"Was It Me or Was It Gender Discrimination?" How Women Respond to Ambiguous Incidents at Work

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Abstract: Research shows that people often feel emotional distress when they experience a potentially discriminatory incident but cannot classify it conclusively. In this study, we propose that the ramifications of such ambiguous incidents extend beyond interior, emotional costs to include socially consequential action (or inaction) at work. Taking a mixed-methods approach, we examine how professional women experience and respond to incidents that they believe might have been gender discrimination, but about which they feel uncertain. Our interviews show that women struggle with how to interpret and respond to ambiguous incidents. Survey data show that women experience ambiguous incidents more often than incidents they believe were obviously discriminatory. Our vignette experiment reveals that women anticipate responding differently to the same incident depending on its level of ambiguity. Following incidents that are obviously discriminatory, women anticipate taking actions that make others aware of the problem; following ambiguous incidents, women anticipate changing their own work habits and self-presentation. This study establishes ambiguous gendered incidents as a familiar element of many women's work lives that must be considered to address unequal gendered experiences at work.

Keywords: discrimination; ambiguity; gender; work

RESEARCHERS have documented the existence of discrimination against various groups in labor markets and the workplace. Discrimination affects a range of workplace processes and outcomes, including hiring (Kang et al. 2016; Pager 2007; Quadlin 2018), compensation (Correll, Benard, and Paik 2007; Seidel, Polzer, and Stewart 2000), performance evaluations and rewards (Castilla 2008, 2015; Rivera and Tilcsik 2019), as well as everyday interactions (Ridgeway 1997) and task segregation (Anteby and Chan 2018). Such findings make it clear that certain groups are consistently disadvantaged at work.

Although researchers have firmly established the existence of workplace discrimination, individuals often feel uncertain about classifying negative personal experiences as discrimination based on group membership (Petersen and Saporta 2004; Small and Pager 2020). They might wonder whether they were denied rewards or privileges as a result of discrimination or more benign factors, such as task-relevant characteristics. For example, when a woman is passed up for a promotion in favor of a man, she may wonder whether she was the victim of discrimination or whether her colleague's performance was superior. She must work to make sense of this incident of potential bias and may never fully resolve whether it was discriminatory. We refer to such experiences as "ambiguous incidents."

We define ambiguous incidents as events or interactions that targets believe *may* have been motivated by bias. Integrating findings from disparate literatures,

we propose that ambiguous incidents have three key characteristics. First, they range from quotidian microaggressions to rare but serious events (e.g., from being interrupted to missing a promotion) (Feagin 1991; Lamont et al. 2016; Small and Pager 2020; Sue 2010). Second, ambiguous incidents generate gradational classifications (Major, Quinton, and Schmader 2003), spanning "more ambiguous" to "more obvious" attributions. Third, the motives underlying these incidents are heterogeneous and difficult to ascertain—for both targets and researchers. Some fraction of incidents are motivated by bias; yet another unknown fraction are not, and these incidents constitute misunderstandings between the "perpetrator" and the target (Frieze, Olson, and Good 1990).

Scholars have emphasized the interior, emotional costs associated with ambiguous incidents. People experience cognitive and affective strain when they cannot definitively identify a negative experience as driven by their individual characteristics (like a lack of professional experience) or prejudice based on their membership in a marginalized group (Jones et al. 2016). For example, people facing microaggressions—slights rooted in group membership that typically remain ambiguous—frequently experience rumination, sleep problems, stress, and other physical and mental health problems (Douds and Hout 2020; Embrick, Domínguez, and Karsak 2017; Pascoe and Richman 2009; Sue 2010). And when discrimination is ambiguous rather than obvious, people experience greater depletion in cognitive resources (Salvatore and Shelton 2007) and lower self-esteem (Crocker, Cornwell, and Major 1993; Crocker and Major 1989).

In this study, we look beyond the emotional and cognitive costs to consider how ambiguous incidents may shape social actions taken (and not taken) at work. Our theoretical intuition comes from research showing that people generally work hard to resolve ambiguity, often by talking with others (Saint-Charles and Mongeau 2009; Srivastava 2015). Yet, in the workplace, employees can face negative repercussions for discussing incidents of potential discrimination (Brake and Grossman 2007; Shelton and Stewart 2004). As a result, those who experience ambiguous incidents may not reach out to others but might respond in other ways. Although existing theories suggest that people will take some kind of action following ambiguous incidents, it is unclear exactly *how* they will respond.

To understand responses to ambiguous incidents at work, we focus on women in professional settings in the United States. Discrimination against women is still common (Graf 2018; Quadlin 2018; Ridgeway 2011; Saguy and Rees 2021), and women in professional roles report high levels of gender discrimination (Parker and Funk 2017). Professional women are thus likely to realize that workplace gender discrimination exists, but may struggle with classifying a specific ambiguous incident as discriminatory. We focus on a single axis of identity—gender—because doing so makes it possible to measure the effects of ambiguous incidents in a straightforward, parsimonious way. Nevertheless, we recognize that multiple axes of identity may shape ambiguity, and we note the influence of intersectionality where possible in the study.

Adopting a mixed-methods, sequential research design (Brewer and Hunter 1989; Small 2011), we employed three methods to study uncertainty in perceptions of discrimination. First, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 31 women

to analyze meaning making and behavior in response to ambiguous incidents. Based on interview findings and existing theory, we then designed a survey of professional women in the United States ($N = 600$) to evaluate whether respondents in a large, diverse sample experienced ambiguous incidents as regularly as our interviews suggested. Third, we used interviewee narratives to design vignette experiments that compare how women anticipate responding to the same situation of negative treatment depending on whether the incident of potential discrimination is more versus less ambiguous. This mixed-methods approach allows us to ask: How do women see ambiguous incidents as affecting their work experiences? And what actions do they anticipate taking in response to more versus less ambiguous events? Like other similar mixed-methods designs (e.g., Doering and McNeill 2020; Kang et al. 2016; Kreager et al. 2017), this strategy allowed us to calibrate and refine our research tools, with early qualitative explorations (interviews) informing subsequent quantitative analyses (survey and vignette experiments).

Across stages of analysis, we examine subjective experiences of discrimination (Cooley 1902; Fine 1993; Schütz 1967) and do not attempt to measure it objectively. By focusing on perceptions of discrimination and their effects, we follow scholars who emphasize the importance of subjective discrimination experiences (e.g., Hart 2021; Small and Pager 2020).

Our findings demonstrate that ambiguous incidents are salient, common, and consequential for professional women. Through interviews, we found that ambiguous incidents range from everyday microaggressions to significant career events. Interviewees described their struggles to make sense of ambiguous incidents and reported responding differently to negative treatment they perceived as more versus less ambiguous. Next, our survey of a diverse sample of professional women confirmed what interviewees suggested: respondents experienced more ambiguous incidents than incidents that they classified as obvious discrimination. We found this trend consistent across various demographic groups.

Through vignette experiments, we found that women anticipate responding differently to the same situation when discrimination is more versus less ambiguous. Consistent with interviewees' accounts, our experimental results revealed that women who experience more obvious gender discrimination anticipate taking actions that make *others* aware of the problem. This includes raising the issue with a human resources officer, speaking with a supervisor, or engaging with a group for equity and diversity in their organization or industry. Such actions have the potential to initiate changes in organizational procedures or structures that could improve conditions for other women. By comparison, women who experience more ambiguous incidents are more likely to anticipate taking actions that alter *their own* work habits and self-presentation but do not make others aware of the problem. These actions include working harder, drawing a supervisor's attention to their accomplishments, or communicating more formally. Such actions may alter a woman's work experience or career, but they are unlikely to initiate changes that promote gender equality.

This research has implications for the study of workplace discrimination and the policies designed to address it. Although most discrimination research implicitly assumes that people experience discrimination as obvious, this study reveals the

prevalence of uncertainty in perceptions of discrimination and illuminates how such uncertainty shapes the social (in)actions that individuals take in response. Following calls to empirically investigate uncertainty in perceptions of discrimination (e.g., Bielby 2000; Hart 2021; Small and Pager 2020; Sue 2010), this study demonstrates that ambiguous incidents deserve as much attention as obvious discrimination in the study of workplace inequality. Finally, this research offers insights into how organizations might reduce ambiguous incidents and limit their negative ramifications, thereby moving towards more equitable workplaces.

Uncertainty in Perceptions of Gender Discrimination

Group-level Trends Versus Individual Experiences at Work

Sociologists often demonstrate the presence of workplace gender discrimination by comparing differences in the treatment that women and men receive on average. This analytic approach allows for the documentation of discrimination, defined as differential treatment on the basis of group membership (Quillian 2006). Research shows that women tend to receive fewer interviews, fewer job offers, and lower starting salaries (Foschi, Lai, and Sigerson 1994; Moss-Racusin et al. 2012; Quadlin 2018). Once hired, women are more likely than men to be assigned undesirable and less challenging tasks that provide limited opportunities for reputation building and career advancement (Babcock et al. 2017; Chan and Anteby 2016; Pater, Vianen, and Bechtoldt 2010). Women are also held to higher standards in promotions and terminations (Bobbitt-Zeher 2011; Olson and Becker 1983) and receive lower performance evaluations than similar male colleagues (Heilman 2001; Rivera and Tilcsik 2019). And even when men and women have identical quantitative performance evaluations, women tend to receive smaller salary raises and annual bonuses (Castilla 2008, 2015; Castilla and Benard 2010). Women are also more likely than men to report various forms of harassment, repeated small slights, social exclusion and isolation, unfavorable working conditions, and discrimination in the application of organizational policies (Bobbitt-Zeher 2011; McLaughlin, Uggen, and Blackstone 2012; Parker and Funk 2017; Reid 2015; Welsh 1999). In sum, sociologists find that women face gender discrimination in a variety of social forms, ranging from common and quotidian to rare and severe incidents.

Although research clearly documents the existence of workplace gender discrimination, an individual woman who experiences an incident of potential discrimination may feel uncertain about her evaluation of the situation. She may struggle to conclusively classify any given event or interaction as fueled by gender bias. Indeed, social theorists have long observed that uncertainty in understanding others' behavior is a fundamental feature of social life. As Simmel (1910:378–79) wrote, "complete knowledge of the individuality of another is denied to us; and all interrelations of men [*sic*] with one another are limited by the varying degrees of this deficiency." People often feel uncertain about attributing others' actions to particular motives (Blum and McHugh 1971; Garfinkel 1967; Schütz 1967), and this makes it difficult to evaluate whether specific incidents—often shrouded in ambiguity—were discriminatory.

Uncertainty about gender discrimination may be particularly widespread among women in the workplace. Coworkers, supervisors, and clients increasingly have incentives to avoid sexist language and direct references to gender, as obvious discrimination can have economic, legal, and social repercussions. The attendant sociohistorical shift from obvious toward more subtle and hard-to-decipher forms of discrimination makes classifying incidents more challenging for those who are subjected to negative treatment (Small and Pager 2020). Research on microaggressions—quotidian assaults on individuals' dignity driven by membership in marginalized groups—further suggests that contemporary discrimination often takes subtle forms (Domínguez and Embrick 2020; Embrick et al. 2017; Sue 2010). The decline in explicitly biased language and behavior, along with the rise of more indirect forms of discrimination, opens the door for women to experience a range of ambiguous incidents. Some of these incidents will be motivated by bias, whereas others may be benign misunderstandings. The challenge for women lies in managing the uncertainty of being unable to classify ambiguous incidents as falling in one category or the other.

The Cognitive and Affective Costs of Uncertainty

How does such uncertainty about potential discrimination affect individuals? Social psychological research emphasizes the cognitive and affective costs that individuals experience when they struggle to classify ambiguous incidents. Scholars propose that individuals experience "attributional ambiguity" when they feel uncertain about whether negative events reflect their individual characteristics (such as a lack of professional experience) or prejudices against their marginalized group (Crocker et al. 1993; Crocker and Major 1989; Major et al. 2003).

Members of marginalized groups experience a host of cognitive and affective costs when they cannot make definitive attributions about negative treatment (Jones et al. 2016). For example, those who are uncertain about the reasons for negative feedback report lower self-esteem than those who view the same feedback as discriminatory (Crocker et al. 1993; Crocker and Major 1989). Similarly, individuals show more cognitive impairment following ambiguously negative events and less cognitive impairment following obvious discrimination (Salvatore and Shelton 2007). Further, when discrimination is obvious, individuals tend to attribute negative feedback to biases held by the perpetrator; when it is ambiguous, they tend to attribute negative feedback to personal underperformance (Ruggiero and Taylor 1995).

These findings from social psychology are consistent with sociological research on microaggressions, which are typically couched in ambiguity. Douds and Hout (2020) find that microaggressions predict lower quality of life, worse mental and physical health, as well as emotional challenges. Examining the experience of women working in the tech industry, Alfrey and Twine (2017) argue that microaggressions can engender a sense of fear, isolation, and shame in women and racialized minorities. Although microaggressions' personal toll is well-established, little research has examined how individuals *act* in response to microaggressions (see also Eschmann 2021).

Uncertainty and Action

Individuals suffer cognitive and affective strain when they struggle to classify ambiguous incidents, but we suspect that such incidents also affect the social actions that women (do not) take in response, particularly at work. We propose that uncertainty in classifying ambiguous incidents may carry a host of communicative, social, and professional repercussions that currently go unaccounted for in the existing literature.

Existing research points to somewhat different expectations about how women might respond to ambiguous incidents at work. Given that individuals tend to feel uncomfortable with ambiguity and seek to resolve it (Kruglanski and Webster 1996), one might expect that women who experience incidents whose discriminatory character is ambiguous would work to clarify and classify such events. And because individuals communicate more actively about ambiguous than unambiguous information (McMahan and Evans 2018; Shibutani 1966), it stands to reason that women might be more inclined to reach out to managers, colleagues, or human resource professionals to discuss and resolve the uncertainty they experience. Consistent with this argument, research on social networks shows that people often respond to uncertainty by seeking contact with others who can help them make sense of their situation (Saint-Charles and Mongeau 2009; Srivastava 2015).

However, there are also compelling reasons to expect that uncertainty about an ambiguous incident will lead to a different response. Research on workplace discrimination shows that individuals hesitate to register formal complaints, particularly if they suspect they may not be believed (Brake and Grossman 2007). For members of marginalized groups, even suggesting the possibility of discrimination can carry steep reputational risks (e.g., Shelton and Stewart 2004). Indeed, a common reason for not speaking up in organizations is the assumption that it is inappropriate to raise concerns without conclusive evidence (Detert and Edmondson 2011). Accordingly, women may be especially unlikely to speak up in response to incidents about which they feel uncertain. Research also shows that individuals tend to attribute ambiguous negative feedback to their own underperformance rather than evaluator bias (Ruggiero and Taylor 1995), and that identifying as a victim of bias is psychologically costly (Jost and Banaji 1994). Reflecting this, women may respond to uncertainty about negative treatment by enhancing their work efforts or highlighting their contributions. Existing research thus suggests that uncertainty is likely to shape women's behavioral responses to potential discrimination, but it is unclear exactly *how* they will respond.

Methods and Results: Interviews, Survey, and Vignette Experiment

To understand the lived experience, perceived commonality, and workplace consequences of ambiguous incidents, we conducted in-depth interviews, a survey, and vignette experiments. We adopted a sequential (Small 2009) approach to combining multiple methods. We began abductively (Tavory and Timmermans 2014), using existing research and our own intuitions to craft interview questions and, based

on interview results, designed a survey that allowed us to test the consistency of trends reported by interviewees in a larger, more diverse sample. Interview and survey data illuminated the nature and relative frequency of ambiguous incidents, but they could not isolate the causal effects of ambiguity on women's anticipated actions at work. To that end, we ran a series of vignette experiments to identify the causal effect of ambiguity on anticipated responses. When crafting vignettes, we drew on real-life examples that women described in interviews. In what follows, we present the methods and results for the interview, survey, and experimental studies.

Interviews

Methods

We launched our research by conducting in-depth interviews to obtain contextualized knowledge about how women experience and respond to uncertainty about ambiguous incidents (Lamont and Swidler 2014). First, we sought to assess whether women consider ambiguous incidents to be an important aspect of their workplace experiences and careers. We also wanted to understand how women made sense of ambiguous incidents. What contextual information did they consider? Whom did they consult, and how did this shape their interpretations? Moreover, we explored actions and workplace changes that occurred following ambiguous incidents. We assessed this information in comparison to incidents of obvious discrimination that participants also reported.

Our sample includes 31 professional women from the United States. Professional women report high levels of discrimination (Quadlin 2018; Saguy and Rees 2021) and have the realistic—albeit difficult—option of confronting discrimination, which allows us to observe a range of responses. Intersectionality scholars highlight the divergent experience of gender (and other categories) for individuals from different classes and races (Hill Collins 2000). We thus used purposive sampling to incorporate these and other axes that might shape the experience of gender discrimination (Small 2009; Weiss 1995), including age, region, profession and industry, and political standpoint. In terms of race, we interviewed seven Asian, three black, three Latina, two Middle-Eastern, two multiracial, and fourteen white women. For more information on participant demographics, see Table A in the Supplemental Materials.

We began recruiting respondents by asking acquaintances and colleagues for referrals and then used snowball sampling to ensure sample variation. During recruitment, we described the study as focusing on "women's experiences in the workplace" without mentioning discrimination or uncertainty. The interviews were conducted between August 2020 and May 2021 over the phone or through video conferencing software by a research assistant with extensive interviewing experience. At the beginning of each interview, we established a timeline of respondents' employment history. We then asked about incidents of potential gender discrimination, exploring each incident with follow-up questions that sought to elicit detailed accounts. For example, we asked whether the incident had changed

how participants felt about or behaved at work and whether they discussed the incident with others. We did not initially ask about the challenges entailed in classifying incidents as gender discrimination because we wanted to assess whether women would raise these issues independently—indeed, many did.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Interviews had a median length of 74 minutes, with a minimum of 34 minutes and a maximum of 130 minutes. After completing a first set of ten interviews, we closely read the transcripts several times, wrote analytic memos highlighting interesting and surprising findings (Tavory and Timmermans 2014), and developed a coding scheme that we used to analyze the entire set of transcripts (Deterding and Waters 2021). For each incident of potential gender discrimination, we coded the type of event (such as condescending treatment or being passed up for a promotion), the "perpetrator," the certainty or uncertainty the respondent felt about classifying the event as discrimination, the information and input the respondent considered in evaluating the incident, the respondent's response (such as filing a complaint or doing nothing), and the outcome and/or repercussions associated with the response.

Results

Participants in our in-depth interviews were intuitively familiar with the feeling of uncertainty about potentially discriminatory incidents. In fact, they frequently raised the issue of uncertainty without being prompted. After establishing respondents' work histories, we asked whether they had ever experienced gender discrimination at work. Right away, several respondents prefaced their answers by pointing out that it was challenging to definitively classify negative experiences as discrimination. For example, one respondent said, "Things aren't always black and white, and I don't know that [it was gender discrimination], obviously." Another woman commented on this problem after describing several incidents of negative treatment she had faced: "You're wondering, 'Was it me, or was it because I'm a woman, or both?' I don't know—there's just so many questions around this and, yeah, I wonder, is this happening to other women, or did this just happen to me?"

Participants reported a broad set of incidents that might have been gender discrimination but remained shrouded in uncertainty. They mentioned many minor incidents, such as colleagues interrupting them or ignoring their contributions, excluding them from social activities, or making patronizing remarks that questioned their competency. However, they also mentioned highly consequential situations that fundamentally shaped their careers. For example, they described the ambiguity surrounding stalled promotions and other career development opportunities. In this section, we discuss several cases that illustrate the range of ambiguous incidents women experienced and reveal how feelings of uncertainty shaped their subsequent behavior and career outcomes. For a list of participants and their sociodemographic features, see Table A.

Kelly is a 36-year-old white woman. Between the age of 28 and 32, Kelly (interviewee 6 in Table A) worked as a product manager for a security solutions company in San Francisco. After about two years, Kelly's colleague Brian was promoted to senior product manager. Brian was hired after Kelly, but she knew

that Brian already had relevant experience working in the security industry. Kelly also knew that Brian was hired with a higher starting salary than hers, but she accepted this given Brian's prior work experience. However, Kelly thought that her work performance was superior to Brian's, who, she said, had been "in and out of a performance improvement plan." Accordingly, she was upset when her supervisor invoked Brian's work experience to explain why he, rather than Kelly, was promoted. She said:

> The original pay discrepancy [with Brian], I think wasn't [gender discrimination] because at that point you could make the argument: you hire someone externally who looks good on a résumé, has a lot of experience, so you're probably going to pay that person more. But I think once we were both working and you could actually see all actual performance and then giving that person a senior title—that I find a little bit more questionable. I feel like at that point you can't base it on a person's prior experience on their résumé anymore, right?

Kelly thought a lot about being passed up for this promotion as well as her future with the company. She discussed her experience with friends, select colleagues, and family. Her friends and family found the promotion decision troubling and encouraged Kelly to complain. Another woman working at the company even suggested that Kelly explore legal options. But Kelly decided to respond in a way she saw as more amicable by asking her supervisor what she needed to do to be promoted to senior product manager. She was disappointed to find that her supervisor did not give her a clear answer. She recalled him saying, "Oh, we don't have a plan in place on how to become a senior. There's some opportunity maybe down the line that you can get engaged in, and that way you can expand your responsibilities." However, this opportunity never materialized, and Kelly became increasingly unhappy at work. When she had still not been promoted after two more years, she became disillusioned with her job: "I basically said to my husband, 'At this point, we might as well have kids.' And we did end up having kids at that time and, yeah, I realized that I kind of cared less about it [the job], so I was like not working long hours anymore, wouldn't respond to emails over the weekend, and after I came back from maternity leave, I stayed for a few more months but then I left." Kelly now works as a product manager in the healthcare industry. She is happier with this job than in her prior position at the male-dominated security solutions company. But the experience took a toll on her, and she is still not entirely sure whether being passed up for promotion can be attributed to her gender:

> I thought, 'As long as my work shows, my work will show for me.' And now I realize how wrong that assumption is. I mean, it's kind of weird because I think if you ask anyone in this country, no one would say, 'I don't want a female manager!' I don't think anyone would say that! But yet somehow, I feel like the way they perceive their female employees, they think that either they can't do the job or they just don't want them to do the job… I don't know. Thinking back, I can't see any objective reasons of why I should not have got have gotten the job. And even

now, you know, four years later, I still can't figure out why I wouldn't get that job.

Among interviewees, uncertainty around ambiguous incidents affected career advancement in many ways, not only when women were passed up for promotions. Respondents also described everyday treatment that might have been gender discrimination and made it harder for them to position themselves for leadership opportunities. Specifically, they noted that colleagues and supervisors often discounted, overlooked, or ignored their actual and potential contributions to their organizations—but they felt uncertain about whether these incidents were discriminatory. More than half of the interviewees described experiences of this kind. This challenge is illustrated by Alicia, a 39-year-old Filipina (interviewee 8). Between the age of 26 and 30, Alicia worked as a grants and donor relations manager for a philanthropic organization in the Midwest. She repeatedly faced the problem of coworkers and supervisors overlooking her ideas and contributions. She recalls one particular meeting soon after she was hired:

> I remember sharing something and I don't know that anyone even heard me. Only one person responded and was just like 'Oh, that's interesting' and then it just kind of got brushed over, because no one else responded or said anything. And then, maybe like towards the end of the meeting, this other person, this gentleman, said 'By the way, I was just thinking about this place or this thing' and shared the same exact [idea] or rephrased it, but shared something that I had talked about and it was well received.

Alicia did not know how to make sense of this experience and initially blamed herself. She said: "I remember thinking, 'Gosh, maybe I just wasn't loud enough, I wasn't articulate enough, or maybe people didn't understand the way I said it.'" Her response was to speak more loudly at subsequent meetings: "I was always trying to project, almost like I was yelling, in my mind, after that, any time I would share an idea." At the same time, however, the initial experience made it harder for her to share ideas because "it made me feel nervous to share answers for things or presenting, because I wasn't sure how it would be interpreted. So, it created a little bit of anxiety for me sometimes and it forced me to be more hyperaware of what I was saying and preparing well in advance." In hindsight, having now had similar experiences throughout her career, Alicia interprets these situations as discrimination based on her gender, race, and age:

> I see it as a little bit of gender and race, because I'm Asian and I tend to be a little bit quieter around people and people always just expect me to be that quiet. And I, you know, was a young woman at the time. And I think like all of those things played into like how I would present myself, because I would see that that was my identity and that is the response I would get, or I would get talked over, or someone would repeat what I just said.

Alicia's experience indicates the additional challenges that women of color face. Like white women, women of color frequently feel uncertain about classifying

negative treatment as discrimination. But they also have to weigh whether their race—alone or in combination with their gender—shaped their treatment.

Respondents also described the uncertainty they felt about receiving undesirable work assignments. Some mentioned that they were expected to take notes during meetings even when they held senior positions, and that they were asked to place lunch orders, plan parties, and organize other social events. Additionally, women were often assigned tasks that were simply less desirable or challenging than those assigned to male colleagues. Many suspected that these requests were grounded in gender bias. For example, Rusti (interviewee 27) is 44 years old and works for the federal government as a senior program analyst. After working under a male supervisor for several years, she noticed that he assigned more interesting and rewarding projects to men whereas women received more tedious assignments. But Rusti decided not to share and discuss her observation with her team members, because she did not want to disrupt the team's collegial spirit.

> I was afraid it would cause problems. You know, we had a really great team, a really cohesive team, as far as our team went, outside of management. We did things together; we had a monthly outing where we went and played golf or we went bowling a couple of times. So, it just wasn't worth raising [the gendered task assignments].

Participants also reported entirely unambiguous incidents, such as sexist jokes, groping, and other types of sexual harassment. Interestingly, however, even respondents who had encountered obvious discrimination said they found ambiguous experiences more troubling. They described brooding over these incidents, being unsure how to interpret them or respond. Addison (interviewee 26), a young black woman, said: "I think that certain [incidents] are a lot easier to kind of move through and move on from. When you have enough, like, pieces of evidence to kind of corroborate your intuition. After I've gone through my iterations of trying to make sense of something that maybe doesn't make sense, I try my best to move on, but those ambiguous instances are harder for sure." Similarly, Kelly, whose case we discussed above, said: "I think I would feel better if it was overtly gender [discrimination], because at least you would feel somewhat validated in your perception, whereas you always question, like, maybe I'm not seeing things right, maybe I'm biased, you know? It's just my subjective perception, maybe I don't want to admit that there's a flaw on my end."

In analyzing the interview data, we found that uncertainty shaped whether and how women responded to potential incidents of discrimination. After all, ambiguous incidents are difficult to contest. Women may reasonably feel they need conclusive evidence of discrimination before complaining to human resources, confronting perpetrators, or asking supervisors to act. For example, Johanna (interviewee 7) reported that male colleagues at her consulting agency had been promoted faster, but she was unsure if she could attribute this to gender. When asked how things would change if she knew that the disparity was the result of gender discrimination, she said she would "think about raising it potentially more broadly in the company as an issue that would need to be addressed. And I think I would talk to more people about it too, you know, to see if they had any similar experiences."

This type of response could initiate broader changes in the organization that might reduce gender disparities.

Barring clarity in the face of potential discrimination, however, respondents usually reacted by adjusting their own behavior by working harder or presenting themselves differently. Accordingly, Kelly asked her supervisor for a promotion roadmap rather than challenging his decision to promote her underperforming colleague, and she eventually quit her job when her efforts remained unrewarded. Alicia spoke more loudly rather than pointing out that her coworkers overlooked her ideas. And Rusti kept silent rather than contesting unequal patterns in project assignments. Our interview findings, therefore, suggest that uncertainty reduces the likelihood that women will speak out to contest negative treatment. When faced with ambiguous incidents, interviewees tended to adjust their own work habits and self-presentation rather than taking actions that might encourage organizational change.

Survey

Methods

We found that interviewees described ambiguous incidents as a relatively common experience that occurred more frequently than obvious discrimination. However, we took seriously the possibility that our interviewees' impressions might reflect that of a small, select group of individuals. We thus ran a survey to examine whether the trends described by interviewees were consistent with those drawn from a larger, more diverse sample of professional women in the United States. In this way, the survey serves as a confirmatory extension of interview-based findings (Small 2011). Because the survey does not contain a probabilistic sample of respondents whose demographic characteristics are proportional to those of professional women across the United States, the findings should not be interpreted as precise estimates of population-level patterns.

We administered the survey using the online survey platform Prolific. Research shows that participants on Prolific are attentive and engaged, with limited prior exposure to common survey instruments and experimental paradigms (Peer et al. 2017). Prolific allows researchers to invite participants based on pre-screened characteristics, reducing the likelihood that respondents will misrepresent themselves (Palan and Schitter 2018). In January 2021, we surveyed 600 women residing in the United States who (a) held at least a 4-year college degree, (b) worked in a professional role,[1] and (c) indicated they were working part- or full-time before the COVID-19 pandemic. Compared to our interviewee sample, the survey captured a more diverse set of respondents in terms of race, age, political affiliation, geography, work experiences, and other factors. For example, 30 percent of respondents were non-white, and 22 percent identified as politically conservative; and respondents came from 49 states. Table B in the Supplemental Materials reports respondents' demographic characteristics.

Our survey captured women's self-reported experiences of ambiguous incidents and obvious discrimination in the workplace. We began by specifying that cer-

tain experiences are obviously gender discrimination, whereas others are more ambiguous. We wrote:

- Some incidents of discrimination against women are **obvious**: It is immediately clear that a person is treated negatively because she is a woman. **She can be sure that the cause of the negative treatment was bias against women.**

- Some incidents of possible discrimination against women are **not obvious**: It is not immediately clear that a person is treated negatively because she is a woman or for some other reason. **She cannot be entirely sure whether the cause of the negative treatment was bias against women or something else.**

We then asked participants to report the frequency at which they experienced each type of incident. We asked (in random order):

- As we mentioned earlier, some incidents of discrimination against women are **obvious**. Thinking about your own experience, how often have you personally experienced incidents where **you were sure** you were discriminated against for being a woman?

- As we mentioned earlier, some incidents of discrimination against women are **not obvious**. Thinking about your own experience, how often have you personally experienced incidents where **you were not sure** you were discriminated against for being a woman?

Respondents indicated the frequency at which they had each type of experience during the years 2019 and 2020 (separately). We focus on the 2019 results to avoid the unusual conditions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. Respondents answered using a six-point Likert-type item ranging from never (0) to very often (5), a measure that scholars have used previously to capture discriminatory experiences (e.g., Sheridan 2006). Finally, respondents answered a series of questions about their demographic and workplace characteristics.[2]

Results

In the diverse sample of professional women surveyed, we found trends similar to those described by interviewees. Women in the survey sample reported that they more commonly experienced incidents they perceived as ambiguous than incidents they perceived as obvious discrimination. Reporting on the year 2019,[3] 74.2 percent of respondents said they experienced some kind of ambiguous incident, whereas 64.2 percent said they experienced obvious discrimination. These results suggest that the professional women surveyed experience more ambiguous incidents than obvious discrimination.

Table 1 summarizes responses across the six-point Likert-style options. Notably, similar proportions of respondents reported both types of negative experiences "one time" (12.2 percent for both categories) or "a few times" (41.5 percent and 39.2 percent). However, differences emerge at the extremes. Only 25.8 percent of respondents say they "never" experienced ambiguous incidents, whereas 35.8

Table 1: Frequency of Self-Reported Obvious Discrimination and Ambiguous Incidents in 2019, All Respondents ($N = 600$).

	Obvious Discrimination (%)	Ambiguous Incidents (%)
Never	35.83	25.83
One time	12.17	12.17
A few times	41.50	39.17
Often	8.33	16.33
Very often	2.17	6.50

Note. Answers are in response to the following questions, presented in random order: (1) "As we mentioned earlier, some incidents of discrimination against women are **obvious**. Thinking about your own experience, how often have you personally experienced incidents where **you were sure** you were discriminated against for being a woman?" and (2) "As we mentioned earlier, some incidents of discrimination against women are **not obvious**. Thinking about your own experience, how often have you personally experienced incidents where you may have been discriminated against for being a woman but **you were <u>not</u> entirely sure**?"

percent say the same about obvious discrimination. And although 22.8 percent of respondents reported experiencing ambiguous incidents "often" or "very often," only 10.5 percent say the same about obvious discrimination.

The survey results demonstrate that, on average, professional women viewed ambiguous incidents as a more common feature of their work experience than obvious discrimination. In a series of supplementary analyses, we found that this pattern holds across numerous social categories, including different professions, age groups, political leanings, sexual orientations, and racial groups.

A notable—and unexpected—finding from our survey data emerged from an optional open-ended question in which we invited respondents to describe their experiences of ambiguous or obvious gender discrimination. We were surprised to find an outpouring of detailed descriptions of ambiguous incidents, many of which resembled what we heard during in-depth interviews.

Survey respondents frequently described feeling "uncertain" or "unsure" about whether negative incidents stemmed from gender bias or other factors. For example, one respondent wrote, "I'm a psychologist in training, and I have a supervisor who is a man. A lot of the things he says question my ability as a therapist. I'm not sure if this is due to me being in training or because I'm a woman." Others expressed similar uncertainty, as captured by this respondent's account: "Honestly, I'm not sure how to explain it, but it was kind of a feeling based on how someone (a man) decided to shorten my name (like a nickname) without my consent. [...] I am not sure he would do this to everyone or only a woman." Although respondents occasionally speculated about factors unrelated to gender that might have motivated these incidents, many remained unsure, like this respondent: "A group of coworkers arranged an event after work and invited people from different departments (but not me). The group was 100 percent men. I didn't know any of them very well, so they simply might not have felt comfortable inviting me, but I can't be certain."

Survey respondents had no financial incentives for filling out the optional textbox with descriptions of ambiguous incidents. We take their voluntary efforts in this part of the survey as an indication that the topic of ambiguous incidents "hit

a nerve" with participants. This outpouring of narrative accounts further suggests that ambiguous incidents are a familiar and important workplace experience for professional women.

Vignette Experiment

Methods

Although our interviews suggested that uncertainty shapes how women respond to potential discrimination and survey data highlighted the frequency of ambiguous incidents in a larger sample, these data could not isolate the causal effect of uncertainty from the influence of other situational factors. We thus designed a vignette experiment to measure the effects of uncertainty in perceptions of discrimination on anticipated behavior while holding all other aspects of the incident constant. This approach made it possible to examine how women anticipate responding to incidents that differ only in their degree of ambiguity but are otherwise identical.

From a purely empirical perspective, the ideal experiment to study this question would be a field experiment allowing us to surreptitiously monitor women's behavior in a natural workplace setting. We would randomly assign some women to experience ambiguous incidents while subjecting other women to otherwise identical incidents involving more obvious discrimination. Of course, exposing people to actual incidents of discrimination and then monitoring their behavior would be unethical and infeasible. Thus, we used a vignette experiment to capture how women anticipated responding to realistic scenarios about incidents that were more or less ambiguous in their discriminatory nature. Research suggests that individuals' anticipated responses to vignettes are reasonably strongly associated with their actual responses to similar situations in the real world. Indeed, vignette study participants can anticipate fairly accurately how they would actually respond to complex and emotionally charged events, such as receiving a sexual assault disclosure (Waterman et al. 2021). Meta-analyses of the link between intended and actual behaviors point to a similar conclusion (Ajzen 2012; Sheeran 2002). Thus, although not perfect, a vignette study of anticipated responses provides an ethical, feasible, and informative empirical approach.

Figure 1 summarizes the structure of our experiment. Each participant read one (and only one) of three vignettes describing a potential incident of gender discrimination in the workplace. Within each vignette, we manipulated the level of ambiguity: the incident involved either relatively obvious gender discrimination (i.e., the control condition) or relatively ambiguous gender discrimination (i.e., the treatment condition). After reading the vignette, respondents completed a set of items to indicate how they would respond to the situation and then answered standard demographic questions.

We drew extensively on our interview data to develop vignettes that were grounded in our interviewees' experiences and captured incidents of varying severity. In the first vignette, a supervisor overlooks the participant's contributions in a meeting but gives credit to a male colleague for raising the same idea. In the second vignette, the men on a project team are given substantive and valued assignments,
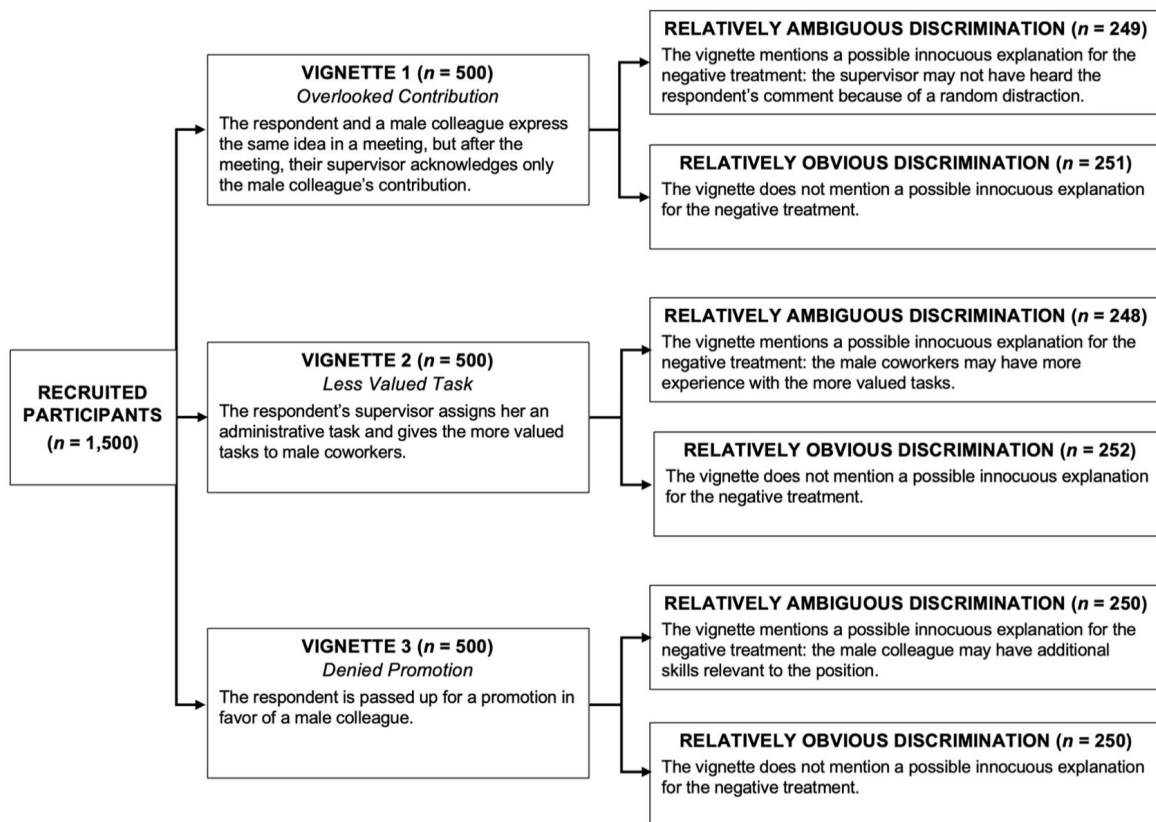
Figure 1: Structure of the Vignette Experiment. *Notes:* Appendix C in the Supplemental Materials contains the vignettes and manipulations. Within each vignette, participants were randomized to a more or less ambiguous incident.

whereas the female participant is left with a minor and less desirable task. In the third and highest-stakes scenario, the participant is passed up for a major promotion. Ranging from a relatively minor episode in a meeting to a significant career event, these vignettes enabled us to identify the effects of ambiguity across high- and low-stakes situations.

Following an established experimental paradigm in social psychology (Ruggiero and Taylor 1995; Son Hing et al. 2008), we manipulated the level of ambiguity in each vignette through the presence or absence of a possible reason for the negative treatment other than bias. That is, to create a sense of uncertainty, we provided participants in the more ambiguous condition with a potential, though not definite, non-gender-related explanation for the outcome. For example, the ambiguous version of the first vignette introduced the possibility that the participant's contributions to the meeting were overlooked because of a random distraction—a ringing cell phone—rather than gender bias. The second and third vignettes created ambiguity by suggesting that the participant's male coworkers might have been favored because of their relevant skills. Online supplement C in the Supplemental

Materials contains the vignettes and manipulations. A pretest ($N = 450$) confirmed that these manipulations had the intended effects.[4]

To generate an initial set of items capturing actions taken in response to ambiguous incidents and obvious discrimination, we drew again on our interview data. We further refined this list by building on previous research that measured people's reactions to discrimination (e.g., Lamont et al. 2016). Many of the actions our interviewees described fit broadly within the categories of responses outlined by Lamont et al. (2016), which provided confidence that our interviewee-generated list of actions reflected broader trends in how individuals react to potential discrimination in the real world.

Table 2 lists all response items. Some items capture actions that make others aware of the incident (e.g., raising the issue with a human resource officer). In contrast, other items focus on altering one's own work habits or self-presentation (e.g., working harder or communicating differently at work). A third set of items measures intentions to exit the situation by looking for an assignment with a different supervisor or a new job in a different organization. Participants indicated how likely they were to take each of these actions on a six-point Likert-type item (1 = very unlikely, 6 = very likely).

Participants were women with at least a college degree living in the United States and working full-time in a professional role. Power analysis indicated that, to have 80 percent power, we needed about 250 participants per cell (i.e., 500 per vignette) to detect small-to-medium between-subject effects ($d = .25$, $\alpha = .05$, two-tailed). Accordingly, we recruited 500 participants from Prolific for each vignette (with half of the participants randomly assigned to the more ambiguous condition and the other half to the more obvious condition), resulting in a total sample of 1,500. Most participants were white (70 percent), Asian (14 percent), or black (7 percent). Ages ranged from 22 to 65, with a mean of 35.6 years. We preregistered our design, sample size, and planned analyses.[5]

Results

Figures 2, 3, and 4 summarize the results of our vignette experiment. These figures show differences in means for items capturing actions women expect to take in response to obvious versus ambiguous discrimination incidents. Figure 2 focuses on actions that make others aware of the incident. Figure 3 examines changes to one's own work habits and self-presentation. Figure 4 explores attempts to switch to a different supervisor or leave the organization.

Figure 2 reveals a clear pattern across all vignettes. When gender discrimination incidents were more ambiguous, respondents reported being less likely to discuss their concerns with their human resources department, colleagues, or a local or industry-wide group focused on equity, diversity, and inclusion. In two of the three vignettes, ambiguity also reduced women's intention to discuss the incident with their supervisor or other professionals in their industry. We thus find that women who experience ambiguous (rather than relatively obvious) discrimination incidents report being less likely to make others aware of the problem.

Table 2: Frequency of Self-Reported Obvious Discrimination and Ambiguous Incidents in 2019, All Respondents (N = 600).

In response to this situation, how likely are you to take each of the following actions?

- Reach out to your organization's Human Resources (HR) department to discuss the incident and express concerns.

- Reach out to your supervisor to discuss the incident and express concerns.

- Reach out to colleagues in your organization to discuss the incident and draw attention to this as a problem that women overall may face.

- Reach out to other professionals in your industry to discuss the incident and draw attention to this as a problem that women overall may face.

- Reach out to a group for equity and diversity in your organization or industry to discuss the incident and draw attention to this as a problem that women overall may face.

- Work harder at your job.

- Work less hard at your job.

- Do more to draw your supervisor's and colleagues' attention to your work and contributions.

- Adjust your appearance at work by changing your clothing, hair, or make-up.

- Communicate more formally at work by trying to be more articulate, avoiding casual language, or speaking in a louder voice.

- Do nothing at all.

- Look for a work assignment with a different supervisor within your organization.

- Look for a new job at a different organization.

Note: Item order was randomized for each respondent.

These effects were not only statistically significant but also meaningful in a practical sense. Across vignettes, for example, 34 percent of participants in the less ambiguous (relatively obvious) condition reported that they would be at least somewhat likely to reach out to their human resources department, but only 20 percent in the more ambiguous condition anticipated doing the same. Similarly, when discrimination was less ambiguous, more than 40 percent of women indicated being at least somewhat likely to contact an Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion group in their industry, but when discrimination was more ambiguous, this figure dropped below 30 percent.

Rather than prompting women to speak up (e.g., to a supervisor) and speak out (e.g., to a group focused on equity and diversity), ambiguous incidents encourage inaction or self-focused actions. As Figure 3 shows, when women experience
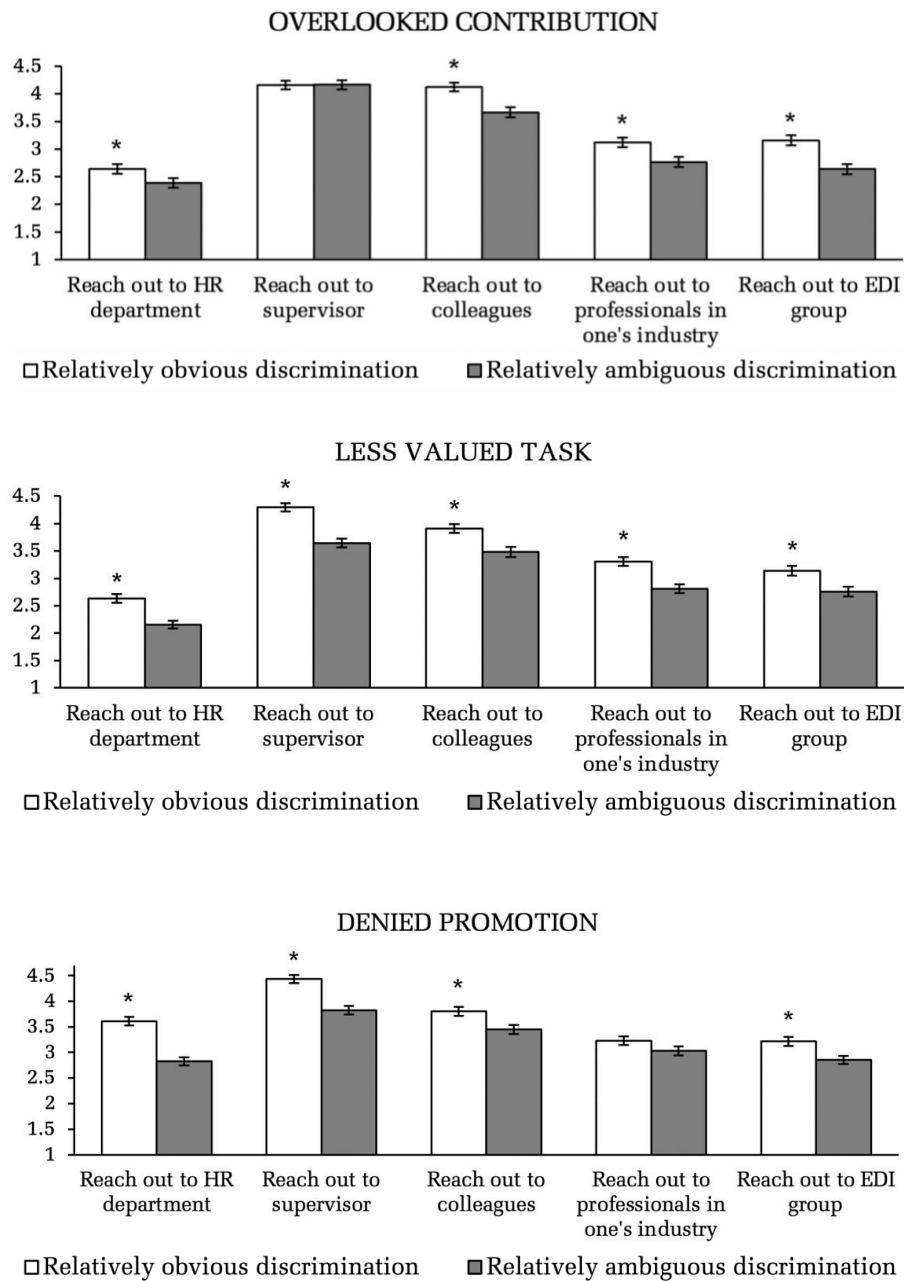
OVERLOOKED CONTRIBUTION

□ Relatively obvious discrimination   ■ Relatively ambiguous discrimination

LESS VALUED TASK

□ Relatively obvious discrimination   ■ Relatively ambiguous discrimination

DENIED PROMOTION

□ Relatively obvious discrimination   ■ Relatively ambiguous discrimination

Figure 2: Likelihood Ratings of Actions that Involve Reaching out to Others, by Vignette and Condition. *Note*: Mean likelihood ratings with standard error bars are displayed. Asterisks represent significant differences between adjacent means ($p < .05$).

more ambiguous gender discrimination incidents, they are more likely to focus on themselves by altering their work habits and self-presentation. In all three scenarios, greater ambiguity led women to try to draw more attention to their work and contributions. Likewise, in two of the three vignettes, women in the
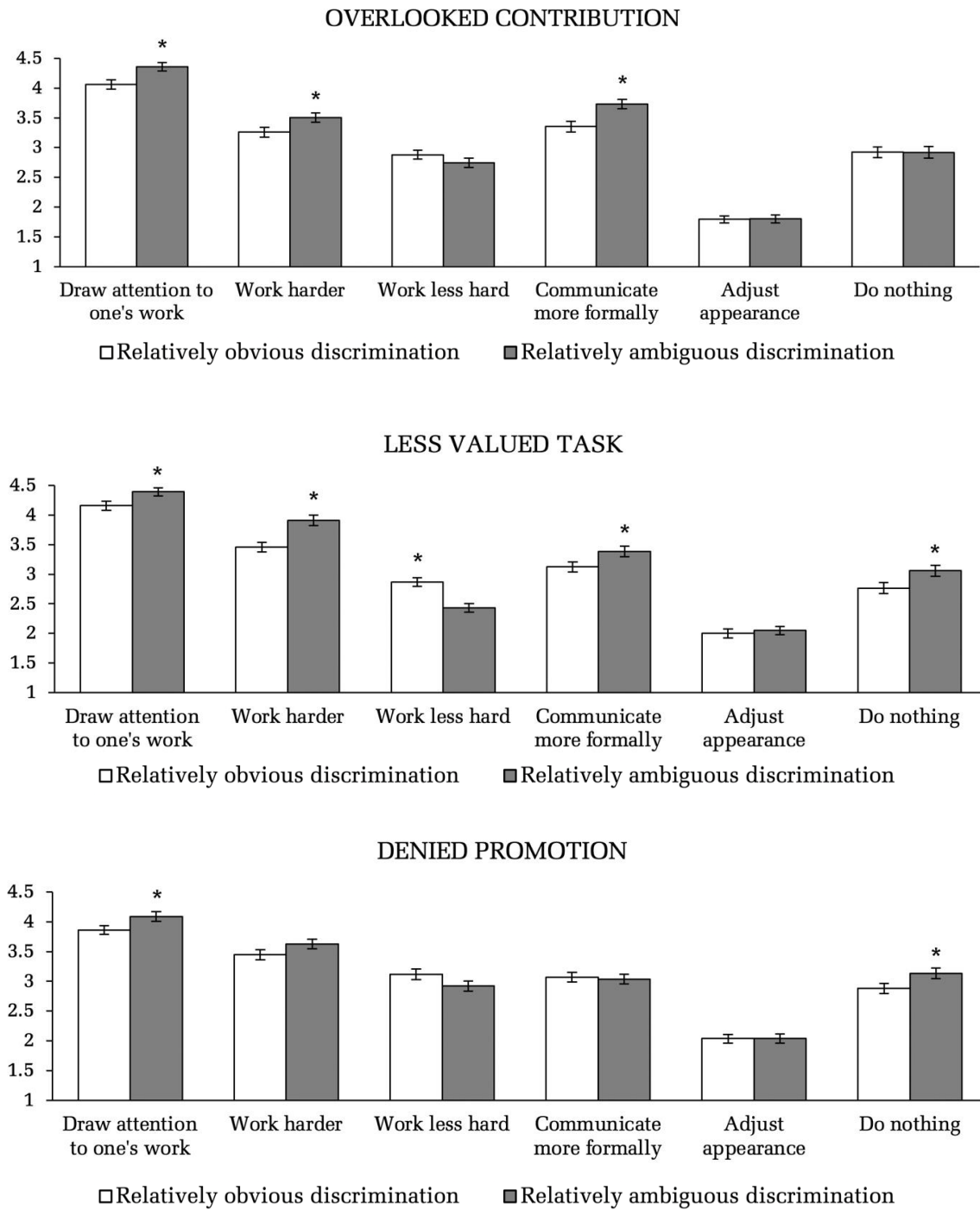
Figure 3: Likelihood Ratings of Actions that Alter One's Own Work Habits and Self-Presentation, by Vignette and Condition. *Note*: Mean likelihood ratings with standard error bars are displayed. Asterisks represent significant differences between adjacent means (*p* <.05).
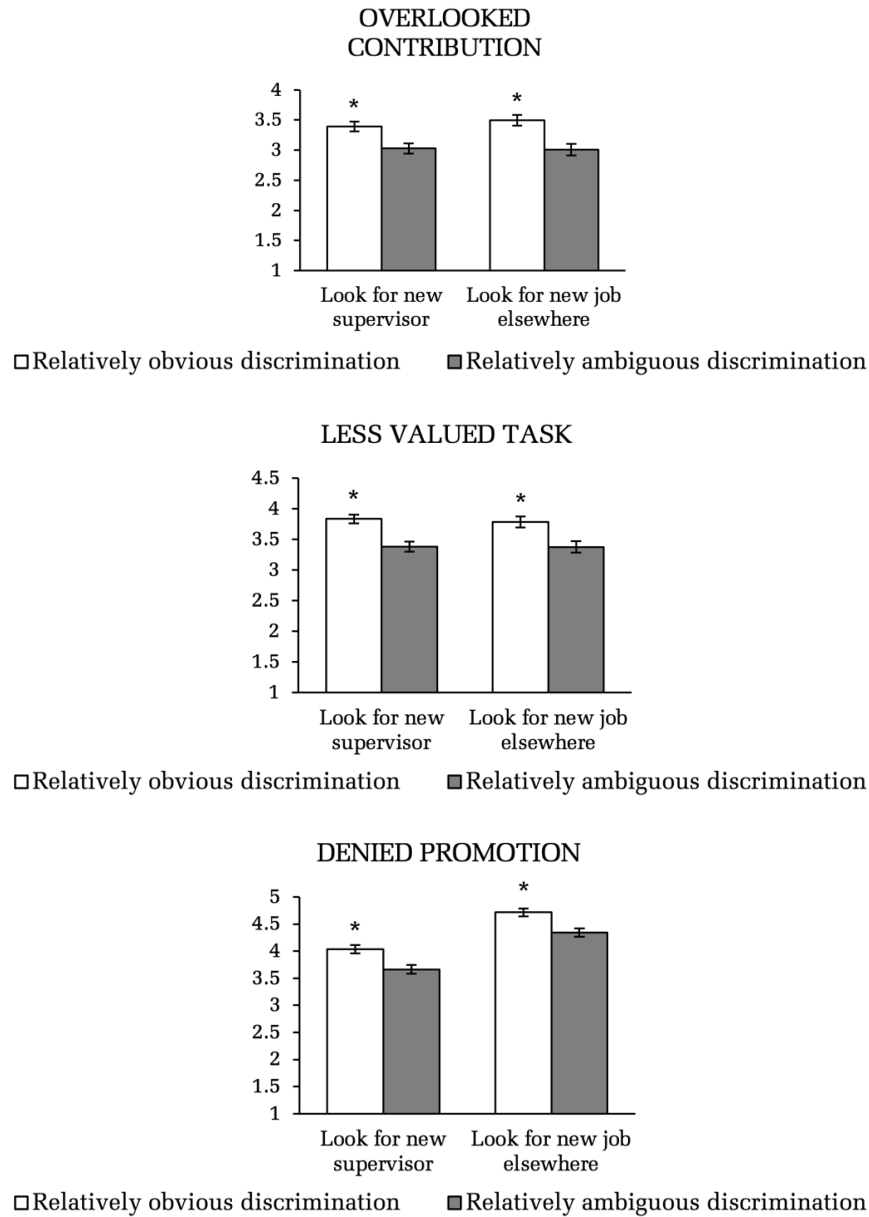
OVERLOOKED CONTRIBUTION

☐ Relatively obvious discrimination   ■ Relatively ambiguous discrimination

LESS VALUED TASK

☐ Relatively obvious discrimination   ■ Relatively ambiguous discrimination

DENIED PROMOTION

☐ Relatively obvious discrimination   ■ Relatively ambiguous discrimination

Figure 4: Likelihood Ratings of Looking for a New Supervisor or Job, by Vignette and Condition. *Note*: Mean likelihood ratings with standard error bars are displayed. Asterisks represent significant differences between adjacent means ($p < .05$).

ambiguous condition were more likely than those in the control group to report that they would work harder at their job and communicate more formally in the workplace. In addition to encouraging self-focused actions, ambiguity leads to a greater anticipated propensity for inaction. For two of the three vignettes in Figure 3, women who experienced more ambiguous incidents were more likely to anticipate doing nothing in response to the incident. Thus, rather than spurring actions that

make others aware of the problem, experiencing ambiguous discrimination may be more likely to foster self-focused behaviors, silence, and even inaction.

Finally, Figure 4 reveals that women who experienced more ambiguous incidents expected to be less inclined to look for an assignment with a different supervisor or a job in a different organization. Ambiguity, in other words, increases the intention to stay with the supervisor and the organization. In the Discussion, we consider how the lack of exit intention associated with ambiguous incidents may leave supervisors and HR professionals unaware of the challenges women face, making changes to organizational policy and practice less likely.

Overall, confirming initial observations from interviews, the vignette experiment demonstrates that women anticipate responding differently to the same situation when discrimination is more versus less ambiguous. In response to obvious gender discrimination, women anticipate being more likely to take action, bring others' attention to the problem, and consider exit. In contrast, in response to ambiguous incidents, they are more likely to anticipate staying in the same job, remaining silent about the incident, and focusing on changing their own behaviors.

Discussion and Conclusion

Although research documents the cognitive and affective costs associated with attributional ambiguity in the face of potential discrimination, scholarship has paid less attention to the social action (or inaction) that individuals take in response to such incidents. Here, we propose that prior research offers an important but only partial account of how individuals respond to ambiguous incidents at work.

Adopting a mixed-methods approach, we examined professional women's self-described experiences and responses to uncertainty, tracked the frequency at which women report ambiguous incidents versus obvious discrimination, and examined the effects of ambiguity on anticipated actions taken in response. Our interviews demonstrate that women are intimately familiar with uncertainty in classifying incidents as discrimination and consider ambiguous incidents as a significant challenge for their careers and workplace satisfaction. They also report struggling with how to respond when facing ambiguous incidents. A diverse survey sample of professional women reports experiencing ambiguous incidents more frequently than obvious discrimination. Finally, our vignette experiment reveals that women anticipate responding differently to more versus less ambiguous events. When discrimination is relatively ambiguous, women are less likely to anticipate taking actions that make others at work aware of the problem; instead, they are more likely to anticipate taking actions that alter their own work habits and self-presentation.

Together, our results suggest that ambiguous gendered incidents are a salient, common, and consequential experience for professional women and thus an important aspect of perceived discrimination in the contemporary workplace. By looking beyond ambiguity's emotional toll, our research moves the study of uncertainty in discrimination from an exclusively individual experience to one that has important ramifications for social action, inequality, and the workplace.

The Action-Based Consequences of Uncertainty

We propose that women's differential responses to ambiguous incidents and obvious discrimination may shape how workers and managers address gender discrimination. Our vignette experiment shows that women exposed to more obvious discrimination anticipate taking actions that make supervisors, HR professionals, colleagues, and diversity organizations aware of the problem. By taking actions that raise awareness, women push their organizations to alter policies and workplace practices in ways that could improve conditions for female employees in general. Indeed, the literature on exit, voice, and loyalty in organizations (Hirschman 1970; Withey and Cooper 1989) supports this expectation. Research shows that exercising voice—or speaking up about dissatisfaction—has the potential to precipitate organizational change by raising awareness about important issues (Allen 2020; Edmondson 1999). In contrast, our study also demonstrates that women are less committed to speaking out or exiting in response to ambiguous incidents of negative treatment about which they feel uncertain. Rather than turning outward by voicing concerns or exiting, women who experience more ambiguous incidents report turning inward by resolving to work harder, draw more attention to their contributions, and communicate more formally.

Ambiguous incidents put women in a difficult position. Although they may want to discuss the incident with managers or HR officers, they might worry about the ramifications. Voicing concerns about such incidents might feed into stereotypes of women as overly emotional and may lead to backlash via lower performance ratings, exclusion from important projects, or reduced organizational mobility (Barrett and Bliss-Moreau 2009; Brescoll 2011). Further, women may worry about damaging their personal reputations (Shelton and Stewart 2004) or anticipate not being believed (Brake and Grossman 2007). From an individual perspective, it makes sense that women would protect themselves and their careers by staying silent about ambiguous incidents.

However, from a gender equity perspective, such silence is problematic. Some ambiguous incidents are benign, but others constitute discrimination. If women do not speak out or take action, truly discriminatory events will remain unaddressed. It is here that allyship can play an important role. Although women who experience ambiguous incidents may be understandably reluctant to speak out, their colleagues—ideally those with greater power—can, with permission, investigate the incident on their behalf (Salter and Migliaccio 2019; Yoon, Joshi, and Dang 2023). When colleagues act as allies, women may enjoy the benefits of resolved ambiguity without risking their reputations. Moreover, insofar as women communicate about negative treatment, they may reveal patterns of gender discrimination that can spark social movement activism, thereby pressuring leaders to implement change (Soule 2009).

Implications for the Sociology of Discrimination

Our findings also have implications for how researchers measure and study experiences of discrimination. Currently, most research tends to treat discrimination experiences as unambiguous, focusing on patterns that researchers can establish

unequivocally (e.g., via résumé audit studies, see Quillian and Midtbøen 2021) or requiring respondents to report discrimination with certainty (Small and Pager 2020). For example, one typical item on the General Social Survey asks: "Over the past five years, have you been discriminated against with regard to work, for instance when applying for a job, or when being considered for a pay increase or promotion?" Respondents who feel unsure may answer "no," leading researchers to undercount ambiguous experiences and overlook their effects. To advance research on experiences and perceptions of discrimination, we suggest that scholars ask separate questions about ambiguous incidents. This may help to distinguish their differential effects and to avoid undercounting events about which respondents feel uncertain. Additionally, differentiating ambiguous and obvious discrimination incidents may help researchers more accurately measure the negative effects of perceived discrimination on careers, health, and other outcomes (Pager and Shepherd 2008).

Future studies can also advance discrimination research by examining how intersecting identities shape experiences of, and responses to, ambiguity. Intersectionality scholars have productively demonstrated how experiences of discrimination can be complicated and compounded by multiple identities (Crenshaw 1991; Harnois 2015; Hill Collins 2000; Saguy and Rees 2021). Our interview data hint at the additional challenges that women of color face. However, our findings mostly pertain to a single axis of identity (gender) among one type of worker (female professionals). Scholars can build on these findings to examine how factors like race, religion, and sexuality mesh with gender to shape experience and action. Further, scholars might examine ambiguous incidents among those who occupy less powerful positions in the workplace, like blue-collar workers or those with tenuous immigration statuses. By taking an intersectional approach, future research has the potential to reveal how experiences of, and responses to, ambiguity unfold differently with unique identity combinations.

Implications for Anti-Discrimination Policy in Organizations

Our findings suggest that professional women often experience uncertainty about gendered incidents at work but are unlikely (for good reasons) to raise awareness about them. This tendency has two challenging implications for organizations. First, if women stay silent about ambiguous incidents, it ensures that the fraction of such incidents that are discrimination will persist without being addressed. In this way, ambiguous incidents can contribute to negative cycles at work (i.e., Anteby and Chan 2018), in which truly discriminatory incidents may persist or become more common as they go unaddressed. Second, if women regularly experience ambiguous incidents, they may not only be discouraged from raising concerns, but may also become exhausted, develop lower expectations about their potential for success in the organization, and may be less likely to pursue opportunities for career advancement (Fernandez-Mateo and Kaplan 2018). Ambiguous discrimination may therefore contribute to gender inequality at work or slow its decline.

Some of the most commonly adopted anti-discrimination initiatives are unlikely to address these challenges effectively. Consider the case of formal grievance

procedures, a popular organizational measure thought to quell bias by allowing employees to challenge discriminatory decisions through a formal, legalistic process (Dobbin, Schrage, and Kalev 2015; Edelman et al. 2011). Our vignette experiment suggests that women who are uncertain about whether an incident was discriminatory may be hesitant to raise concerns with their human resources department, let alone file a formal complaint through a grievance system.

Organizational interventions that increase the transparency of personnel decisions are more likely to be effective. These measures ensure that all insiders are aware of internal job opportunities, promotion ladders, and eligibility rules (Dobbin et al. 2015), and foster pay transparency by enabling employees to find out their peers' salaries (Castilla 2015). A similar approach is to increase transparency in the communication of hiring and promotion decisions by clearly and accurately explaining how and why a particular decision was made. These steps toward transparency can help organizations address ambiguous incidents by ensuring that patterns of inequality and potential discrimination are apparent to all, making it easier for employees to evaluate actions and decisions for signs of unequal treatment (Dobbin et al. 2015). With increased transparency, women should be less likely to feel uncertain about whether or not an incident was discriminatory.

Appointing equity and diversity personnel may also help. These professionals not only make managers feel accountable for their decisions (Kalev, Dobbin, and Kelly 2006), but their presence might also create low-barrier opportunities for employees to informally discuss their concerns even if they do not have irrefutable proof of discrimination. Indeed, consistent with our experimental findings, research shows that one of the most frequent reasons for not speaking up in organizations is the belief that it is inappropriate to raise concerns without conclusive evidence (Detert and Edmondson 2011; see also Vaughan 1996). This pervasive belief can block the sharing of important concerns and valuable observations—including those about possible discrimination—even when managers and human resources officers might appreciate this information. Thus, organizations need to dispel this belief by proactively inviting employees to speak up about ambiguous incidents and rewarding them for doing so.

Overall, our findings suggest that understanding and addressing gender inequalities at work demands considering overt gender discrimination, as well as gender inequalities associated with uncertainty in the face of potential discrimination. Attending to the uncertainty that women face in the wake of ambiguous incidents as well as uncertainty's behavioral implications will offer a more accurate and complete understanding of unequal gendered experiences at work.

Notes

1 Professional roles included upper management, middle management, junior management, trained professional, consultant, researcher, self-employed/partner, support staff, or administrative staff.

2 De-identified survey data are available at https://doi.org/10.5683/SP3/LNEKUK

3 Although we collected data for 2019 and 2020, we focus on results from 2019 because they capture respondents' experiences prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. We recognize that respondents may suffer from greater retrospective bias when reporting 2019 experiences, but 2020 experiences are likely to be shaped by stay-at-home orders. Indeed, we find similar trends in the differences between self-reported ambiguous and obvious bias in 2020, although the frequency of both types of experiences is lower. We anticipate that this difference stems from reduced interactions with clients and colleagues when working remotely, which reduced opportunities for discrimination in interactions.

4 Each pretest participant read one vignette with either the less ambiguous manipulation or the more ambiguous manipulation. They then indicated whether gender discrimination occurred in the situation using a 100-point sliding scale (0 = obviously yes, 50 = unclear, 100 = obviously no). Within each vignette, the mean response in the more ambiguous condition was near the "unclear" anchor, whereas the mean response in the less ambiguous condition was significantly closer ($p < .001$) to the "obviously yes" anchor.

5 https://aspredicted.org/ds2yp.pdf

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