



Uncomfortable truths

At the Practitioners' Conference, keynote speaker and social psychologist **Keon West** revealed some of the unconscious processes that impact on how our society operates. Arguing that both privilege and deeply engrained prejudices perpetuate inequality, he considers how this impacts on who holds positions of power at work

Imagine a man who professes to value quality time in his marriage, but repeatedly sacrifices time with his partner for time spent with friends. Or, imagine a woman who professes strong concerns about the environment, but drives when she could cycle. Highlight these discrepancies in their values and behaviours, and you would make the man and woman uncomfortable. This discomfort we feel when we try to hold two or more contradictory beliefs or values at the same time is what psychologists call 'cognitive dissonance'¹. There are two reasons for cognitive dissonance. First, people tend to strive for consistency – we just like it when things make sense and are harmonious. Second, it is often the case that one of the beliefs or values is important for our self-esteem, even if it is not supported by the available evidence.

Here is another example. I know many people who say that 'gender doesn't matter', or that 'colour doesn't matter', and who proudly teach these ideas to their children. Yet, of the 53 British prime ministers, how many have been women? How many were not White? Who are the richest people in society? Who are poorest? Even in your own workplace, how many of the people who are more senior than you are women or Black or Asian? And what about the people who are less senior than you; how many of them are female, or Black or Asian? If your workplace is anything like mine, or most others in the UK, these reflections probably make you feel a bit uncomfortable.

Again, this is another case of cognitive dissonance stemming from three incompatible beliefs. Though we often try to ignore it, it is an easily observed reality that **society is uneven**. Men tend to have more power and status; White people tend to be wealthier and healthier². However, this stratification is difficult to square with the notion that demographics 'do not matter', an idea that can be broken down into two parts. The first part is that **society is equal**. Most of us like to view ourselves as forward-thinking, egalitarian people³. We consider it crass or outdated to believe in the inherent superiority of men or White people. The second part is that **society is fair**. Most people admit that, generally, life is not fair. However, few of us believe that *our* successes in life are due to unearned, demographically based privileges, rather than individual talent or effort. Thus dissonance: society cannot be **uneven, equal, and fair**.

To reduce cognitive dissonance at least one of the incompatible beliefs or behaviours must be removed. While the stratification of society cannot be ignored, it is possible that society becomes more **even** over time. Perhaps present-day unevenness is due to historical inequalities, and is largely disappearing? Unfortunately, the available evidence does not support this view. On the contrary, analyses show that this unevenness is stable, or even *increasing*. Despite progress made in the 1970s and 80s, the gender-based pay gap has remained stable in more recent decades⁴, and in some places the White-Black pay gap has *increased* by almost 300 per cent⁵. A second option is to conclude that society is not in fact **equal**. Perhaps men and White people are in fact superior, at least in some ways? However, this is also not supported by the evidence. For almost a century psychologists have observed that apparent differences in capabilities between genders and 'races' are not inherent, but rather due to training and opportunities^{6,7}.

This leaves the third option: the uncomfortable admission that society is perhaps **unfair**, that we benefit from unjust and unearned privilege, and perhaps perpetuate this unjust system. As unpleasant as it may be to accept, this is the conclusion supported by the available evidence.

The available evidence

Most people underestimate the volume of scientific data that investigates bias, prejudice or discrimination. As I write this in April, 2014, there are over 11,000 manuscripts on prejudice *published since 1 January 2014*. Of course several times as many were published before. This massive body of research covers topics such as predictors of prejudice^{8,9}, strength and acceptability of prejudice¹⁰, and ways of reducing or managing prejudice^{11,12,13}. It paints a clear and troubling picture.

For example, do you believe that, for the same work, women should be paid as much as men? Most people would say 'yes'. However, a group of researchers asked hundreds of participants to describe the 'typical worker' for a number of different jobs. This description included, among other things, whether the typical worker was male or female, and what the appropriate salary for the position would be. They found that participants assigned significantly higher salaries to jobs they perceived as 'male' jobs than to jobs they perceived as 'female' jobs (eg those

who thought the typical editor was male assigned editors a higher salary than those who thought the typical editor was female). This was even true for *female* participants. Even if they were doing the same things, these participants put a higher financial value on men's work than on women's work¹⁴.

Other researchers dropped off 130 real applications for waitress or waiter positions at 65 real restaurants (two per restaurant). The candidates described in these applications were *identically qualified*, but for each restaurant one applicant was male and one was female¹⁵. Despite identical qualifications, the candidates did not receive an equal number of job offers. At mid-price restaurants, males received almost twice as many job offers as females (48 per cent vs 29 per cent). At high-price restaurants, the difference was substantially larger; males received over five times as many job offers as females (48 per cent vs nine per cent). Only at the low-paying restaurants did females have an advantage; then, females received almost four times as many job offers as males (38 per cent vs 10 per cent).

Yet another group of researchers distributed thousands of CVs to real companies with real job vacancies. In this experiment, as in the previous one, the different CVs were identical except for the ethnicity of the applicant, who was either Black or White¹⁶. For the same qualifications and experience, a White applicant was 50 per cent more likely to receive a call-back from an employer than a Black applicant. Using this data, the researchers calculated the value that could be ascribed to Whiteness, and found that being White was worth eight years of additional experience.

However, additional experience does not benefit everyone equally. By varying the skill level of the applicants in this study, the researchers also investigated the effects of increased qualifications and experience. While White applicants experienced a 30 per cent increase in call-backs due to higher quality credentials, for the same improvement, Black applicants only received a nine per cent increase in call-backs. Thus, the benefits of being White increase as applicants become more qualified, and additional effort is much more rewarding for White people than for Black people. These effects occur at every junction. For the same behaviour, teachers think less of and expect less from Black students than from White students¹⁷. Non-White people receive more hostile, less welcoming behaviour at interviews¹⁸. Co-workers assume that men should hold high authority positions, but women should hold low authority positions¹⁹. Furthermore, decreasing differences in status exacerbates (rather than reduces) gender-based differences in treatment²⁰. There are many other examples.

But surely this does not apply to us! We've been taught the importance of not valuing gender difference, and of being 'colour-blind'. We have a genuine appreciation for egalitarian values. This is true. And thus, since the 1970s, social psychologists have had difficulty detecting prejudice using explicit, question-and-answer methods²¹, which was odd considering the persistent effects of

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demographics. However, a breakthrough in prejudice research occurred in the 1990s with the development of implicit tests of bias³. Unlike explicit tests, these tests are based on reaction times, error rates, and other variables of which participants may not even be aware.

The most influential of these is the implicit association test²², which asks participants to simultaneously categorise multiple things to determine the ease with which they are associated. It is a difficult test to describe. However, you could experience 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 others. Though, be forewarned, despite their best intentions, most people find that they have several implicit prejudices with which they may not be comfortable. These biases are conditioned into us by a lifetime of stories about princes who rescue and damsels who are rescued, of good, light-skinned people, and bad, dark-skinned people, of White male bosses, and non-White female servants. This conditioning predicts our beliefs and behaviour, and though it can be undone, it cannot be undone easily.

These are unpleasant discoveries, and this article has only addressed contemporary discrimination in the workplace based on gender and ethnicity. There is also research on the effects of class, religion, sexuality, mental and physical health, age (and more). We can respond to these unpleasant facts with guilt, shame or anger. However, these emotions do little to help us or help society. Solutions to intergroup bias are as varied as its negative effects, but they all start with the same thing: abandoning the dissonance-generating belief that society is **fair**. When we courageously face the fact that demographics do matter, and are willing to understand how they matter, we are much better equipped to make a **fairer, more even, more equal** society: a society in which we could consider the demographics of the rich and the poor, of the powerful and the powerless, of those more and less senior than ourselves in our workplaces, and feel no discomfort at all.



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