



Opportunity Saint Paul Unconscious Bias Workshop

“The most simple definition of bias is a preference for or against a group of people, a thing, or something that we encounter. I like to think of it as a lens. It's the lens that our brain uses as it processes inputs.” —Becky Evan, Metropolitan State University

EVENT SUMMARY

Why study bias?

People volunteer to help improve their community as well as to better the lives of their neighbors. Volunteer efforts are valuable and can bring needed resources and transformative activity to issues that affect communities. Volunteering is also people-centered and relies on good interpersonal skills to be effective.

In seeking to maximize positive outcomes, volunteers should be mindful of their own assumptions and actions — making sure that they are being attentive and compassionate in their interpersonal interactions as volunteers. Biases and assumptions can sometimes lead us to imperfect decisions and actions. Being mindful in examining our motivations, intentions, and biases can help us to be the best volunteers we can be.

“Most of the time, bias is a good thing. However, when it comes to people, sometimes our brain misinterprets patterns that it's seeing. And so how this could impact our interpersonal relationships, is that we might not go outside of the five people that we know. Or we might not know anyone who lives outside of our community. And a lot of this is really unintentional.” —Becky Evan

How does our brain function impact bias?

In “Exploring Unconscious Bias,” Howard Ross writes: “Less than 15% of American men are over six feet tall, yet almost 60% of corporate CEOs are over six feet. Why does this happen?” He notes that corporate boards are not explicitly seeking tall candidates for CEO jobs, but yet “the numbers speak for themselves.” While it seems absurd, he writes, to choose a CEO based on height, it is just as absurd to treat people differently based on clothing choices, or to prescribe medical procedures based on race. “Yet, all of these things continuously happen, and they are but a small sampling of the hundreds of ways we make decision in favor of one group, and to the detriment of others, without even realizing we're doing it.”

Ross's paper goes on to describe how the human brain functions, making multiple—and largely automatic—decisions about “what is safe or not, what is appropriate or not,” and so on. Ross notes that this kind of built-in “danger detector” has a useful purpose, but when left unchecked and unreviewed, these unconscious patterns of bias-based decision-making can lead to inadvertent discrimination.

“I've seen bias show up in volunteering where we walk in and make assumptions about people on first blush. And our brain is doing that behind the scenes. And so, if we're meeting someone that we don't know, we might make up an entire story about them that is based on the bias that our brain has.” —Becky Evan

Bias can impact volunteer work

In Becky Evans' presentation to Interfaith Action of Greater Saint Paul, she stressed the value of volunteering, as witnessed in her own life, and the lives of others. She also asked volunteers to recognize that they are imperfect and make mistakes. One's biases and imperfections can lead to moments of error or awkwardness during people-intensive volunteer activities. Becky urged volunteers to keep their minds open to new and challenging experiences and to commit to going on a “learning journey” through their volunteer work.

“I like to talk about this as a journey of self-awareness. And so by understanding the bias that I have, I'm able to more quickly change my response. I'm able to understand how I'm responding in the moment, and it allows me to be much more authentic in my relationships with people.” —Becky Evan

INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

Faith traditions stress attentiveness to our neighbors

Bashir Imady used the following verse as a challenge to think about our differences - in terms of language, skin color, or culture. For Bashir, the “lightening” imagery challenges us to overcome our negative biases or initial fears about each other, and to instead focus on a broader hope for humanity that grows out of our collective diversity - a spark in the midst of darkness.

“And among the signs of God has shown to you is this: The lightning that is shown to you so that you may experience fear and hope.” —Reading from “Romans” in the Quran

The verses on the following page are from Rum, or the Romans. When the Romans lost a major battle to the Sassanids in 614 A.D., the polytheists of Mecca took it as a sign that the Abrahamic faiths were destined to lose. So, the Rum chapter was revealed saying that, yes, the Romans lost, but do not despair for in a few years they will win a decisive victory (which eventually took place during Heraclius' campaign of 622 A.D. which pushed the Sassanids out of Anatolia). The verses chosen for today come out of themes of family, hopefulness, and faith in the Divine.

English Translation: Rum – Surah 30

And among the signs of God is this: You are created from earth, and with time, you become humans dispersing throughout the earth.²⁰ And among the signs of God is this: Your companions were created for you from your very selves that you may experience tranquility in intimacy, and love and compassion was placed between you. Indeed, there are in this signs for those who reflect.²¹ And among the signs of God is this: The creation of the heavens and the earth, and the diversity of your tongues [languages] and [skin] colours. Indeed, there are in this signs for all.²² And among the signs of God is this: How you sleep during the night and, during the day, how you seek the various blessings of God. Indeed, there are in this signs for those who can hear [with their hearts.]²³ And among the signs of God is this: The lightning that is shown to you so that you may experience fear and hope. And how rain falls from the sky and gives life back to a land after it had experienced death. Indeed, there is in this signs for those who comprehend.²⁴

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Unconscious Bias

1. Becky states that stereotyping is any thought widely adopted by specific types of individuals or certain ways of behaving intended to represent the entire group of those individuals or behaviors as a whole. Our brain sees a pattern and we begin to reinforce those ideas through stereotypes. What are some stereotypes you or society might have towards a certain group of people/set of behaviors? What are ways you can stop reinforcing these ideas?
2. When you first started volunteering with a person/group of people, you may have made assumptions based on your first interaction. Think back to those first impressions/assumptions you made about the people. Since working with them and learning more about them, what stereotypes have been dismantled through your ongoing interactions? What did you learn from these experiences?
3. Write down assumptions you have about the person/people you serve while volunteering. Reflect on these assumptions. Come up with questions you can ask these people at a future volunteer session to help you get the truth about these assumptions.
4. What are action steps you can take to learn more about the people around you?

Interfaith Dialogue

1. What might be learned from the juxtaposition of the verse that focuses on intimate relationships and a verse that speaks about the diversity of humanity?
2. What could be seen as hopeful about these verses—what might be hopeful about their juxtaposition?
3. What do you think are the blessings in human differences? Why might this be mentioned as a blessing at all?

REFERENCES

1. Web article: <http://www.cookcross.com/docs/UnconsciousBias.pdf>
2. Balta, H. (2015). Unconscious Bias. *Public Relations Tactics*, 22(11), 16.
3. Cuddy, A.J.C., Glick, P., and Beninger, A. The Dynamics of Warmth and Competence Judgments, and their Outcomes in Organizations. Retrieved from <http://www.people.hbs.edu/acuddy/in%20press,%20cuddy,%20glick,%20&%20beninger,%20ROB.pdf>
4. Taggar, S., & Brown, T. C. (2006). Interpersonal Affect and Peer Rating Bias in Teams. *Small Group Research*, 37(1), 86-111. doi:10.1177/1046496405284382
5. Talamas, S. N., Mavor, K. I., & Perrett, D. I. (2016). Blinded by Beauty: Attractiveness Bias and Accurate Perceptions of Academic Performance. *Plos ONE*, 11(2), 1-18. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0148284