality differences

Women, on average, have more:

- Openness directed towards feelings and aesthetics rather than ideas. Women generally also have a stronger interest in people rather than things, relative to men (also interpreted as empathizing vs. systemizing).
  - These two differences in part explain why women relatively prefer jobs in social or artistic areas. More men may like coding because it requires systemizing and even within SWEs, comparatively more women work on front end, which deals with both people and aesthetics.
- Extraversion expressed as gregariousness rather than assertiveness. Also, higher agreeableness.
  - This leads to women generally having a harder time negotiating salary, asking for raises, speaking up, and leading. Note that these are just average differences and there's overlap between men and women, but this is seen solely as a women's issue. This leads to exclusionary programs like Stretch and swaths of men without support.
- Neuroticism (higher anxiety, lower stress tolerance).
  - This may contribute to the higher levels of anxiety women report on Googlegeist and to the lower number of women in high stress jobs.
Note that contrary to what a social constructionist would argue, research suggests that "greater nation-level gender equality leads to psychological dissimilarity in men's and women's personality traits." Because as "society becomes more prosperous and more egalitarian, innate dispositional differences between men and women have more space to develop and the gap that exists between men and women in their personality traits becomes wider." We need to stop assuming that gender gaps imply sexism.

Men's higher drive for status

We always ask why we don't see women in top leadership positions, but we never ask why we see so many men in these jobs. These positions often require long, stressful hours that may not be worth it if you want a balanced and fulfilling life.

Status is the primary metric that men are judged on, pushing many men into these higher paying, less satisfying jobs for the status that they entail. Note, the same forces that lead men into high pay/high stress jobs in tech and leadership cause men to take undesirable and dangerous jobs like coal mining, garbage collection, and firefighting, and suffer 93% of work-related deaths.

Non-discriminatory ways to reduce the gender gap

Below I'll go over some of the differences in distribution of traits between men and women that I outlined in the previous section and suggest ways to address them to increase women's representation in tech without resorting to discrimination. Google is already making strides in many of these areas, but I think it's still instructive to list them:

- Women on average show a higher interest in people and men in things
  - We can make software engineering more people-oriented with pair programming and more collaboration. Unfortunately, there may be limits to how people-oriented certain roles at Google can be and we shouldn't deceive ourselves or students into thinking otherwise (some of our programs to get female students into coding might be doing this).
- Women on average are more cooperative
  - Allow those exhibiting cooperative behavior to thrive. Recent updates to Perf may be doing this to an extent, but maybe there's more we can do.
  - This doesn't mean that we should remove all competitiveness from Google. Competitiveness and self reliance can be valuable traits and we shouldn't necessarily disadvantage those that have them, like what's been done in education.
- Women on average are more prone to anxiety

4 For heterosexual romantic relationships, men are more strongly judged by status and women by beauty. Again, this has biological origins and is culturally universal.
Make tech and leadership less stressful. Google already partly does this with its many stress reduction courses and benefits.

- Women on average look for more work-life balance while men have a higher drive for status on average
  - Unfortunately, as long as tech and leadership remain high status, lucrative careers, men may disproportionately want to be in them. Allowing and truly endorsing (as part of our culture) part time work though can keep more women in tech.
- The male gender role is currently inflexible
  - Feminism has made great progress in freeing women from the female gender role, but men are still very much tied to the male gender role. If we, as a society, allow men to be more "feminine," then the gender gap will shrink, although probably because men will leave tech and leadership for traditionally "feminine" roles.

Philosophically, I don’t think we should do arbitrary social engineering of tech just to make it appealing to equal portions of both men and women. For each of these changes, we need principled reasons for why it helps Google; that is, we should be optimizing for Google—with Google's diversity being a component of that. For example, currently those willing to work extra hours or take extra stress will inevitably get ahead and if we try to change that too much, it may have disastrous consequences. Also, when considering the costs and benefits, we should keep in mind that Google's funding is finite so its allocation is more zero-sum than is generally acknowledged.

The harm of Google’s biases

I strongly believe in gender and racial diversity, and I think we should strive for more. However, to achieve a more equal gender and race representation, Google has created several discriminatory practices:

- Programs, mentoring, and classes only for people with a certain gender or race
- A high priority queue and special treatment for "diversity" candidates
- Hiring practices which can effectively lower the bar for "diversity" candidates by decreasing the false negative rate
- Reconsidering any set of people if it's not "diverse" enough, but not showing that same scrutiny in the reverse direction (clear confirmation bias)
- Setting org level OKRs for increased representation which can incentivize illegal discrimination

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5 Stretch, BOLD, CSSI; Engineering Practicum (to an extent), and several other Google funded internal and external programs are for people with a certain gender or race.
6 Instead set Google’ed OKRs, potentially for certain demographics. We can increase representation at an org level by either making it a better environment for certain groups (which would be seen in survey scores) or discriminating based on a protected status (which is illegal and I've seen it done). Increased representation OKRs can incentivize the latter and create zero-sum struggles between orgs.