

Diversity, prejudice and

PRIVILEGE



Dr Keon West, keynote speaker at this year's BACP Universities & Colleges conference, challenges assumptions about prejudice and privilege when working with students from diverse backgrounds



There is a story that we like to tell ourselves about our place in history. We are the enlightened, the egalitarian. We are the generation that has done away with prejudice. We recognise the extreme biases of our predecessors. However, we also recognise that progress has been made since then. We imagine ourselves living in a world in which fairness and equality form the backdrop, like the darkness of the night sky. And while we acknowledge the persistence of some bigotry, we believe these bigots to be scattered and isolated remnants of a former time: dim stars growing dimmer until they fade away entirely.¹⁻³

The past

This story is not wholly inaccurate. We need only to read articles written 100 years ago to see the difference between then and now. In the 1920s it was widely taken for granted that ‘the best energies of married women should be devoted to the interests of the home and family’, and that the societal change resulting from the employment of married women was ‘clearly one for the worse’.⁴ Similarly, a manuscript from the *Journal of the Royal African Society*⁵ described black Africans and non-human primates in so similar a manner that it is difficult to tell which is which when the accompanying names have been removed (to test yourself, see the extracts reproduced on the next page). Today we take it for granted that the subjugation of women and the dehumanisation of black people is an affront to human dignity. We point to Angela Merkel and Barack Obama as examples of women and black people whose power and accomplishments would have been impossible, even unthinkable, 100 years ago.

The problem with this story is not that it is inaccurate but that it is incomplete. It is a set of partial truths that paints us in a very good light and our predecessors in a very bad one. The first part of the story asserts the bigotry of those who came before us. In doing so it leaves out those who, as early as 1920, wrote that it was ‘fundamentally false’ that women are less intelligent than men.⁶ It also leaves out those who fervently argued, as early as 1928, that differences in academic achievement between whites and blacks were due to opportunity and not to any actual racial differences.⁷ The second part of the story asserts our own efforts to increase equality, but in doing so we ignore those who did so long before us. In the 1940s there were already evident struggles for gender and racial equality both in and out of academia.^{8,9} The contact hypothesis, which continues to inform prejudice-reducing strategies today,¹⁰⁻¹⁵ was coined in the 1950s.¹⁶

Most problematic of all, this is where the story stops – over 60 years ago. What followed these efforts to reduce prejudice is rarely acknowledged by anyone other than social psychologists. This is not surprising: the more complete story, the one that includes what

happened after the 1950s, paints us in a less flattering light, and damages our image of ourselves as individual egalitarians who have succeeded in a meritocracy.

A different story

There were three blows that undermined this story. The first was to our sense of individuality. To demonstrate this during my conference presentation, I gave everyone in the audience a list of five types of people: blind people, ex-convicts, homeless people, rapists, and ugly people. Without saying what the other side was instructed to do, I asked the people on one side of the audience to rate the groups according to how negatively *they personally* felt toward them and asked the people on the other side to rate the groups according to how *socially acceptable it was* to feel negatively towards them. They were surprised to discover that, even though their tasks were different, their lists were exactly the same.

The importance of social norms in guiding our evaluation of others has been known since the 1950s.^{17,18} Furthermore, recent research has shown that our awareness of social norms concerning negativity toward other groups and our personal feelings of negativity toward other groups are statistically indistinguishable.¹⁹ This is true for a wide variety of groups, whether defined by gender, ethnicity, sexuality, occupation or physical or mental difficulties. This is an important lesson about our approach to others. As in the research, most people in the audience were comfortable with feeling negatively towards ex-convicts, but less comfortable feeling negatively towards blind people. Readers will probably feel the same way. However, whatever our feelings about ex-convicts, it is worth examining our justifications for these feelings. We may find that we are less autonomous than we believe.

The second blow was to our belief in a meritocracy. While most of us are aware that there are some prejudiced people in our society, we rarely think of ourselves as interacting with these people, or with their prejudices; we live our lives outside their influence. However, what we mostly think of as prejudice – rare, individual acts of deliberate meanness – is just one small aspect of the asymmetry in any society. In the 1980s social psychology uncovered another aspect – the many systematic, pervasive examples of unearned advantages conferred by group membership. Peggy McIntosh coined these advantages ‘privileges’.³ She likened them to ‘an invisible, weightless knapsack of special provisions... and blank cheques’. Others have likened them to playing a video game on the ‘easy’ setting: you still have to play, you can still lose, but the game for you is simply easier than it is for someone playing on the ‘hard’ setting.

These privileges range from the relatively benign (eg I can buy ‘flesh’ coloured plasters that actually look like the colour of my flesh) to the deeply disturbing (eg ‘I do not have to educate my children about systematic

Extracts from Johnston H. The mammalian fauna of Africa: 1. The primates or man-like mammals. Journal of the Royal African Society 1920;19(76): 253-277.

is often covered with a short yellow-red or dun-coloured down, almost a fleece in some cases. In addition the males have curly black hair growing on the chest and abdomen, on the legs and arms, and frequently show a considerable growth

markedly from the West African type externally and in the proportions of the skull. It is more "human" in facial appearance, with less exaggerated canines, has abundant head-hair and beard, a larger, broader, more prominent nose, and probably attains to a greater size. This type seems to

prejudice for their own protection'). Furthermore, those who hold social privileges are often unaware of the ignorance their privilege affords them. McIntosh rightly points out that those of us in the religious and cultural majority 'can remain oblivious of the language and customs of persons of colour who constitute the world's majority without... any penalty for such oblivion'. Examples of this asymmetrical ignorance abound. Whatever their culture or religion may be, most white British people can explain the significance of Christmas and Easter. But how much do they know about the Hindu gods? How well could they explain Eid or Ramadan?

Like gamers who always play on the easy setting, those of us with social privileges are not only worse at the game, we usually are completely unaware of how badly we play. Try this for a moment: put down this article and try to list 10 examples of male privilege, ten examples of white skin privilege and 10 examples of heterosexual privilege. If you belong to the minority group for any of those categories, you probably found the list easy to write. However, if you belong to the majority, you probably found them much harder. Now try listing 10 items of cisgender privilege. If you do not know what cisgender means, you should regard that as the first privilege. Understanding of privilege undermines our view of ourselves as successful members of a meritocracy – the reality is that we have received unearned favour every step of the way.

The third blow was to our sense of integrity: the belief that we were innocent of prejudiced reactions to others. Since the 1970s, social psychologists have had difficulty detecting prejudice when using explicit, question-and-answer methods. Many found that, when using these methods, 'virtually no one appeared to be bigoted'.²⁰ However, these findings were out of sync with the way people generally behaved. A breakthrough occurred in the 1990s, with the development of implicit tests of bias.²¹ These tests are based on our reaction times, error rates and other variables of which we may not even be

aware. The most influential is the implicit association test,²² which asks participants to suggest an attribute with which two concepts are associated in their mind – the faster their ability to do this, the stronger the association. Using tests like these, the numbers changed radically – almost everyone was prejudiced.

It is very difficult to describe the implicit association test. You can trial one yourself at <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/>. There you will find a range of implicit association tests investigating your biases against women, black people, Muslims, gays and many other groups. Be forewarned: you may not like what you find. It is worth pointing out that the implicit association test is not a means of catching dishonest people. Your egalitarian desires are genuine, and you are probably unaware of your own implicit prejudices. Nonetheless, these prejudices have been conditioned into you by a lifetime of stories of good, light-skinned people, and bad, dark-skinned people, of princes who rescue and damsels who are rescued, of many varied, complex heterosexual couples and few if any gay couples.

The effects of this conditioning are not trivial. A study conducted as recently as 2003 found that, even with identical qualifications, white people are 50 per cent more likely to get called back for an interview than black people are.²³ Another study in 2007 found that implicit biases made police officers more likely to mistakenly shoot an unarmed non-white person.²⁴ Yet another study, in 2008, found that parents' implicit biases and non-verbal behaviour predicted their children's prejudices, while parents' explicit bias and verbal behaviour did not.²⁵ Understanding implicit biases forces us to face our own prejudices and the ways in which we perpetuate systems of bias and disadvantage.

Taken together, understanding social norms, privilege and implicit biases fundamentally alters the image we have of ourselves. We are not the individual, egalitarian members of a meritocratic society. We, post-2000, are the entrenched, prejudiced members of a prejudiced society who have received far more than

we have rightfully earned. We live in a world in which bias forms the backdrop, like the darkness of the night sky, and in which fairness and equality are rare points of light that must be worked for to be sustained.² This should not be confused with saying that we have made no progress. Rather, the problem is that we focus too much on how far we have come, while ignoring how far we have still to go.

Conclusion

I am often asked what we should do about this. This question is at once necessary and impossible. It is necessary because we must do something. It is impossible because there is more to be done than can be summed up in a single response. Every year

thousands of papers are published on the measurement, management and reduction of intergroup bias. No panacea for prejudice has emerged from this vast body of research. Rather, there are varied, complex responses to varied, complex problems. However, a crucial first step seems to be to make ourselves aware of where we were and where we are now, to bridge the gap between the reality we live in and the story we tell ourselves.

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