Who is Your Bias?

Elizabeth Nielsen

Utah Valley University

This essay discusses the importance of recognizing and overcoming our social biases in the workplace. Prejudice can hold organizations back from reaching maximum potential. Race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and other differences should not just be ignored but accepted and utilized as strengths. Studies have shown that we can recognize and overcome our personal biases. The research explored throughout this essay expounds the benefits of overcoming our biases and how this can be achieved.

Verna Myers was on a plane when a woman's voice came over the PA system. Myers was excited to have a female pilot, exclaiming, "Yes, women, we are rocking it. We are now in the stratosphere." Then the plane hit some turbulence and she thought, "I hope she can drive." At that moment she realized a bias she didn't even know she had. We all have biases we are unaware of and Myers's story demonstrates that. She explains, "You know, fast moving planes in the sky, I want a guy. That's my default. Who is your default? Who do you trust? Who are you afraid of? Who do you implicitly feel connected to? Who do you run away from?" (Myers, 2014, 4:24). These questions help us discover our own biases. It is important for us to find them because bias leads to prejudice. In order to have the most effective workplace, we need to overcome our prejudices and open the door for opportunity.

To understand why it is important to overcome biases we need to understand what prejudice is; how it looks, sounds, and feels. Prejudice is bias in motion. Prejudice looks like the single father of four not getting the job he is perfectly qualified for and desperately needs, solely because his skin is the wrong color. It looks like diversity quotas. It looks like a woman being paid 21% less than her male counterpart in a career in which they show equal levels of skill (Gould & Sheth, 2017). Prejudice feels like not knowing if you are in the position you're in because you are actually the best, or there as a placeholder to keep the company from being sued. It feels like the frustration of a female engineering student whose male group members immediately assume her incompetence in completing the project and try to disguise their seizing control as courtesy and chivalry. Prejudice sounds like women being labeled "pushy" twice as often as men (Khazan, 2014). It sounds like mocking, sarcasm, and insults. Prejudice is the unfair treatment of people based on factors that do not matter in their career. Imagine the difference in your work environment if everyone felt accepted. Imagine how you would feel if there was no need to overcome what people think about your religion, skin, sexual orientation, hair, gender, or body type. Imagine the ideas that could be generated and the growth that true acceptance of diversity could bring.

Racial colorblindness is an ideal situation in which skin color and other features don't matter in the slightest. This ideal doesn't fully work because, as Bahiyyah Williams (2015) puts it, "…even though colorblindness isn't a bad ideal considering the negative connotations race has had, it fails to be an adequate ideal for combating racial inequality because it fails to be genuine and it also allows the persistence of racial hierarchies and inequalities" (p. 3). Racial colorblindness is not genuine or effective because it is shallow. The problem is much larger than skin color and skin color goes so much deeper than skin. It is part of who we are but it is not our defining feature. To be "colorblind" is to be ignorant to all the complexities of thought that different backgrounds can bring to the table. To discriminate based on skin color or any other physical or mental attribute is to be ignorant in the same way. Instead of being colorblind in the workplace, I submit that we be colorful. We should overcome our biases so that we can see people for what they can do because of their differences rather than in spite of them.

For us to be able to overcome our biases we must admit we have them. A study was conducted by Patricia G. Devine and colleagues from the psychology department of the University of Wisconsin-Madison on long term reduction of implicit race bias. They found that two major contributing factors to a change in bias were: the individual's awareness of their bias and their desire to change this bias (Devine, Forscher, Austin, & Cox, 2012). It makes sense that if you have no desire to change your bias then you would not. If you are unaware of your bias then you do not have the choice to change in the first place. Take, for example, people who drive in the left lane of traffic. There are two groups of people in this lane: those who hate slow drivers camping out in the left lane and those who have no idea this is a problem. If you don't know the rule of etiquette that slower traffic stays right, then why would you ever change out of the left lane where traffic seems to flow so smoothly? Remaining unaware of our biases is like driving slow in the fast lane. When we sit idly in our ignorance we block the way of improvement. A study was done specifically on modern prejudice and the role of bias awareness and reported:

> When bias is cloaked in a way that people do not recognize, they are likely to continue to perpetuate their biased behaviors and unlikely to reduce their negative attitudes. However, when people become aware of their biases, they often adjust their attitudes and behavior to be more egalitarian. (Perry, Murphy, & Dovidio, 2015, p. 1)

When we "cloak" or ignore our biases we do not change our behavior. Simply denying the fact that we have a bias does not do anything to fix the problem. Taking an "out of sight, out of mind" approach does not work for bias reduction. We must recognize our biases in order to start the process of overcoming them.

Sometimes we cloak our bias accidentally. Joleen Archibald (2014) states, "In most cases, people's biased perceptions of others are not a result of any malicious intent to inflict harm. Instead, biases in social perception tend to occur because we as perceivers, are imperfect processors of information" (para. 1). Social perception is not inherently bad; the problem occurs when our perception is wrong and we make no effort to fix it. If we are afraid to admit to ourselves that we have biases, then we can never change. No one

is perfect. Everyone has biases. We cannot control that but we can control how we respond to them. We must admit to ourselves that we are, in fact, imperfect processors and then we must act. Think of the driver in the left lane. Once they realize their mistake they now have the choice to change either their speed or their lane. When we admit that we are imperfect processors, we uncloak our biases and have the choice to change our behavior.

A great way to overcome bias is by using anti-bias tactics. The study by Devine et al. (2012), mentioned previously, lists the five tactics taught in their study group that proved to be effective in overcoming bias. The first is *Stereotype Replacement* which involves replacing stereotypical responses with non-stereotypical responses. You recognize a response is based on stereotypes, label the response as stereotypical, reflect on why you responded that way, then decide how to respond differently in the future. The second tactic is *Counter-Stereotypic Imaging*. This involves imagining others who are counter-stereotypic. For example, if you generally view a specific group of people as being less intelligent, then you would imagine people who fit in that category but don't fall under the stereotype of being unintelligent. They can be famous people, people you personally know, or just an abstract idea of a person. The third tactic studied is *Perspective Taking*. This is when you put yourself in someone else's shoes and try to see through their eyes. Fourth is *Individuation*, which focuses on helping you see people for their personal rather than group-based attributes. You can do this by finding specific information about individual group members. The last tactic is *Increasing Opportunities for Contact*. This strategy does not require you to completely immerse yourself in a new culture, but to increase the number of interactions you have with "out-group" members (Devine et al., 2012). These are just five of hundreds of tactics that can be used to overcome bias. It is a simple enough task to find one that works for you and to utilize it.

For anti-bias tactics to be effective, we have to want to change. It is not enough to admit we have a bias; we must see the importance in overcoming it. Sheryl Sandberg, COO of Facebook and founder of Leanin.org and Optionb.org expressed, "I think what has to happen is that businesses have to decide this isn't only the right thing to do but the smart thing to do" ("The Female Quotient," 2019). For a company to reach

ultimate success and efficiency, it needs to have the most effective people in the most effective positions in spite of irrelevant factors. Whether you are in a place of leadership or an unpaid intern, the better you are at realizing you are an imperfect processor and looking past your biases, the more successful you will be. First Round, a venture capital firm, released an article about what they learned in their last ten years of business. The very first statistic listed is that companies with at least one female founder outperformed all-male teams by 63% ("First Round 10 Year Project," 2015). This statistic does not show that women are better than men. It does not say that all female teams outperformed all-male teams, but that teams with *both* men and women outperformed teams with just men. It shows that diversity is better than singularity. Laura Brounstein, special projects director of *Cosmopolitan* and *Seventeen* stated, "When you have greater diversity of thought, innovation happens" ("The Female Quotient," 2019). If we can look past our biases and see people for their strengths and weaknesses we will open whole new levels of innovation.

Some people argue that you cannot change the way you view people. They might feel we are born with our biases and that is just the way it is. Lesley Slaton Brown, Chief Diversity Officer of HP Inc. says, "We're never going to get rid of our own biases but we can look organizationally" ("The Female Quotient," 2019). Even if it is impossible to change the way we feel about people, we can change the way we think. We can look organizationally, find strengths, and put individuals where they are needed. There is evidence that change is possible. The study by Devine and colleagues on long term implicit bias reduction concludes:

> In sum, this study presents the first intervention of its kind, one that, using a randomized controlled design, produces a reduction in implicit race bias that endures for at least two months. Our data provided evidence demonstrating the power of the conscious mind to intentionally deploy strategies to overcome implicit bias. As such, these findings raise the hope of solving a problem that has long vexed social scientists—how to reduce race-based discrimination. By empowering people to break the prejudice habit, this study takes an

> important step toward resolving the paradox of ongoing
> discrimination in a nation founded on the principle of
> equality. (Devine et al., 2012, pp. 13-14)

Overcoming our biases is a choice. It may take a lot of effort and discipline, but it can be done by looking organizationally and changing our implicit bias. We can change and we should. Using simple tactics, we can overcome our perception processing imperfections. There is no need to dawdle in the left lane and hold up ourselves and others. Realizing and overcoming our biases puts our foot down on the gas pedal. It is the key step in overcoming prejudice and clearing a path for progression. As we look past appearance, gender, sexual orientation, religion, culture, body type, background, and beliefs, we will find the most effective people for the required position and we will reach levels of ingenuity and success that can be met no other way.

References

Archibald, J. (2014, September 22). Guidelines for overcoming bias in social perception [Web log post]. Retrieved from https://leadershiparchways.wordpress.com/2014/09/

Devine, P. G., Forscher, P. S., Austin, A. J., & Cox, W. T. L. (2012). Long-term reduction in implicit race bias: A prejudice habit-breaking intervention. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 48*(6), 1267–1278. doi:10.1016/j.jesp.2012.06.003

First Round 10 Year Project. (2015). *First Round 10 Year Project*. Retrieved from 10years.firstround.com/

Khazan, O. (2014, May 23). 'Pushy' is used to describe women twice as often as men. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2014/05/pushy-is-used-to-describe-women-twice-as-often-as-men/371291/

Gould, S., & Sheth, S. (2017, 8 March). 5 charts show how much more men make than women. *Business Insider*. Retrieved September 15, 2017, from www.businessinsider.com/gender-wage-pay-gap-charts-2017-3/#the-gender-wage-gap-varies-widely-depending-on-the-state-1

Myers, V. (2014). How to overcome our biases? Walk boldly toward them. *TED*. Retrieved from https://www.ted.com/talks/verna_myers_how_to_overcome_our_biases_walk_boldly_toward_them/transcript

Perry, S. P., Murphy, M. C., & Dovidio, J. F. (2015). Modern prejudice: Subtle, but unconscious? The role of Bias awareness in whites' perceptions of personal and others' biases. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 61*. 64-78. doi: 10.1016/j.jesp.2015.06.007

The Female Quotient: Advance women. Advance equality. (2019). *The Female Quotient*. Retrieved from www.thefemalequotient.com/

Williams, B. (2015). The failure of the colorblind ideal. (Senior Thesis, Trinity College). Retrieved from http://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/theses/515