

We All Do It: Unconscious Behavior, Bias, and Diversity*

Ronald Wheeler**

Mr. Wheeler suggests that many of our behaviors, in the workplace and elsewhere, are motivated by unconscious triggers and emotions, including racial biases. These behaviors, however, can be prevented by making conscious choices that enhance diversity.

¶1 The academic literature on diversity in librarianship and in the legal professions tends to focus on institutional barriers to racial and ethnic diversity. Things like law school and library school admissions demographics, law firm employment demographics, and the demographics of legal academe have all been discussed.¹ These types of discussions, while necessary, may also allow most law librarians to feel absolved of any responsibility for diversity. They reinforce the notion that the average law librarian has little control over changing the systemic forces that impede diversity. Yet there are steps that all law librarians, and indeed all people, can take to foster diversity in the workplace. My hope here is to demonstrate that we can all contribute to advancing diversity in our workplaces.

What We Know from Social Psychology

¶2 Much of what we do on a daily basis is unconscious. Psychologists and other social and behavioral scientists are in agreement about this point.² In fact, “one of the least controversial propositions in all psychology is that people are not always

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** Director of the Law Library and Information Resources, Suffolk University Law School, Boston, Massachusetts.

1. See, e.g., Meera E. Deo, *Looking Forward to Diversity in Legal Academia*, 29 BERKELEY J. GENDER, L. & JUST. 352 (2014) (discussing the underrepresentation of women of color in legal academe); John Nussbaumer & Chris Johnson, *The Door to Law School*, 6 U. MASS. ROUNDTABLE SYMP. L.J. 1 (2011) (discussing the reasons minorities are shut out of law schools); Sarah E. Redfield, *The Educational Pipeline to Law School—Too Broken and Too Narrow to Provide Diversity*, 8 PIERCE L. REV. 347 (2010) (discussing the low numbers of minorities in the legal professions); Karen Sloan, *Legal Education’s Diversity Deficit: Despite Efforts, Modest Rise in Minority Enrollment*, NAT’L L.J., May 12, 2014, at 1; see also Alyssa Thurston, *Addressing the “Emerging Minority”*: *Racial and Ethnic Diversity in Law Librarianship in the Twenty-First Century*, 104 LAW LIBR. J. 359, 2012 LAW LIBR. J. 27.

2. See, e.g., SIGMUND FREUD & JAMES STRACHEY, *THE PSYCHOPATHOLOGY OF EVERYDAY LIFE* (1965); Richard E. Nisbett & Timothy D. Wilson, *Telling More Than We Can Know: Verbal Reports on Mental Processes*, 84 PSYCHOL. REV. 231 (1977); Timothy D. Wilson & Nancy Brekke, *Mental Contamination and Mental Correction: Unwanted Influences on Judgments and Evaluations*, 116 PSYCHOL. BULL. 117 (1994).

aware why they do the things they do.”³ That means not only that we are sometimes unaware of what we are doing, but also that we are sometimes unaware of why we are doing the things that we do. Social psychologists in particular have “investigated the ways in which the higher mental processes such as judgment and social behavior could be triggered and then operate in the absence of conscious intent and guidance.”⁴

¶3 One category of unconscious behaviors are those that we consciously choose to do, but then the unconscious takes over so that we are able to do these tasks without conscious guidance. “Typing and driving a car (for the experienced typist and driver, respectively) are classic examples.”⁵ Many of us get in our cars to go to work and then before we know it, we are pulling into our work parking space with no real recollection of the drive to work. Here the unconscious was able to take over the task of driving the car to work without requiring any real conscious thought. The example I like to give from my personal life is running on a treadmill. I can climb onto the treadmill, turn on the *Glee* tunes on my iPhone, and then run for an hour while not ever consciously thinking about running, where I’m placing my feet, whether I’m close to falling off of the treadmill, and so on. The mechanics of running are operated by my unconscious mind.

¶4 Another category of unconscious behaviors is even more interesting. These are behaviors that we do consciously but are unaware of why we do them. Here there is a “preconscious analysis of stimuli prior to the products of the analysis being furnished to conscious awareness.”⁶ In other words, the unconscious analyzes information and produces the motivation for doing something, and the conscious mind does the task in question without any real awareness of where the motivation for action came from. There are lots of examples from experiments and from daily life in the psychology literature. Famous experiments involving seating and gender provide a good illustration of this phenomenon. These experiments have proven that when choosing seating in a waiting room, men will almost never sit next to or across from other men.⁷ Unconsciously, “males react negatively and are usually disturbed by frontal invasion [or encounter] by another male” in a waiting room situation.⁸ When entering a waiting room where only women are seated, men overwhelmingly prefer the frontal position and will sit across from a woman. Women, however, will almost always sit adjacent to another woman and not across from or in the frontal position.⁹ What is important to note is that both men and women are not aware or conscious of why they are making these seating choices.

¶5 Some unconscious triggers are emotional in nature. “Under some conditions an emotional process may remain entirely unconscious, even when the per-

3. Tom Pyszczynski, Jeff Greenberg & Sheldon Solomon, *Proximal and Distal Defense: A New Perspective on Unconscious Motivation*, 9 CURRENT DIRECTIONS PSYCHOL. SCI. 156, 156 (2000).

4. John A. Bargh & Ezequiel Morsella, *The Unconscious Mind*, 3 PERSP. PSYCHOL. SCI. 73, 74 (2008).

5. *Id.*

6. *Id.*

7. Ciani A. Camperio & M. Malaman, *Where to Sit In a Waiting Room: Density, Age and Gender Effects on Proxemic Choices*, 17 HUM. EVOLUTION 175, 175 (2002).

8. *Id.*

9. *Id.* at 182.

son . . . [feeling the emotion can] . . . describe his or her feelings correctly.”¹⁰ In other words, sometimes we know what emotions we are feeling, but we are unaware of why we are feeling them. “Such an emotional process may nevertheless drive the person’s behavior and psychological reactions, even while remaining inaccessible to conscious awareness.”¹¹ We call this emotional process unconscious or implicit emotion. These emotions, rather than occurring explicitly or with “conscious awareness of an emotion, feeling, or mood state,” occur implicitly or independent of conscious awareness, causing “changes in experience, thought, or action.”¹²

The Role of Bias

¶6 The fact that we are often unaware of the stimuli or motivations for the decisions that we make is further complicated by the impact of bias. “Half a century of . . . research has shown that human judgment is often biased.”¹³ “By some counts, 80% of Western democratic populations intend benign intergroup relations but display subtle biases.”¹⁴ It happens naturally, and it happens in all of us. “People seem to overrely on stereotypical intuitions and so-called heuristic thinking instead of more demanding, deliberative reasoning when making decisions.”¹⁵ Simply put, it is easier and more efficient for us to make on-the-spot, everyday decisions this way.

¶7 Biases come in many forms and can influence all of our interactions, including those occurring in the workplace. Much has been written about the impact of racial bias and unconscious racism.¹⁶ Therefore, for our purposes here, I will assume these are concepts with which most people are familiar. It is enough, then, to assert that unconscious racism exists, and it can be a powerful driver of behavior even in well-meaning individuals harboring no racial intent.¹⁷ The resulting effects on racial diversity can be inferred.

¶8 However, even non-race-based unconscious biases drive behavior in the workplace. Biases of all kinds create “awkward social interactions, embarrassing slips of the tongue, unchecked assumptions, stereotypic judgments, and spontaneous neglect.”¹⁸ “The mundane automaticity of bias . . . creates a subtly hostile environment for

10. Piotr Winkielman & Kent C. Berridge, *Unconscious Emotion*, 13 CURRENT DIRECTIONS PSYCHOL. SCI. 120, 120 (2004).

11. *Id.*

12. *Id.* at 120–21.

13. Wim De Neys, *Bias and Conflict: A Case for Logical Intuitions*, 7 PERSP. PSYCHOL. SCI. 28, 28 (2012).

14. Susan T. Fiske, *What We Know Now About Bias and Intergroup Conflict, the Problem of the Century*, 11 CURRENT DIRECTIONS PSYCHOL. SCI. 123, 123 (2002).

15. De Neys, *supra* note 13, at 28.

16. See, e.g., Hart Blanton & James Jaccard, *Unconscious Racism: A Concept in Pursuit of a Measure*, 34 ANN. REV. SOC. 277 (2008); John F. Dovidio & Samuel L. Gaertner, *Reducing Prejudice: Combating Intergroup Biases*, 8 CURRENT DIRECTIONS PSYCHOL. SCI. 101 (1999); Lincoln Quillian, *Does Unconscious Racism Exist?*, 71 SOC. PSYCHOL. Q. 6 (2008).

17. There are, however, a few contemporary researchers who deny the existence of unconscious racial prejudice. See, e.g., Richard E. Redding, *Bias on Prejudice? The Politics of Research on Racial Prejudice*, 15 PSYCHOL. INQUIRY 289 (2004).

18. Fiske, *supra* note 14, at 124.

out-group members.”¹⁹ Biases of all kinds can unconsciously drive behaviors such as “withholding positive emotions from out-groups . . . , withholding basic liking and respect . . . , and cool neglect.”²⁰ Understandably, these behaviors can impede diversity by driving away out-group members or making them feel unwelcome and unappreciated.

Workplace Bias

¶9 I offer examples of my own unconscious biases and how they play out in the workplace to illuminate their effects on diversity. Unlike most librarians and contrary to the librarian stereotype, I am a super-extrovert. I enjoy interacting with people of all kinds, and I draw energy or recharge through human connections. Conversely, I am depleted or drained by most solitary tasks. I would much rather talk about a problem or issue than think about it alone. As a result, I am very naturally drawn to others who enjoy frequent spontaneous conversation, who seem charged by human interaction, and who exhibit extroverted behaviors.²¹ What I have noticed in my professional life is that I have a natural tendency to gravitate to the talkers or extroverts in the workplace far more often than I do to the introverts or quiet types. This has in the past created the perception that I am excluding people, that I like some people more than others, or that I value the extroverts over the introverts. This is how unconscious bias works. My intention was never to exclude anyone, and my actions were never driven by conscious choices. Even so, my actions may have caused some to feel devalued, disliked, or unwelcome. The effect could have been to drive away this facet of workplace diversity, which I greatly value. Before I began really thinking deeply about these issues, I was completely unaware of these behaviors of mine, what motivated them, and how they were impacting others in the workplace.

¶10 I can offer another example from my personal life. I have a nephew who, as the result of a motorcycle accident years ago, is paralyzed from the waist down. He is a fun-loving and social guy who navigates the world in a wheelchair. He is an easy person to like, and my perception is that people generally enjoy his company. Nevertheless, I have noticed that even at family gatherings, he will sometimes find himself alone and on the periphery of the assembled group. I believe this happens as a result of unconscious bias. Unconsciously and unknowingly, people gravitate toward easy social interactions. People’s unfamiliarity with interacting with someone in a wheelchair or their fear of the possibility of discussing my nephew’s paralysis or their discomfort around the mechanics of standing while interacting with someone who is seated all conspire to drive their avoidance of people like him. I’ve seen this dynamic happen again and again, and I know those involved are completely without malice and that many do, in fact, love my nephew. Neverthe-

19. *Id.*

20. *Id.* at 125.

21. I realize that extroversion and introversion are far more complex and nuanced concepts than I acknowledge here, and that I am relying here on the stereotypical definitions commonly understood by most people. See THE MYERS & BRIGGS FOUNDATION, <http://www.myersbriggs.org/> (last visited May 29, 2015) (for a more thorough examination of the concepts of introversion and extroversion).

less, the impact of these situations could cause him to feel disliked, excluded, and uncomfortable. An understandable consequence would be for him to avoid these social gatherings altogether. Now imagine, as I often do, how these dynamics might play out for my nephew in the workplace. It is not at all difficult to imagine how he might begin to feel excluded or even unwelcome. These dynamics are real, they occur in the workplace, and they impede workplace diversity.

¶11 One final anecdote I'll offer involves the intersection of race, national origin, and language. Partly as a result of having taught and traveled in China, I have become more aware of the Chinese students studying at my law school.²² Most of my observations are of interactions outside the classroom in more social contexts like at receptions or other student events. Without fail, I have noticed the students from China ending up alone and looking uncomfortable. Admittedly there could be a host of explanations for this phenomenon including choices being made by the Chinese students themselves. Notwithstanding the Chinese students' actions, it is the actions and omissions of the U.S. students that interest me. Invariably, I've seen U.S. students look at a Chinese student standing alone and then turn and walk the other way. I've even witnessed groups of U.S. students suddenly disperse when approached by a Chinese student. I am confident that these U.S. students harbor no ill will and that they intend no harm. I suspect that their actions are driven by unconscious biases, fears, and emotions. I suspect fear of otherness, inexperience with or fear of conversing with nonnative English speakers, or even mere lack of exposure to people born in other countries all unconsciously drive their avoidance behaviors. These types of actions, especially in the workplace context, can cause at best isolation and discomfort. Even worse, people who feel shunned in this way can begin to feel disliked, discriminated against, and unwelcome.

Self-Awareness

¶12 The first thing that we can all do is become more self-aware. It sounds too simplistic to be true, but it works. The contemporary social psychology literature confirms this assertion. "Implicit attitudes are difficult to access through introspection, but . . . with directed introspection their impact can be somewhat controlled."²³ In my own professional life, I began noticing that while closeness was developing between me and my more extroverted coworkers, a distance was developing between me and my more introverted coworkers. I was saddened by this reality for several reasons. First, I really liked and admired my less verbose colleagues. In fact, in many cases I liked them more than the extroverts with whom I had to compete for floor time during conversations. Additionally, I recognized that it was often the introverts who were more thoughtful and contemplative. They were often the ones who offered a much more nuanced and complete analysis of problems than my more knee-jerk and often grandiloquent opinions contained. I began to realize that I was,

22. I have made these observations at several different law schools at which I have been employed, and my intention is not to implicate any particular law school environment. Instead I mean to assert that these situations occur everywhere.

23. Quillan, *supra* note 16, at 7.

in great part, responsible for this developing dynamic and that I could take steps to change it.

¶13 So, as I made my multiple daily rounds popping into people's offices for chitchat, I began making a point of including the introverts in my perambulation. This took effort on my part not because the introverts were unpleasant in any way, but because conversation with them often took more effort on my part. I found that I often had to brainstorm a few topics to have at the ready in case the conversation lagged. I discovered that asking questions is a great technique for engaging those less inclined to conversational chatter. Also, I found I had to resist my natural tendency to fill silences with my own bombast. After a while, I discovered that conversation with the introverts became much easier. We both (I think?) began to enjoy each other more, and I felt that there grew a mutual appreciation for each other as colleagues. I definitely felt the distance or isolation from the introverts begin to melt away. Perhaps most important, I learned that I had to respect people's boundaries when they were sometimes not interested in impromptu conversation. This was a really difficult lesson for me to learn. However, beginning the process of becoming more self-aware and changing some of my behaviors that were driven by unconscious choices were feasible. It merely required me to do some real self-reflection and to be more deliberate in my daily interactions that involved unconscious choices.

Other Solutions

¶14 There are other ways to reduce bias and take control of unconscious choices that impede diversity. "Social psychologists have studied the positive effects of constructive intergroup contact that increases mutual appreciation."²⁴ This means more than merely being in the same room with those for whom you harbor negative biases. It means initiating contacts where there is "equal status within the immediate setting, shared goals, cooperation in pursuit of those goals, and [supervisory or] authorities' support"²⁵ Being on a workplace or project team is a perfect opportunity. This kind of interaction "provides a basis for intergroup friendship."²⁶ Most intergroup interactions that provide "opportunities for personal acquaintance and supportive egalitarian norms . . . [are effective at] . . . reducing intergroup bias and conflict."²⁷ For me this boils down to making an effort to spend time with people, getting to know them personally, and finding commonalities.

¶15 Intergroup contact works by "reducing the salience of intergroup boundaries, that is, through decategorization."²⁸ These contacts "can produce interactions in which people are seen as unique individuals . . . [especially when enhanced by] . . . the exchange of intimate information."²⁹ My personal experience has been that people are almost always much more than they appear to be. Our tendency as humans, subject to stereotypes and unconscious biases, is to make assumptions

24. Fiske, *supra* note 14, at 127.

25. *Id.* at 128.

26. *Id.*

27. Dovidio & Gaertner, *supra* note 16, at 102.

28. *Id.* at 103.

29. *Id.*

based on what we see. Sometimes what we see and what informs our unconscious biases are things like skin color, disability, fashion sense or lack thereof, gray hair, perceived age, perceived sexual orientation, accents, or speech patterns. The discovery that someone you have, for whatever reason, underestimated, misjudged, or merely overlooked is really a fantastic person and a wonderful colleague is a pretty great feeling—for both parties.

¶16 I will offer one final anecdote here that touches on the intersection of race, age, gender, sexual orientation, and perceived affluence. When I was in library school, I worked in the library of a small Catholic college called Marygrove in Detroit. When I began working there, I was in my early thirties, and I would often encounter a middle-aged, fifty-something-year-old, white woman, librarian-coworker while eating lunch in the lunchroom. On several separate occasions we noticed that, coincidentally, we were reading the same novel. This happened several times with several different novels. Finally, one day, she invited me to lunch to talk about one of the books, and from that day forward she and I became fast friends. Our now fifteen-year friendship is one that I truly cherish. Our adventures over the years have included frequent travel together to places like Paris and Buenos Aires. These are special trips where we both leave our husbands at home and just hang out together. I now consider her one of my closest friends.

¶17 I often ponder the fact that, on the surface, a middle-aged white, heterosexual woman from the suburbs and a youngish black gay man from inner-city Detroit would not be expected to have much in common. In fact, both her friends and mine have commented on this issue over the years. Nevertheless, I have found my dear friend to be so very much more than she appeared to be when we first met. My perception of what she “appeared to be” was no doubt colored by my unconscious biases and stereotypes. I am so glad that we both took control and moved beyond our unconscious biases and assumptions and made the effort to interact and to eventually form a lasting friendship. I also sometimes reflect on how very sad it would be to put up walls and choose only to interact with people of particular races or sexual orientations or abilities or ages or personality types. Doing that would cause one to miss out on so much. The same is entirely true of workplace interactions and relationships. Recall that my friendship described above began in the workplace.

Conclusion

¶18 Many of our behaviors, in the workplace and elsewhere, are motivated by unconscious triggers and emotions. Some of those unconscious motivations are fueled by biases of various sorts. Whether they are biases about race, about ability, about personality type, or about gender, biases exist in all of us, and they can drive behaviors that negatively impact diversity. Unconsciously motivated behaviors can cause people to feel excluded, undervalued, disliked, and even discriminated against. But all of that is preventable. We can all take control of these unconscious impulses. We can reflect on the everyday choices we make, especially in the workplace, and we can make more conscious choices that serve to include, to welcome, and to enhance diversity. These are steps that everyone can take to promote diversity in all of its forms.

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