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Who's still biased? ; Diversity training has swept corporate America. Just one problem: It doesn't seem to work.

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If you work at a large company, and especially if you manage other people, chances are you've gone through diversity training. The vast majority of the Fortune 500 and, by some estimates, the majority of American employers offer diversity training programs for their employees. Many make such training mandatory. The amount of money spent on it in the United States runs into the billions.

The courses vary widely, in content and duration and method and philosophy: Some are short videos followed by structured discussions, some are multiday retreats, some are informational, teaching participants about their "diversity circle" and the difference between a generalization and a stereotype, others focus on role-playing. But they all promise to help people better navigate the fault lines of race, gender, culture, class, and sexual orientation that can divide co-workers and unsettle offices.

Such programs have always been controversial, with critics arguing that they're unnecessary and needlessly politicize the workplace. But despite the growth and prevalence of diversity training, there have been few attempts to systematically study it.

Now a few social scientists are taking a hard look at these programs, and, so far, what they're finding is that there's little evidence that diversity training works. A paper published last year by the psychologist Elizabeth Levy Paluck of Princeton University's

Woodrow Wilson School and the Yale University political scientist Donald Green comprehensively surveyed the literature on prejudice reduction measures and found no empirical support for the idea that diversity training programs change attitudes or behavior. Similarly, a 2008 literature review paper by Carol Kulik of the University of South Australia and Loriann Roberson of Columbia University found that, on the question of changing behavior, there were few trustworthy studies - and decidedly mixed results among those. And research by a team of sociologists on more than 800 companies over three decades has found that the best diversity training programs make little difference in who gets hired and promoted, and many programs actually decrease the number of women and minorities in management.

"Even with best practices, you're not going to get much of an effect," says **Frank Dobbin**, a Harvard University sociology professor on the research team. "It doesn't change what happens at work."

Practitioners and some scholars disagree, arguing that, while there have been some unsubstantiated claims and overhyped "innovations" in diversity training, the field as a whole has begun to figure out what works. The changes that training triggers can often be subtle, defenders argue, and, in a setting as dynamic and stubbornly multivariate as the workplace, it's all but impossible to come up with the clear, falsifiable evidence social science demands. The poor results that do show up in broad-based studies, they say, are due to companies whose commitment to diversity training programs is merely pro forma, and who see training as just a way to protect themselves from lawsuits.

"My experience is that a lot of these studies make good points, but they tend to fall into one particular trap," says Howard Ross, a leading diversity consultant. "When we talk about diversity training as a megalith, it's similar to saying, `Are restaurants good places to eat?' The answer is `yes' and `no,' depending on the restaurant."

Critics, on the other hand, argue that today's practitioners are unlikely to be converging on a set of best practices, since the field is characterized by divergent, even contradictory approaches to the same set of problems. To critics, the proponents are simply mistaking the fact that people feel better about themselves after training for real results. Just because people think they're less prejudiced doesn't mean they are.

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Indeed, with something as subtle and reflexive as bias, we're often our own worst judges.

The roots of diversity training extend back to the work of the psychologist Kurt Lewin at MIT in the 1940s. Trying to train leaders to better manage interpersonal tensions, Lewin developed methods of using small discussion groups to "unfreeze" the attitudes of their members (coining "group dynamics" in the process).

The current popularity of diversity training, however, dates to the 1980s. The social revolutions of the 1960s had brought more minorities and women into the workplace, but their integration was halting, leading to widespread problems: Women and minorities were hired and promoted far less frequently than white males, and paid less for the same work. Many complained of social exclusion, habitual slights, or open hostility from colleagues. These complaints spilled into the public eye as workers began to sue their employers for discrimination and harassment.

Managers, faced with predictions of even greater demographic changes in the workplace in coming decades, turned to diversity courses as a way to respond. Some firms adopted the programs to preemptively head off discord and make themselves more appealing to minority applicants and customers. Others, like Texaco and Coca- Cola, were compelled to implement them under the settlement terms of discrimination lawsuits. A whole "diversity management" industry arose to meet - and encourage - the need, and larg e companies began creating diversity task forces and hiring chief diversity officers.

Social scientists, meanwhile, had been studying bias for decades: Psychologists looked at it in the lab, economists examined its effect on housing and other markets, sociologists studied the way it shaped neighborhoods and schools and even workplaces. But, aside from a few examples like Lewin's work at MIT, the research literature had largely limited itself to diagnosing problems rather than proposing solutions to them.

The current crop of diversity research is an attempt to address that gap. The researchers are driven, at least in part, by the desire to find prescriptive answers to the real-world difficulties of managing diversity in the workplace.

"We were increasingly frustrated by the fact that we know a lot about what kinds of disparities there are in organizations, and what kind of disadvantages women and minorities faced, but we know almost nothing about how to how to reduce them," says Alexandra Kalev, a sociologist at the University of Arizona.

Several years ago Kalev, along with Dobbin and Erin Kelly of the University of Minnesota, set out to see what works. As a measure of program success, they looked at the number of women and minorities in a company's managerial ranks - a much more concrete metric than the surveys of employee attitudes that many other studies relied on. The researchers drew on 31 years of Equal Employment Opportunity Commission data, specifically the annual reports that companies file detailing their racial and gender makeup. The sociologists then surveyed 829 of those companies on what diversity programs they had and when they instituted them. The results were described in a 2006 study, and in another paper that Kalev and Dobbin are currently writing.

The researchers found that while diversity training was by far the most popular approach, it was also the least effective at getting companies to hire and promote women and minorities. Some training programs were more effective than others: Voluntary programs were better than mandatory ones, and those that focused on the threat of bias and harassment lawsuits were worse than those that did not. But even the better programs led only to marginal changes. And those that were mandatory or discussed lawsuits - the vast majority of the programs the researchers examined - slightly reduced the number of women and minorities in management. Required training and legalistic training both make people resentful, the authors suggest, and likely to rebel against what they've heard.

What worked much better than even the best training, the researchers found, were more structural measures: minority mentoring programs, or designating an executive or a task force with specific responsibility to change promotion practices.

"You can imagine, if you're in a meeting for two hours once a year to refresh your diversity awareness, what's the effect of that going to be compared to being a mentor to someone?" says Dobbin.

Diversity trainers concede that there are poorly designed programs out there. There are also, they point out, companies that implement diversity training without much concern for whether it works, which is not a recipe for success. That doesn't mean that well designed, conscientiously applied programs don't work.

And diversity consultants bristle at the suggestion that they believe diversity training programs are a panacea. Properly instituting a diversity training program, many of them insist, means combining it with other, more systemic changes, including measures like those that the Kalev, Dobbin, and Kelly research found were more effective.

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"If you look at just the efficacy of diversity training programs, that's not how we look at it as a practitioner," says Rohini Anand, global chief diversity officer at the food services giant Sodexo. "To me diversity training is one small but very necessary piece of what I need to do."

Nor does the fact that an effect didn't show up in promotion rates necessarily mean there's no effect at all, others argue - the training may be reshaping attitudes and behavior in subtler ways. Derek Avery, a psychologist at the University of Houston, points to research findings that diversity training curriculums in schools led students to spend more time with classmates from other ethnic backgrounds.

"The existing evidence suggests that [diversity training programs] do something, we're just not entirely certain yet what that something is and how far it extends," says Avery.

A few scholars have tried to look systematically at the existing literature on diversity training. Unlike Kalev and Dobbin, they didn't find evidence that diversity training programs didn't work. What they did find was a big question mark: serious doubts about studies that show a positive effect and, overall, a pronounced lack of evidence that diversity training is effective.

Elizabeth Levy Paluck has taken perhaps the broadest look at the literature. In studies she did alone and with Yale's Green, she looked at 985 published and unpublished reports on prejudice reduction programs, by academics and nonacademics.

Among those studies, Paluck found that the ones on diversity training were among the least rigorous: They often comprised little more than asking participants to fill out surveys on their own attitudes. Several compared the attitudes of training participants to a "control" group of co-workers who had opted not to attend the training, but without actually controlling for the possibility that someone who would choose to take the course would do so because they already had different attitudes than someone who would choose not to. It is possible that diversity training works, Paluck concludes, it's just that none of the research that says it does is reliable.

"The best answer we have at this point in time is that we just don't know," she says.

The paucity of reliable research on diversity training programs is all the more notable alongside the wealth of basic research on prejudice. Partly this is because bias is complicated. It's also, however, a result of the incentives in both academia and the business world - neither of which necessarily encourage the critical evaluation of real-life solutions to real-world problems.

For social scientists, the pressure is to find statistically significant, publishable answers to discrete questions about human behavior. That means the experiments and models academic researchers create take out most of the messiness of actual person-to-person interactions. Practitioners, for their part, are selling a service. At its worst, that makes them openly hostile to the idea of critical evaluation - their clients might find out training isn't accomplishing anything. And even if the goal is to discover what works and what doesn't, the sort of data that social scientists rely on can feel like a luxury for people running businesses.

"The question of what data is real data is one that the academics and practitioners often wrestle with," says Ross. "A research project that takes three years works fine in academia, but we're dealing with something where we've got an issue today, how do we solve it tomorrow."

Paluck emphasizes that she doesn't think that academic researchers like her necessarily know best. She believes that the plethora of competing programs may well be generating productive ways of combating bias and getting dissimilar people to be more comfortable work together. But without rigorous study there's no way to separate the good from the bad. Some programs divide their classes into the most heterogeneous discussion groups possible - whether by race or gender or sexual orientation - out of the belief tha
t dissimilarity will force participants to confront competing viewpoints. Others insist that more uniform groups provide a safer environment for people to discuss their own biases and grievances. Some try to get people to be frank about their own attitudes, no matter how taboo; others insist that doing so backfires by making others uncomfortable. Some programs attempt to elicit strong emotional reactions, others to keep things as cerebral as possible.

There's a reasonable argument to be made for all of these approaches, but it's hard to imagine that, in so many particulars, both one approach and its exact opposite will be equally effective.

Kalev emphasizes that she's under no illusion that a practice as entrenched as diversity training is going away. And so she wants readers to take from her work the realization that there are ways it can be improved: by making programs voluntary, by leaving out the legal material, by designing them so that people don't feel targeted, and by combining them with more explicit - and effective - measures like minorit
y outreach, mentoring, and even old- fashioned affirmative action programs like setting gender- and rac

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e- based promotion targets and making someone responsible for them.

She'd also like to see more people doing what she's doing: trying to figure out what we can reasonably expect from programs that offer to train away our deeply ingrained, and often unconscious, biases.

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