

Scanning for Biases

By Dr. Bob Woody

A state agency with which I consult promulgated new policies on workplace prejudice and discrimination. Although wrapped in good intentions, it seems that, in these modern times, a policy on prejudice and discrimination does not reach to the fullest critical level.

These days, no person with a modicum of intelligence and sanity would countenance any form of prejudice or discrimination. That is, ethics, standards, and laws prohibit openly or explicitly expressing a belief or attitude that a certain kind of person deserves an inferior status, albeit that some folks are not well prepared to avoid unconscious and unrecognized negative actions toward persons within a certain classification or group that could stigmatize the person (e.g., due to race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, age, rural v. urban, or economic status).

Monitors for fairness tend to give less attention to biases. As any psychologist is aware, a bias is an inclination, tendency, or preference that may influence how a person perceives or responds to a particular person or situation. If unchecked, bias can lead to prejudice and discrimination.

Most of us do not like to admit it, but everyone (including ourselves) has biases. The challenge is to recognize inklings of bias and take steps to be sure that our opinions, judgments, and actions are not flawed because of bias.

It is human nature to favor people who have characteristics considered to be positive, and to be suspicious of those whose characteristics are unclear or negative. As psychologists, we obviously must retain an open-mind.

As the old adage says, “looks can be deceiving.” The observed person does not deceive, the deception comes from bias--because of conscious or unconscious beliefs and values, the observer sees something that is not really there.

When bias about certain characteristics exists, actual facts may be ignored. Consequently, bias can have undesired consequences. If the psychologist over- or underestimates the importance of a central trait (e.g. race) or situational factors (e.g., the economic level of a neighborhood), there will be the risk of a “self-fulfilling prophecy.”

The psychologist should resist taking the easy route to sizing up a person or situation. Relying on rules of thumb allows unjustified bias to emerge.

Entering into an encounter or situation with a pessimistic or optimistic view colors the perception of the facts. Confirmatory bias leads to seeking information that will support beliefs that have been formed or recognized, and ignoring information that would disconfirm personal preferences.

I offer these comments about prejudice, discrimination, and bias as a self-reminder and for whatever value you might get from them. Despite all my professional training and experiences, I am quick to admit that I am not always 100% confident that my attributions are free from bias. Although “to err is to be human,” applied behavioral science requires that we psychologists seek to assure that our observations, opinions, and judgments are as free from bias as possible.

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