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Addressing Gender-Related Unconscious Bias in the Workplace with a Focus on Women in Computing

I. Introduction: The Inspiration for This Project

This past March, the Python developer conference PyCon made headlines for a sexual joke gone awry. TechCrunch's Kim-Mai Cutler summarizes what happened[1]:

1. While sitting in the 10th row of a Python programming conference, a developer who used to work for mobile monetization startup Playhaven apparently made a joke about "big" dongles and "forking someone's repo."
2. Adria Richards, a developer evangelist sitting in front of them, called them out on Twitter and in a blog post for making the conference environment unwelcoming toward women. PyCon then escorted them out to the hallway.
3. Shortly afterward, Playhaven said it had fired the developer. CEO Andy Yang explained, "As a company that is dedicated to gender equality and values honorable behavior, we conducted a thorough investigation. The result of this investigation led to the unfortunate outcome of having to let this employee go." He added that the employee wasn't Alex Reid, who is the guy looking straight at the camera in Richards' tweeted photo. Reid still works for Playhaven.
4. The unnamed fired employee showed up on Hacker News by the name of "mr-hank" and apologized for the joke.
5. After news that the developer was let go came out, Richards said on Hacker News that she didn't intend for the developer to get fired. She then started getting some incredibly degrading criticism on her Facebook page and on Twitter. I won't re-print it here, but you can just read the link. It's awful.

6. PyCon is still discussing how to change its code of conduct around reporting incidents like this one.

The problem at the root of this incident is twofold: the joke was inappropriate and Richards's response to the joke was inappropriate. As mentioned above, PyCon is revising its code of conduct around reporting incidents of harassment. Though it is important that conferences have policies like this in place, harassment at conferences is only the tip of the iceberg. The PyCon incident is unique in its publicity and impact, but the seemingly harmless joke that sparked it is all but unique. Harassment like this happens regularly in the workplace, and we need a better way to *prevent it from happening* and *respond productively* when it does.

II. How We Define and Understand Harassment

There are certain forms of harassment that are easy to define and respond to. Thankfully, most workplaces do their best to minimize this kind of harassment; there are training videos that explain to employees what is appropriate and there are clear steps laid out in case these guidelines are not respected. What we do not address are the more insidious – and often unintentional – forms of harassment, little comments or jokes like the one made at PyCon.

The Microaggressions project[2] is an online compilation of such comments and jokes:

> *Each event, observation and experience posted is not necessarily particularly striking in and of [itself]. Often, [such events] are never meant to hurt – acts done with little conscious awareness of their meanings and effects. Instead, their slow accumulation during a childhood and over*

a lifetime is in part what defines a marginalized experience, making explanation and communication with someone who does not share this identity particularly difficult. Social others are microaggressed hourly, daily, weekly, monthly.

We compiled some posts from the Microaggressions project to provide further examples of this type of harassment. The posts we selected are all related to gender in the workplace, and many of them came from women in technology.

1. "You won't achieve equality by not knowing how to take a joke."
2. "When are you going to have some kids? You know you're not getting any younger." This is what a co-worker said to me after learning that someone we both know is expecting a child. What if I can't have children? What if I don't want children? Why don't people think about that before speaking?
3. "Wow, you're really good at this!" Male co-worker, in a tone of great surprise, at seeing me use a screwdriver to open my PC because the hard drive had failed. I'm female, 24, and I have a master's in computer science. Made me feel undervalued, like he's expecting less of me because of my gender.
4. I had a boss who treated me like his personal secretary, forwarded his phone to my desk, things like that. I have a master's degree in computer science, more degrees than anybody else working there, but I was the only woman on the project, so obviously I had to answer his phone. 22 years ago at a workplace. Made me furious.

5. At the company I'm working at this summer, I'm the only intern programmer who is female. Whenever I meet someone new who realizes I'm a programmer, they usually end up commenting at how lucky I am, because "software companies always want to hire women!" Makes me feel like people in the industry will always see me first for my sex, and second for my technical abilities and accomplishments, if at all.
6. "Hi Miss [woman with a PhD], do you know where Dr. [male colleague without a PhD]'s office is?" I'm a 32-year old woman with a PhD who works at a private liberal arts college
7. I'm the only woman in the engineering department at a U.S. manufacturing facility. I walk into a meeting after repairing a machine in our grimy production lines. My clothes are filthy. I have black grease on my hands and arms and (as it turns out) a little on my face. My boss: "Hey, you've got some mascara on your cheek." Made me feel like I'm not taken seriously as an engineer, that my boss only sees me as "the girl" on our team.
8. "How does A WOMAN get the idea to study computer science?" Made me feel attacked, forced to defend myself; like the speaker thought I was defective for not fitting his stereotypes.

Our task is this: creating a set of best practices to ensure that microaggressions are minimized in the workplace. With these best practices in mind, we can make the workplace a healthier and more productive space for women and men alike.

The first step in addressing hidden biases is identifying our own hidden biases. For example, let's look at the image below.
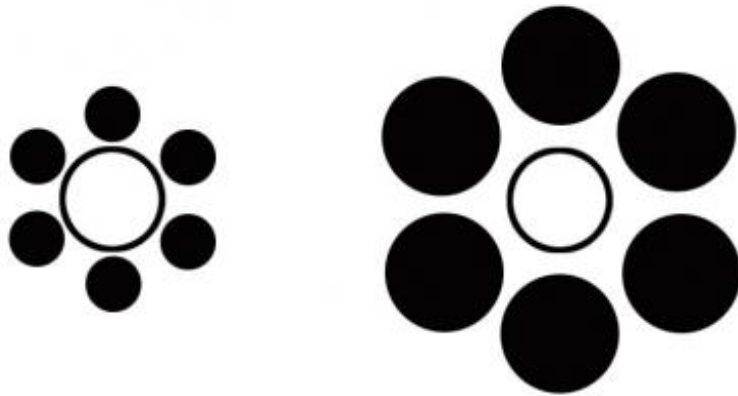
Most observers say that these two white circles are not the same size. If you cut out or trace the circle on the left and place the cut out or trace on the circle on the right, you will notice that the two circles are in fact the exact same size.

This optical illusion demonstrates that we are generally unaware of our perceptual interpretations and how they infiltrate our thoughts. In the example above, we do not recognize that we are seeing the image the wrong way until it is pointed out. The same is true for hidden biases. We often do not realize what biases we hold and how they are impacting our interactions with others.

III. Next Steps: Creating a Set of Best Practices

Below are four steps to help address these hidden biases and reduce microaggressions in the workplace. These steps were developed by compiling strategies presented in *Proven Strategies for Addressing Unconscious Bias in the Workplace*[3], *How to Identify Hidden Biases*[4], and *The Effects of Gender Bias in the Workplace*[5]. We hope to draw on these

when creating our best practices for combating gender-based unconscious bias in the workplace.

1. *Recognize that **you** have biases*

   The first step in dealing with hidden biases is recognizing and accepting that we all hold our own biases. Such biases—even when their holder is not consciously unaware of their existence— can lead to microaggressive remarks (as well as hiring discrepancies, uneven pay, unfair access to training).

2. *Identify what those biases are*

   A great way to identify biases within a company is to create a dashboard that identifies all the employees in terms of their race, gender, pay, etc. Once these groups have been classified, running analysis on the numbers often reveals gaping holes. These holes are important jumping off points for discussing hidden biases, which is an important way to counteract them.

   Another useful tool in helping employees and individuals recognize their own personal biases is an Implicit Association Test, or IAT. There are numerous online resources with IATs that also provide materials that help users interpret and respond to results.

3. *Review Policies and Discuss Policy Revisions*

   Evaluate whether your company documents are gender balanced from language to content. To avoid these biases effects on employee reviews, ensure that evaluations contain specific points and examples

rather than general statements. For example, say "the employee is a good team player, has excellent time management skills and always completes her/his work on time" instead of "the employee has done very well."

When company policies are reevaluated and improved, employees should be informed of and encouraged to discuss policy revisions. Open dialogue leads employees to stop and consider the impact of their hidden biases on past policy and can help reduce the impact of hidden biases—particularly the occurrence of microaggressions – in the future.

4. *Employee training*

As an extension of the policy review from step #3, implement new employee training practices. This training should focus on hallway interactions in addition to some of the bigger, more typically addressed issues (traditional sexual harassment etc.). Some potential strategies:

a) Have employees write down microaggressions they hear around the office. Bring together these records to identify common hidden biases and patterns, ideally with the help of a specially trained, neutral moderator (e.g. a designated human resources representative who can be sure privacy is respected throughout this exercise). Discuss the results of this exercise with all employees.

b) Remind employees that assigned or requested tasks should be based on explicit job criteria rather than stereotypes. Recall microaggression #4: "I had a boss who treated me like his personal secretary, forwarded his phone to my desk, things like that. I have a master's degree in computer science, more degrees than anybody else working there, but I was the only woman on the project, so obviously I had to answer his phone. 22 years ago at a workplace. Made me furious." Of course, this should not happen.

c) Implement a specific plan-of-action that an employee who feels offended or harmed by any microaggressions can take. This should include strategies for conflict resolution and instructions on how to report such an incident to a supervisor.

Companies and employers can – and should – play a role in helping their employees execute these four steps.

IV. Conclusion

We want to use discussions at USENIX—with input from men and women—to expand and fine-tune the above steps. Though these four steps provide a solid jumping off point for our discussion, there is much room for improvement. Ultimately, we hope to create company best practices and employee-training materials on gender-based unconscious bias in the workplace with a focus on women in computing. Keeping the PyCon incident in mind, these materials should contain on both *preventative measures* and *appropriate responses and solutions* to microaggressions in the workplace.

Works Cited

[1] Cutler, Kim-Mai. "A Dongle Joke That Spiraled Way Out Of Control."*TechCrunch.com*. AOL Inc., 21 Mar. 2013. Web. 01 May 2013.

[2] "Microaggressions : Power, Privilege and Everyday Life." *Microaggressions : Power, Privilege and Everyday Life.* N.p., n.d. Web. 01 May 2013.

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