High on the agenda of sociology is to understand the origins and consequences of inequality. This understanding is potentially one of our important contributions to public policy. Examples of such sociological research topics include access to quality education, welfare “reform” and poverty, and the amount of job competition between immigrants and native-born low-wage workers. In this essay, which focuses on gender and race/ethnic discrimination in the workplace, I argue that the standard sociological approaches to explaining workplace discrimination have not been very fruitful in producing knowledge that can be used to eradicate job discrimination. If sociological research is to contribute to the battle against injustice, we need to direct more attention to how inequality is produced. In the following pages, I suggest that research findings from our sister discipline, social psychology, can help us understand both the original and the proximate causes of employment discrimination. This (sometimes interdisciplinary) approach that distinguishes original and proximate causes may be useful and even necessary in other specialty areas where sociologists seek to create a more just society.

In the twentieth century, most sociologists concerned with reducing employment discrimination assumed that once we demonstrated that discrimination persisted, our evidence would find its way to policy makers who would eradicate this discrimination. Thus, sociologists and other social scientists developed a variety of


innovative techniques to assess the extent of employment discrimination. Researchers conducted sophisticated analyses establishing race and gender disparities in various employment outcomes, net of qualifications; confirmed through surveys employers’ aversion to hiring people of color (Kirschenman and Neckerman 1991; Bobo, Oliver, Valenzuela, and Johnson 2000); and designed ingenious ways to estimate the prevalence of discriminatory treatment (Fix and Struyk 1993; Blumrosen, Bendick, Miller, and Blumrosen 1998). In terms of our policy impact, however, we might have spent our time better in counseling labor market entrants or working as human resource specialists. If we want to use sociology to reduce discrimination in the twenty-first century, we need to move beyond demonstrating that employment discrimination exists, and investigate why it persists in work organizations. To do this, we need to expand our conceptualization of discrimination to recognize that it occurs as a result of nonconscious cognitive processes, as well as from the deliberate negative treatment of people of color and white women.

The prominent sociological explanations for discrimination at the beginning of the new century are grounded in conflict theory (e.g., Blumer 1958; Blalock 1967, 1982; Reskin 1988; Martin 1992; Jackman 1994; Tomaskovic-Devey 1993; Tilly 1998). According to a conflict-theory perspective, the beneficiaries of systems of inequality protect their privileges by using the resources they control to exclude members of subordinate groups. Thus, these theories explain discrimination in terms of the strategic, self-interested actions by members of privileged groups who intentionally exclude and exploit subordinate-group members to protect or advance their own interests. However, conflict-theoretic approaches to discrimination are deficient in important respects. Most important, they do not identify the specific processes through which group motives give rise to outcomes that preserve group interests, and they cannot explain the variation in employment discrimination across contemporary workplaces. As a result, they have not proven fruitful in identifying remediating mechanisms.

I should note that most of my past research assumes that intergroup competition prompts dominant groups to discriminate against members of subordinate groups. I remain convinced that this theoretical perspective accurately characterizes the behavior of some people. But intergroup conflict is not the only source of discrimination, or even the most important one. By conceptualizing discrimination as the result of conflict-based behavior, we cannot identify the proximate causes of discrimination that results from other processes. In sum, I argue that the theoretical approach that many sociologists embrace intellectually has not generated explanatory models of the causes of employment discrimination. If our goal in studying discrimination is to discover how to reduce it, conflict theories are not particularly fruitful in helping us to understand why discrimination occurs regularly in tens of thousands of work organizations.

In this essay, I argue that we should turn our attention to how as well as why discrimination occurs, and I propose that social cognition theory can answer both these questions. I make two claims. First, although some employment discrimination results from people pursuing their group-based interests or prejudices, much discrimination stems from normal cognitive processes (the subject of social cognition theory) that occur regardless of individuals’ motives. Second, the proximate cause of most discrimination is whether and how personnel practices in work organizations constrain the biasing effects of these automatic cognitive processes.

In brief, social cognition theory holds that people automatically categorize others into ingroups and outgroups. The visibility and cultural importance of sex and race and their role as core bases of stratification make them almost automatic bases of categorization. Having categorized others, people tend to automatically “feel, think, and behave toward [particular members of the category] the same way they . . . feel, think, and behave toward members of that social category more generally” (Fiske, Lin, and Neuberg 1999). Importantly, categorization is accompanied by stereotyping, attribution bias, and evaluation bias. These, in turn, introduce sex, race, and ethnic biases into our perceptions, interpretations, recollections, and evaluations of others. These biases are cognitive rather than

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1 In addition, they do not generate research hypotheses that are falsifiable.

2 In describing these processes as “normal,” I mean only that normal mental functioning requires cognitive simplification.

3 In this essay I use the term race as shorthand for race, color, ethnicity, and national origin.
motivational; in other words, they occur independently of decision makers’ group interests or their conscious desire to favor or harm others (Krieger 1995: 1188).

The expected outcomes of these habitual cognitive processes are race and sex discrimination. But discrimination is not inevitable. Organizational arrangements can activate or suppress social psychological and cognitive processes (Baron and Pfeffer 1994: 191). We cannot rid work organizations of discrimination until we recognize both that much employment discrimination originates in automatic cognitive processes, and that it occurs because of work organizations’ personnel practices. Sociologists’ knowledge of social and organizational behavior qualifies us for this task. After summarizing the cognitive processes that produce employment discrimination, I propose that sociology in the twenty-first century should examine how employment practices mediate whether these processes give rise to discriminatory outcomes.

Social Cognition Processes as the Exogenous Causes of Discrimination

A large body of research in cognitive psychology suggests that to cope in a complex and demanding environment, people are “cognitive misers” who economize by through categorization, ingroup preference, stereotyping, and attribution bias (Fiske 1998: 362). These processes, sometimes characterized as cognitive “shortcuts,” occur regardless of people’s feelings toward other groups or their desires to protect or improve their own status (Fiske 1998: 364).4 If unchecked, they can produce outcomes that “perpetrators” neither intend nor recognize.

Social Categorization

The categorization of people into ingroups and outgroups is a rapid, automatic, nonconscious process. By conserving cognitive resources, automatic categorization helps people manage an enormous volume of incoming stimuli (Fiske 1998: 364, 375). In keeping with cognitive impulses toward efficiency, categorization into in- and outgroups often is based on sex and race because of their widespread availability as “master statuses” that have long been the bases for differential treatment (Hughes 1945).5 However, I propose that it is primarily through categorization and its concomitants that sex and race are bases for unequal treatment.

Inherent in the categorization of people into in- and outgroups is the tendency to exaggerate between-group differences, while minimizing within-group differences, especially among members of the outgroup. (An example of this is the phenomenon: “I know an X [outgroup category] said it, but I can’t remember which X” [Fiske 1998: 372]). Conceptually, social categorization resembles the sociological concept of differentiation, but each plays a different role in theoretical accounts of discrimination. While a social psychological perspective sees categorization as automatic and not necessarily group-serving, sociologists view differentiation as a fundamental mechanism of stratification through which dominant groups preserve their privileged position (e.g., to divide and conquer [Edwards 1979], or to justify unequal treatment [Reskin 1988]).

Ingroup Preference

Categorization is more than a data-reduction device that our brains use to deal with the barrage of stimuli to which they are exposed. Classifying people into ingroups and outgroups leads more or less automatically to distorted perceptions and biased evaluation of ingroup and outgroup members, and hence to discrimination (Brewer and Brown 1998). In- versus outgroup membership defines the pool of others to whom people are attracted, with whom they seek equal treatment, and who serve as their reference group (Baron and Pfeffer 1994). In general, people are more comfortable with, have more trust in, hold more positive views of, and feel more obligated to members of their own group (Perdue, Dovidio, Gurtman, and Tyler 1990). As a result, people try to avoid outgroup members, and they favor ingroup members in evalua-

4 For a demonstration, take the Implicit Association Tests for racism, sexism, and ageism at www.yale.edu/implicit (Greenwald and Banaji 1999).

5. Ridgeway (1997) offers a related analysis. While she concurs with the psychologists whose work I cite on the importance of categorization, she construes categorization as an emergent property of interaction. Although she does not address the effect of sex categorization except through interactional processes, her conclusions on the consequences of categorization resemble some of those reviewed here. She also provides a useful account of the effect of gender categorization on gender status beliefs.
tions and rewards (Brewer and Brown 1998: 567; Fiske 1998: 361). Thus, at least in the lab, the unequal treatment associated with group membership results more often from ingroup preference than outgroup antipathy.

Given white men's predominance in many workplaces, minorities' and white women's status as outgroup members probably contributes to the devaluation of jobs that are predominantly female and predominantly minority. This account of devaluation suggests that we should observe the overvaluation of men's and whites' activities in settings in which men and whites are the ingroup as a job-level phenomenon.

**Stereotyping**

Stereotypes are unconscious habits of thought that link personal attributes to group membership. Stereotyping is an inevitable concomitant of categorization: As soon as an observer notices that a "target" belongs to a stereotyped group (especially an outgroup), characteristics that are stereotypically linked to the group are activated in the observer's mind, even among people who consciously reject the stereotypes (Bodenhausen, Macrae, and Garst 1998). To appreciate the importance of stereotyping for discriminatory outcomes, it is helpful to distinguish descriptive and prescriptive stereotypes.

**Descriptive stereotypes**, which characterize how group members are, influence how we perceive others and interpret their behavior. Descriptive stereotyping can precipitate discrimination because it predisposes observers toward interpretations that conform to stereotypes and blinds them to disconfirming possibilities (Fiske 1998: 367), especially when the behavior that observers must make sense of is subject to multiple interpretations (e.g., she worked late because women are helpful, rather than she worked late because she wants a promotion). Thus, descriptive stereotypes distort observers' impressions of the behavior of members of stereotyped groups.

**Prescriptive stereotypes** are generalizations about how members of a group are supposed to be, based usually on descriptive stereotypes of how they are. These normative stereotypes serve as standards against which observers evaluate others' behavior. Both descriptive and prescriptive stereotypes influence what we remember about others and the inferences we draw about their behavior (Heilman 1995: 6). Thus, stereotypes serve as "implicit theories, biasing in predictable ways the perception, interpretation, encoding, retention, and recall of information about other people" (Krieger 1995: 1188).

The cognitive processes involved in stereotyping make stereotypes tenacious. People unconsciously pursue, prefer, and remember "information" that supports their stereotypes (including remembering events that did not occur), and ignore, discount, and forget information that challenges them (Fiske 1998). From the standpoint of social cognition theory, stereotypes are adaptive: People process information that conforms to their stereotypes more quickly than inconsistent information, and they are more likely to stereotype when they are under time pressure, partly because stereotyping conserves mental resources (Fiske 1998: 366; Fiske et al. 1999: 244). Research on people's efforts to suppress stereotypes is relevant. In one study, subjects instructed to avoid sexist statements in a sentence-completion task could comply when they had enough time, but when they had to act quickly the statements they constructed were more sexist than those of subjects who had not been told to avoid making sexist statements. And according to a comparison of subjects who were and were not instructed to suppress stereotypes, the former could refrain from expressing stereotypes, but in a "rebound effect," they expressed stronger stereotypes in subsequent judgments than did subjects who had not tried to suppress their stereotypes in the first place (Bodenhausen et al. 1998: 326).

**Evaluation Bias and Attribution Bias**

Stereotype-based expectations and ingroup favoritism act as distorting lenses through which observers assess others' performance and account for their successes and failures (Crocker, Major, and Steele 1998: 539). Descriptive stereotypes affect observers' expectations and hence the explanations they construct. When the actions of others conform to our expectations, we tend to attribute their behavior to stable, internal propensities (e.g., ability), while we attribute actions that are inconsistent with our stereotype-based expectations to situational (i.e., external) or transient factors (e.g., task difficulty, luck, or effort). In this way, stereotype-based expectations give rise to biased attributions. For example, given the stereotype that men are good at customarily male tasks, competent performance

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*When “attentional resources” are limited, stereotyping increases (Fiske et al. 1999: 237).*
by men doesn’t require an explanation; men’s failures do, however, and observers tend to attribute these unexpected outcomes to situational factors such as bad luck or lack of effort, none of which predict future failure. In contrast, women are stereotypically not expected to do well at customarily male endeavors, so explaining their failure is easy: They lack the requisite ability (an internal trait) and hence are likely to fail in the future. In contrast, their successes are unexpected, so they must have resulted from situational factors that do not predict future success (Swim and Sanna 1996; Brewer and Brown 1998: 560).

Ingroup preference and outgroup derogation lead to similar attribution processes. Because observers expect ingroup members to succeed and outgroup members to fail, they attribute ingroup success and outgroup failure to internal factors, and ingroup failure and outgroup success to situational factors. Observers also tend to characterize behavior that is consistent with their expectations in abstract terms and unexpected behavior in concrete terms. For example, given the same act—arriving late for a meeting—an observer would recall that an ingroup member was delayed, but that an outgroup member is a tardy person. Once a behavior has been interpreted and encoded into memory, it is the interpretation, not the initial behavior, to which people have ready access (Krieger 1995: 1203). Thus, observers would predict that the outgroup member, but not the ingroup member, would be tardy in the future.

Power and Cognitive Biases

Up to this point, I have treated discrimination motivated by status politics or antipathy and discrimination that results automatically from unconscious cognitive processes as if they were mutually exclusive. Although cognition researchers have given relatively little attention to their relationship, a handful of experimental studies indicate that power differentials condition these cognitive processes. These studies have shown that although the propensity to categorize is universal, occupying a position of power may prompt people to invest extra effort into categorizing others (Goodwin, Operario, and Fiske 1998). In addition, power affects the degree to which people act on the propensity to stereotype. People can’t afford to stereotype others on whom they depend because they need to assess them accurately, but they can afford to stereotype subordinate groups and are more likely do so than subordinate group members are to stereotype members of dominant groups (Fiske et al. 1999: 241). In addition, under conditions of perceived threat, the more stake observers have in the status quo, and hence the more to lose, the more likely they are to stereotype outgroups (Operario, Goodwin, and Fiske 1998: 168). The sense of entitlement that accompanies dominant-group status is likely to give dominant group members particular confidence in their stereotypes. This propensity is reinforced by the fact that powerful observers actively seek information that confirms their stereotypes and disregard disconfirming information. However, priming the powerful with egalitarian values leads them to pay closer attention to information that contradicts outgroup stereotypes (Operario et al. 1998: 172–73). Finally, members of high-status ingroups show more bias in favor of ingroup members than do members of low-status ingroups (Brewer and Brown 1998: 570).

The Proximate Causes of Discrimination

According to social cognition theory, bias and discrimination result from the individual-level cognitive processes summarized above. Cognitive psychologists agree, however, that these biases can be controlled (Fiske 1998: 375). Thus, the proximate causes of discrimination are the contextual factors that permit or counter the effects of these habits of the brain. The course I urge for sociology in the twenty-first century is to investigate how organizational practices can check these factors. Experimental research on contextual factors that appear to minimize the likelihood of stereotyping and its biasing effects provides a starting point for this enterprise. These factors include constructing heterogeneous groups, creating interdependence among ingroup and outgroup members, minimizing the salience of ascribed status dimensions in personnel decisions, replacing subjective data with objective data, and making decision makers accountable for their decisions.

Of course, organizations’ ability to apply the findings from experimental research to the exogenous causes of discrimination depends on the external validity of the experimental results described above. Work organizations are vastly more complex than laboratory experiments. In particular, work organizations are hothouses that nurture power and status differences. Thus, the first task for sociologists—perhaps in collaboration with social psychologists—is to determine
whether the cognitive processes that I have reviewed operate the same way in work organizations as they do in the lab.\footnote{Bielby (2000) believes they should be even stronger in work organizations than in laboratory experiments.\footnote{Of course, for these categories to supplant sex- and race-based categorization, category membership cannot be associated with sex or race.}} If they do, the next step is to investigate the proximate causes of employment discrimination: the social, contextual, and organizational mechanisms that suppress or exacerbate these exogenous causes. Below I summarize the experimental research. I hope readers view this summary as a set of propositions that specify how organizations can prevent nonconscious cognitive processes from culminating in employment discrimination.

**Heterogeneity of Work Groups**

Categorization is too fundamental to cognitive processing to be prevented, and ingroup favoritism is remarkably hard to eradicate, even for people with a material stake in ending it \cite{Brewer and Brown 1998: 566}. But organizations can discourage the categorization of people based on their sex, race, and ethnicity, and thus reduce sex and race discrimination. Creating work groups and decision-making groups that are homogeneous with respect to these ascriptive characteristics should suppress ingroup preference and outgroup derogation, stereotyping, and concomitant bias personnel decisions. (In addition, if neither ingroup nor outgroup members numerically dominate decision-making groups, personnel outcomes are less likely to be linked to group membership.)

Of course, organizations whose work groups are well integrated by sex and race are not the ones in which discrimination is a serious problem. Organizations in which work groups are segregated may be able to create superordinate identities (i.e., more inclusive ingroups) that are independent of sex and race \cite{Brewer and Brown 1998: 583}. In laboratory experiments, researchers can artificially create categories to which subjects become attached, even on the most trivial basis, so workers should be receptive to recategorization based on characteristics that are contextually salient \cite{Fiske 1998: 361}. Organizations may be able to create such categories by using existing functional categories that are relevant and hence cognitively available to workers, or they may be able to create new categories that supplant ascriptively defined categories as the basis for the cognitive processes discussed here. Among possible bases of categorization are teams, divisions or branches, job groups, and the organization itself.\footnote{Workers may initially resist these collective arrangements, however. In addition, when the context changes, the former groupings are likely to re-emerge \cite{Brewer and Brown 1998: 582–83}. In other words, intergroup contact is not a quick fix; it makes a difference only when it occurs through a permanent transformation of the workplace.} With respect to the last of these, the more organizations emphasize organizational culture, the easier it should be to expand the ingroup to encompass all employees. Organizations can maximize the impact of heterogeneous groupings by reinforcing ingroup identification through task interdependence, job rotation, and other collective activities. Sociology should place high on its agenda for the twenty-first century a study of organizations’ ability to minimize ascriptively based categorization by emphasizing other categories and the impact of such re-engineered groups on stereotypes and attribution bias.

**Interdependence**

Intergroup contact that exposes people to individualizing information about outgroup members challenges outgroup stereotypes, and hence should reduce bias. But for intergroup contact to change ingroup members’ perceptions, the latter must attend to information about outgroup members \cite{Goodwin et al. 1998: 681}. The conditions that should foster such attention are enumerated in the contact hypothesis. This hypothesis argues that intergroup contact alters ingroup members’ attitudes only if the groups come together with a common goal, have institutional support for their joint enterprise, and have close and sustained contact in equal-status positions \cite{Brewer and Brown 1998: 576–78}.

The logic of the contact hypothesis assumes that ingroup members’ interdependence with outgroup members encourages the former to notice counterstereotypic information about the latter and thus to form more individuated and accurate impressions.\footnote{By the same logic, ingroup members’ dependence on outgroup members should motivate the former to seek accurate information about the latter. Based on this expected association, Goodwin and his colleagues \cite{1998: 694} contended that supervisors who know that their salaries depend on their...}
subordinates’ productivity or evaluations will judge their subordinates more accurately.

Intergroup competition based on status characteristics is counterproductive because it encourages each group to stereotype the other. Fiske and her colleagues (1999: 241–42) speculated that this happens because group members devote most of their available cognitive resources to obtaining accurate information about their teammates, rather than about their opponents. Thus, cooperative interdependence can reduce stereotyping, while competitive interdependence increases it.

**Salience**

Anything that focuses observers’ attention on a stereotyped category “primes” stereotyping, and it does so without the observer’s awareness (Heilman 1995; Fiske 1998: 366). For example, men who were primed with stereotypic statements about women were more likely to ask a female job applicant “sexist” questions and exhibit sexualized behavior (and it took them longer than nonprimed men to recognize nonsexist words; Fiske et al. 1999). Thus, a comment about pregnancy, a sex discrimination lawsuit, or diversity immediately before a committee evaluates a female job candidate is likely to exacerbate sex stereotyping in the evaluation (Heilman 1995). The process of priming may mean that injunctions to a search committee to look closely at female or minority candidates can backfire, tainting the evaluations of women and minorities. Similarly, when women and men are interacting and gender is relevant to purpose of the interaction, cultural gender stereotypes become “effectively salient” (Ridgeway 1997: 221). Organizational contexts can also make category membership salient. A highly skewed sex or race composition in a work group is likely to activate stereotypes (Bodenhausen et al. 1998: 317).

**Formalized Evaluation Systems**

Stereotyping and its concomitants distort how we interpret the behavior of outgroups, and the vaguer the information to which we are responding, the more subject it is to misinterpretation. In work settings, this means that recollections and evaluations that are based on unstructured observations are particularly vulnerable to race or sex bias (Fiske, Bersoff, Borgida, Deaux, and Heilman 1991). Organizations should be able to minimize race and sex bias in personnel decisions by using objective, reliable, and timely information that is directly relevant to job performance (Heilman 1995). For objective measures to minimize intergroup bias, organizations must provide a detailed specification of all performance criteria along with precise information for each candidate for each criterion (Krieger 1995: 1246). Employers should further reduce attribution errors by routinely collecting concrete performance data and implementing evaluation procedures in which evaluators rely exclusively on these data without attributions explaining them.

**Accountability**

The biasing effects of stereotypes and other cognitive distortions on evaluative judgments are reduced when decision makers know that they will be held accountable for the criteria they use to make decisions and for the accuracy of the information upon which they base their decisions (Salancik and Pfeffer 1978; Tetlock 1992; Tetlock and Lerner 1999). If evaluators know that they will be held accountable for their judgments before being exposed to the information on which they will base their judgment, accountability not only reduces the expression of biases, it also reduces bias in nonconscious cognitive processes, such as the encoding of information (Tetlock 1992). The benefits of accountability vanish under time pressure, however (Tetlock and Lerner 1999). Indeed, time pressure, mental “busyness,” and information overload—all common in contemporary work organizations—exacerbate the effects of stereotypes on judgment and memory (Bodenhausen et al. 1998: 319).

The processes underlying the importance of accountability no doubt help explain how antidiscrimination and affirmative action laws and regulations increase job access for people of color and white women. Goals, timetables, and monitoring—all effective affirmative action mechanisms—hold organizations responsible for

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10 Interpersonal (i.e., one-on-one) competition reduces stereotyping, because competitors’ success depends on having accurate information about their opponent.

11 As Ridgeway (1997: 221) observed, the diffuse nature of sex stereotypes makes them relevant in many situations.

12 See DiTomaso (1993) for a description of Xerox’s successful use of accountability.
sex- and race-balanced hiring and the sex and race composition of their job assignments (Reskin 1998). Hypothetically, organizations can achieve similar results through programs that make decision makers at all levels responsible for ensuring that their decisions are not tainted by ingroup preference and for the outcomes of those decisions.

Conclusions

All common social scientific theories of discrimination, as well as the dominant legal approach to discrimination (Krieger 1995, 1998), locate its source in intrapsychic processes such as prejudice, ignorance, the sense of threat, and the desire to maintain or improve one’s position. They differ, however, in whether they view the consequences of intrapsychic processes as motivated or automatic. Theories that assume that discrimination is motivated by antipathy toward or fear of another group view discrimination as an aberration within a generally fair reward system (Black 1989). According to social cognition theory, in contrast, the basic cognitive processes through which everyone sorts through data distort all our perceptions, bias all our attributions, and induce all of us to favor ingroup members. Laissez-faire decision making in work organizations—and other domains, including schools, voluntary organizations, and the family—transforms these biases into discrimination against outgroup members. If the cognitive processes that lead to discrimination are universal, as experimental evidence suggests, then they cause a huge amount of employment discrimination that is neither intended nor motivated by conscious negative feelings toward outgroups. And the organizational practices that determine how the input of individuals contribute to personnel decisions, and hence precipitate, permit, or prevent the activation of cognitive biases, are the proximate causes of most employment discrimination.

Although I and others suspect that most employment discrimination originates in the cognitive processes I have summarized, we should not lose sight of the fact that discrimination also results from conscious actions that are motivated by ignorance, prejudice, or the deliberate efforts by dominant group members to preserve their privileged status. Twentieth-century sociology has focused on these conscious processes of exploitation and exclusion, as well as on structures that preserve a discriminatory status quo. This approach assumes that dominant group members intentionally create work structures and organizational arrangements whose purpose is to preserve or enhance their position. Among many examples I could offer is the widespread and deliberate exclusion of minorities and women from police and fire departments (Chertkovich 1997; also see Reskin 2000). When people’s group position motivates them to discriminate, exclusionary organizational practices are superficial causes of discrimination, and they require different interventions. Organizations, I have argued, can reduce discrimination issuing from nonconscious cognitive processes. Remedying discrimination that results from dominant group members’ deliberate construction of exclusionary personnel practices will require race- and gender-conscious interventions, including formal charges of sex/race-based discrimination, collective action organized on the basis of status groups, or intervention by regulatory agencies, including sex- and race-conscious remedial affirmative action.

The same characteristics—sex, race, ethnicity—are the primary bases of both automatic cognitive categorization and social stratification; indeed, their centrality in each process reinforces them in the other process. Moreover, automatic cognitive categorization and race- or sex-based social stratification have the same result: privileging ingroup members who are usually white males of European ancestry. Moreover, both cognitive-based and conflict-group-based processes comprise “countless small acts by a changing cast of characters, . . . that incrementally and consistently limit the employment prospects of one group of workers compared with those of another” (Nelson and Bridges 1999: 243). Individually, either process leads to the accumulation of advantages and dis-

13 At least one social psychological theory, “realistic group conflict” theory, attributes discrimination to group conflict (Brewer and Brown 1998: 565).

14 For discussion of superficial causes, see Lieberson (1985) or Reskin (1988).

15 For example, in challenging intentional, bias-based racial discrimination by Shoney’s Restaurants, the NAACP Legal Defense Fund publicized an 800 number for complaints against Shoney’s, generating both the basis for a class action lawsuit and supporting evidence from white supervisory employees who supported the lawsuit (Watkins 1993).
advantages. Sometimes both cognitive biases and prejudice- or conflict-based discrimination are at work, with reinforcing effects. Ridgeway’s (1997: 227) analysis illustrates this with respect to gender: “Only occasionally will gender be so salient in the situation that men will act self-consciously as men to preserve their interests[, but] the repeated background activation of gender status over many workplace interactions, biasing behavior in subtle or more substantial degrees, produces the effect of men acting in their gender interest, even when many men feel no special loyalty to their sex.”

As I said above, some members of the dominant group actively discriminate against people based on their race, sex, national origin, as well as other characteristics such as age, sexual orientation, weight, and religion. Here I have questioned the assumption that I and many other sociologists brought to the study of workplace inequality in the twentieth century: that most discrimination results from the purposive actions by dominant group members who seek to preserve and expand their privileges. While dominant group members benefit from such discrimination, the salience of race and sex in contemporary society and in cognitive processes such as categorization and stereotyping allows most dominant group members to benefit without their having to take any action. By assuming that discrimination is largely the result of purposive action, we are on the wrong track for reducing discrimination. Plaintiffs routinely lose discrimination lawsuits because they cannot prove that their employer intended to discriminate against them (for examples, see Krieger 1995; Reskin 2000).16 And employers, who share our view that discrimination involves deliberate attempts to harm people because of their status, find discrimination charges implausible and reject them out of hand. The recognition that discrimination often stems from universal cognitive processes may make organizations less resistant to charges of discrimination and more receptive to modifying their employment practices to remove the effect of cognitive biases against people of color and white women.

Sociology’s history of trying to expose, understand, and reduce discrimination is to our discipline’s credit. Most of our progress in the last several decades of the twentieth century has been in documenting discrimination’s extent and persistence. We have made less headway in understanding its persistence and very little in figuring out how to reduce it because we have not correctly theorized how or why discrimination occurs. I have argued that much of it results from nonconscious cognitive processes. If I’m right, then its proximate cause is the organizational practices that permit or prevent it. Exactly how and when organizations contain the effects of cognitive biases should be high on the discipline’s agenda for the twenty-first century.

References

16 For a discussion of the legal limitations associated with the standard conception of discrimination as actions intended to harm people based on their sex, race, or color, see Krieger (1995).