

Perspective

Thoughts and Experiences of Bias: A Personal Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This is a narration about observations on biases and cultural disquiets experienced in my personal and professional life both in my own birth place as well as in my country i.e., New Zealand where I currently live. In the following paragraphs, my personal experiences on biases has been described. Many academics have already written extensively about the types of biases I discuss in their research papers. My professional career has lasted for the past 43-years. Out of 43-years, 27-years have been spent in New Zealand, where I have worked in around 17 organisations. The time span covered is from May 1994 till now. Following questions are in my contemplation: Why are people so biased? What does it feel like to be overlooked for your efforts or contributions? The ubiquitous nature of bias has been documented in the scientific literature, as well as how it is ingrained in human characteristics and attitudes. Is it possible to eliminate bias? Is there a way to mitigate the negative effects of bias that we as humans impose on one another?

Keywords

Bias; Unconscious bias; Society; Culture; Organisation; Diversity and inclusion.

INTRODUCTION

My bias reflections address issues such as the following: Why are people so biased? What does it feel like to be overlooked for your efforts or contributions? The ubiquitous nature of bias has been documented in the scientific literature, as well as how it is ingrained in human characteristics and attitudes. Is it possible to eliminate bias? Is there a way to mitigate the negative effects of bias that we as humans impose on one another?

Diversity and inclusion have become critical components of today's corporate cultures. From a human level of comprehension, I have a basic understanding of bias. Our brains are capable of immediately distinguishing between various objects. If disparities are perceived consistently over time, they might become stereotypes. An Indian immigrant in European civilization, for example, gives the idea that there are contrasts in the world: Indians consume curries, utilise chillies, and eat hot spicy food. They are brown, and they do not speak English.

Different societies have evolved over time, each with their own social and cultural aspects. As a result of being classified as civilised or uncivilised, colonizations have had a variety of effects on populations. Many people in the modern world want to

migrate to the so-called developed countries, and their decisions have diverse consequences based on their experiences and the cultures of the countries they relocate to.

During my investigation, I came across various allusions to the concept of bias based on personal experience and my studies in social/cultural anthropology in scholarly works.

GENDER BIAS

Malos¹ has discussed a variety of gender, age, and disability-related workplace biases that might effect career performance evaluation and progress. The example in Malos¹ is of a female engineer who was fired with the explanation ("justification") that women are "no good" for technical job, that they are unworthy of consideration for such work, and that they should stay at home and raise their children. This is a reminiscence of my time working as a secretary for an academic male professor in 1978 (in India). The professor mentioned that he had a lot of young male budding scientists and engineers in his group, and that my visit would be a distraction for them. In response to the professor's remark, I stated that my intentions to join were solely for economic and educational reasons. It happened while I was pursuing my master's degree in Economics at a nearby university. Industrial and labour

economics were my main areas of study. This was repeated to that professor: the aims were not to find a male companion as a means of finding work!

Many communities still have long-held stereotypes about women working as office assistants, teachers, midwives, and nannies, to name a few. Women have always been a liability and potential cause of disasters because the power of creation is dominated by men. Biases, according to Malos,¹ are linked to stereotypes that are perpetuated by unconscious biases. Women are becoming increasingly conscious of how bigotry towards women obstructs their work possibilities and success in their careers.

In New Zealand, however, I have found that women and men are treated equally well. Women make up much over 60% of the workforce in my place of employment, where I have worked since 2006. There are more women in the upper tier positions. However, it is unfortunate to mention that women in such high positions may be just as biased as men when it comes to how they treat their female employees. Working under a woman was a dreadful nightmare in my own experience. I have often wondered what causes such conduct. Are they attempting to demonstrate that they are on par with men?

ACCENTS AND LANGUAGE BIAS

My experiences and observed bias based on accents and how one uses language in the last 28-years of experience in 17 different settings and organizations, ranging from small-farm work to cleaning jobs, manufacturing, clerical work in a financial institution, and administration in a local and central governments. Bias is present at every level in large organizations due to ethnic composition and power differentials. Employees who appear quiet, do not talk to everyone and keep a low profile tend to be favored. But, employees who speak up face huge hurdles and are viewed as if they are not putting enough effort to think, and speak off their head. This was one of the major issues that encountered at job interviews and in general group discussions. One must say that my grade was A-plus for the oral presentations in the academic work. My abilities were very good at grasping questions and responding appropriately at interviews and group discussions. However, in my work environment, I never received any sort of acknowledgment or credit for my contributions and was often ridiculed for being overconfident and “too much”.

Moreover, the experienced employees observed that new immigrants face insults for their accents and less-than-perfect English language skills. Because of their foreign accents and imperfect English, they tend not be recognised and valued. Employers show strong favouritism towards native speakers. Because of this bias immigrants fear losing good jobs, knowing that they may end up with less than favorable references, which makes it hard to get new jobs.

The typical Kiwi female bosses that I met at several jobs have often refused to accept suggestions and recommendations for improvement from their employees with foreign accents. Their prejudices against Indians and Asians are quite extreme. They

would go to great lengths to favor and train other nationalities from neighbouring Pacific countries. Their intentions and actions are obvious and skewed. Too many times my situation have seen such biases and preferences impact many of my fellow immigrant friends who were Asians, East Europeans, and South Africans. I have noticed that New Zealand-born, and second or third-generation European women show much more pronounced prejudices.²

After nearly six-months of hard work applying for various jobs, the realisation of the truth about not getting good reference came to be known to me through an employment consultant that one of my supervisors refused to provide references whom was my referee. In a different case, a bad reference from a bank manager resulted in me being rejected for all of my applications. An employment agency later informed me that the reference was insufficient for them to consider my application. These rejections were all from European-descent women who were third or fourth generation. The supervisors' preferences and likes and dislikes can have a significant impact on how and whom they hire for various positions. Such prejudices have influenced many of my friends and acquaintances. I must say that in my own experience, I have had only a few female bosses who were easy to work with and get along, who were respectful of what and how I could contribute. Such bosses are few and far between compared to New Zealand born European male and female supervisors and employers.

Immigrant employees who tend to be shy and quiet are truly smart and have good relationships with their supervisors and the management. Strong, outspoken and outgoing people tend to be disliked and viewed as “too much”, “self-boasting”, “show off” and so on. Soft skills that lead to successful employment and positive relationships with bosses for immigrant workers are not described anywhere and are not indicated in the skill requirements for any particular position. How can these soft skills be displayed when they are not described in expectations and job descriptions?

The central underlying systemic bias in organizations and work environment that is reinforced and seems to be maintained emanates from the expressions, “*It is not what you know, but whom you know*”. How can one develop skills that lead to a positive network to sustain robust and mutually productive relationships and work environments? For immigrants, does it mean that one just should not become an open book to stay out of trouble with ones boss and employer?

IMMIGRANTS SETTLE IN

It is common knowledge that once immigrants arrive in developed or Westernized countries, they will seek out people from their home country. New Zealand's South Auckland, for example, has a sizable ethnic population. Before moving to a new country, they find out where more of their country's people live so they can move there to be close to them. In some cases, it may not occur because the new migrant's job is in a remote, rural, or distant town or village far from major cities and their ethnic communities.

Europeans living in areas with a higher influx of immigrants, primarily from third or developing countries, relocate to more rural areas driven by the desire to be closer to their own kind.

South Auckland, Manurewa, Takanini, and Papakura are just a few of the areas where a new immigrant population is gradually replacing New Zealand Europeans.

One consequence of immigrant influx that I have noticed is a shift in Christian worship and celebration. The colonising Europeans brought Christianity with them to New Zealand, which encouraged many ethnic groups other than Europeans to follow them for religious purposes. New immigrants consider the English-language services unsettling and not comforting once they start establishing themselves in their communities. Their cultural practices are gradually infiltrating into the New Zealand English services and congregational gatherings. The worship services are intended to provide comfort and community to the participant. Cultural and social practices familiar to the ethnic groups can add to the positive impact services have on the congregation. Gradually, churches are transforming to be more inclusive of the cultures of their congregations.

Migrants can adapt to Europeanised culture in clothing for work and speak English with their coworkers, and as they go shopping outside their communities. They revert to their native languages once they return home or participate in their community events and celebrations. Shoppers more often than not tend to patronize ethnic community stores, which belong to their compatriots, to have access to the goods and services familiar to them, and the opportunity to use their native language in their shopping transactions.

INGRAINED CULTURAL BIAS IS PERVASIVE

People migrate more often than not for economic reasons rather than motivated by political events, conflicts and unrest. People also migrate for, educational and occupational opportunities that eventually lead to better economic conditions for them. Migration tends to happen because people may be unable to sustain a simple, secure, satisfying and harmonious life in their own countries. Many people migrate from developing Asian or African countries to other parts of the world for many reasons including inability to meet their economic needs, to gain basic education and obtain well-paying employment. Migrations also happens because of turmoil, unrest and conflict that leads to refugees who flee their countries to avoid being killed and hurt, and to find more secure places to live.

The western developed society's attraction is for the promise of a smooth, free, and prosperous life, that is unbound by bribes and corrupt practices. The developed societies are expected to provide a semblance of respect for human rights that gives hope for a happy and secure lifestyle. In spite of all the good promises of a good life, the ingrained biases, discrimination, and cultural discomforts affect many immigrants, often resulting in certain types of mental illnesses such as depression, anxiety and insecurity.³

According to McCormick,⁴ unconscious bias is found in every society, and it can be targetted at many attributes, such as skin colour, gender, age, height, weight, marital and parental status, physical and mental disabilities, or other attributes such as foreign

accents, socioeconomic status and so many others. Coming from a society like India, I have experienced and observed many of these unconscious biases in action. As a general definition of unconscious bias one can say that it is a social stereotype that involves a pre-reflective attribution that are less than positive in nature addressed towards members of outgroups or individuals with certain perceived characteristics. Such biases develop by virtue of one's social environment and are held persistently. Immigrants quickly find out that unconscious bias is present in their newly adopted country.

Immigrants bring their native culture into the Westernized country they settle in. New immigrants like to get their cultural values included, respected, or treated as part of their new societal values and environment. However, this may not be an easy process. For example, the traditional practice of arranged marriages among the immigrant population appears as an inflexible and freedom constraining practice to the settled Europeans. It should be noted that the practice of arranged marriages is present among many of the more than 200 ethnic groups in New Zealand. Regardless of where they have migrated or moved to, the migrant people feel proud to follow their traditions and values, giving them feelings of comfort and familiarity. The intermingling of the cultural practices takes time and much effort on the part of both parties, often involving distress at the individual and the group level.

Rudman⁵ in his paper "*Social Justice in our Minds, Homes, and Society*" writes about the social environment of American society when he was a child focusing on prejudice in American society and the discriminatory treatment of African Americans that goes far beyond unconscious bias manifested in behaviour and action. In the last two years, the "*Black Lives Matter*" movement has become the latest media portrayal of American society that depicts the struggle to right what has been wronged. Rudman⁵ underscores the notion that prejudice and discrimination are on-going issues in society, with implicit biases prevalent directed at race, age, religion, physical appearance, and socio-economic class.

Rudman⁵ writes about his childhood experiences as a privileged white and superior-ranked family. His childhood experience allowed him to pursue and later publish many scholarly writings on social justice. In 1959, Martin Luther King visited India to understand how Mahatma Gandhi could have managed the rigid caste system and his fight for freedom, which he called "Harijans", American society does not brand the differences between the dominant and subordinate groups as a caste system, rather as distinction between superior and inferior races and social classes.

In organization power differences exist and are ridden with biases. When people join a workplace, some are very clever at knowing the power and authority structure and the way to navigate the system successfully. My daughter told me that in my career my failure is due to not developing a network of influential people. It was not the network that helped me back in India, but my talent and self-motivation that made my university lecturers and principles help me get a higher education, and provided me with financial assistance. My relationships with all of my classmates, Harijans and Dalits regardless of their belonging to any particular

caste community was unbiased. Not hesitated to marry someone from one of these communities or to develop long-term friendships with them within the school environment or the worksettings where my employment was. My experiences in New Zealand were mostly in government organizations that were colored by implicit and explicit bias among those who held power and authority, and developing productive networks was not easy. My career was less than completely successful perhaps because of the power held by those who decide whom they want to recognise and promote.

According to McCormick's⁴ research unconscious bias may be targetted against someone's name. Before 2000, it was difficult to find a job with my Indian name in New Zealand. The response to my job applications increased when I changed my name to European Christian. However, when my application was unable get through for a permanent position because of the exposure of my true physical self once they met me at the interview or heard my voice with the Indian accent.

From my experiences and observations that what can be evidenced in local governments and banking institutions is that they do not offer better job opportunities than educational institutions. Preference are given to island nationals over mainstream immigrants due to their "higher" qualifications and "exemplary" talents. New Zealanders have the expression, "*tall poppy syndrome*". It is sometimes meant as a joke, but has a deeper meaning saying that the person referred to is a nuisance or that they present themselves as an all-knowing smart immigrant. This makes it hard for management to recognise the talents and achievements of their current employees, especially if they are immigrants. Being modest about one's achievements is one thing but being ignored and disrespected for being outspoken about one's accomplishments is another.

McCormick's⁴ work shows that bias is embedded in the brain and that unconscious bias is part and parcel of it. Rankings, classifications, and inter-group experiences lead to biases. Growing up in a strict, caste-oriented, and religious society like India it was difficult for me to see people without bias. Anyone who eats meat is considered lower, and those who eat even garlic and onions are also considered lower in the society, where my childhood life spent. The environment has helped me recognize that in the organisations for which my work was, had bias well-rooted and tend to be systemically ingrained.

Immigrants can not easily remove their own biases or the biases they encounter in their new adopted countries and societies because they are formed at a young age in their native countries. In any organization cleaning people and property maintenance people will be part of the organization. New immigrant may think that being friendly with such lower grade employees in an organization is not beneficial. They also believe that they are smarter, and should and want to get close to management where the power resides.

It is amazing to not that systemic bias may be present within human-made computer software because they are developed by humans who have biases.⁶ Write about how the computerised airline reservation system is biased. The authors talk about the

biases of preference for specific airlines and the number of bookings that go to specific airlines. They further talk about discrimination against individuals or groups of individuals that is embeded in the computer system. Random errors, of course, do occur in a computing system. However, one should be aware that if humans are deliberately programming and implementing systems with their specified codes to give preferential advantages to individuals or groups, the computer will reflect those biases.

My observations were that those who do not mix with everyone, as well as those who are less friendly and harder to approach, are the people who seem to achieve the most. This may be a form of unconscious bias. It is ironic to see how being distant and not easily approachable leads to being more successful and results in being recognised in an organizational setting. Such unconscious bias in the workplace should be recognized and discouraged as part of training for employees. All human beings regardless of where they come from or where they grow up develop biases that are naturally formed in due course. Perhaps recognizing this may be a good start to diminish the impact of bias.

Humans are different and come from different societies with different biases that form the bases of and influence ethical behavior and values. Training in this respect for top-level management as well as employees at all levels should be required if an organization is to function within ethical bounds, aware of the impact of unconscious bias. The whole organization is likely to benefit from the top-to-bottom trickle. Humans are biased, and it's not an easily erasable trait. It is important that we focus on understanding how much of injustice has been overcome and how much unfairness has been avoided as human civilization has progressed. We should work on eliminating bias to benefit both the general social structures civilization has created and specific organization, where people work. The training for unbiased practice needs to be for the top and the bottom tiers of all organizations and levels of society.

CONCLUSION

Over all what observed were that as society around the world is transforming into multi-ethnic communities and national entities, it is accompanied by more social risks and cultural fears. Migration and exchange of populations across border is growing. This creates uncertainty, fear, and suspicion of strangers as people from different places interact and intermingle. In the current context of growing ethnic complexity along with the pandemic situation tensions between groups of different ethnic and national background is exacerbated. How can immigrant in the long run and in the newly forming more complex societies could cope with such fears, suspicions, and perceived personal risks? Furedi⁷ has discussed the risks involved in the emerging cultures around the world related to fear of "strangers" in his book *Culture of Fear Revisited*. This condition of fear of the "other" in today's multi-ethnic communities across increasingly artificial borders points to the urgent need to promote the development of trust and confidence in "others" as the world becomes smaller and interdependent by the end of the day. Rules and regulations are never sufficient, and relying on public feelings of togetherness and compassion will be inadequate. In

such an environment we need to think about how we should prepare the new generation to cope and to care for each other.

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