CONSCIOUSLY OVERCOMING UNCONSCIOUS BIAS IN THE WORKPLACE — PART II (INSTITUTIONAL STRATEGIES)

Dr. Joseph M. Williams
Associate Professor of Education
University of Virginia
jmw5dj@Virginia.edu
AGENDA

Session Take-Aways

- Identify and define (implicit) institutional bias
- Understand the negative impact of institutional biases on workplace culture
- Discuss a framework for challenging institutional biases
WHAT INTERESTED YOU IN THE STUDY OF INSTITUTIONAL BIAS IN THE WORKPLACE?

AND/OR

WHAT ARE SOME STRATEGIES YOU’VE TRIED TO ADDRESS BIASES IN THE WORK ENVIRONMENT? AND WHAT HAVE BEEN THE SUCCESSES AND CHALLENGES?
Bias — the evaluation of one group and its members relative to another, usually in a way considered to be unfair, preconceived or unreasoned.
Implicit Bias – prejudices and stereotypes we hold outside of our conscious awareness.

Or

...attitudes and stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decision in an unconscious manner
SUMMARY OF IMPLICIT BIAS (CONT.)

1. Operates at the **subconscious level**. We are NOT aware that we have them. **It derives much of it's power from the fact that people are unaware of it.**

2. Run **contrary to our stated beliefs and attitudes**. We can say that we believe in equity (and truly believe it). But then behave in ways that are biased and discriminatory.

3. Triggered **automatically** through the **rapid association** of people/groups/objects and our attitudes AND stereotypes about them.

4. Unconscious bias may lead a person to act in a way that is at odds with their intentions.

5. Operate at both **the individual and institutional** level
Institutional Bias – A tendency for the rules, policies, practices, and procedures of particular institutions to operate in ways which result in certain social groups being advantaged or favored and others being disadvantaged or devalued.
Ethnocentrism: the belief that one’s own racial or ethnic group’s beliefs, values, and practices are the standard by which all things are measured or valued.

Institutions often reflect the cultural assumptions of the dominant group, so that the practices of that group are seen as the norm to which other cultural practices should conform (Anderson and Taylor, 2006).
IDENTIFYING INSTITUTIONAL BIAS

When bias operates at the systems, or institutional level, it acts as a social force and instead of impacting people one by one, it affects many people. It can show up in a number of overt and subtle ways.
Using Data to Identify Institutional Bias

- Identify inequities and discrepancies

Two frames of thoughts regarding attributions of the source of group-based disparities:

- Group-Based Factors
- Institutional Factors
IDENTIFYING SOCIAL INSTITUTIONAL

Health Care
Government
Education
Employment
Housing
Criminal justice
EDUCATION AND CAREER TRAJECTORIES

Research findings on the education and career trajectories of men and women scientists and engineers do not reveal differences in ability, training, or even productivity that explain the sex differences in career progression. Rather, a web of factors—including psychosocial features, family patterns, and institutional requirements (which can impact aspirations, expectations, access, etc.), combine to produce unequal career outcomes for men and women.

POTENTIAL INDICATORS OF INSTITUTIONAL BIAS

- Recruitment: Diverse candidates not advancing through the interview process
- Retention: High turnover among historically underrepresented groups
- Salary: Pay Inequities
- Hiring/Advancement bias presents itself in a multitude of ways:
  - Homogeneous workforce
  - Diversity concentrated at the lowest levels of the organization
  - Homogeneous applicants
  - Lack of visible diversity in leadership
  - Lack of diversity recruitment/retention strategy
  - Lack of concern about diversity
  - Failure to invest in mentoring, professional development, and succession planning
  - Failure to cast a wide recruiting net
EXAMPLES

WOMEN IN SCIENCE (U.S. Current Population Survey and the National Committee on Pay Equity, 2016)

• Science remains institutionally sexist. Despite some progress, women scientists are still paid less, promoted less frequently, win fewer grants and are more likely to leave research than similarly qualified men.

• Median annual earnings of non-male or non-white people as a percentage of the median annual earnings of white men in 2016
  White men = 100%
  White women = 73.5%
  Black men = 72.1%
  Black women = 63.6%
  Latino men = 57.5%
  Latino women = 51.7%
WORKPLACE DECISION IMPACTED BY INSTITUTIONAL BIASES

Hiring Decision
Recruiting efforts
Interviews
Mentoring Decisions
Job Assignments
Training Opportunities
Promotional Decision
Performance Reviews
Pay Increases

How we conduct the initial orientation interview
Listening to people's ideas and suggestions
Treating customers
Choose board members
FRAMEWORK FOR OVERCOMING INSTITUTIONAL BIAS

Framework for overcoming bias (Jana & Mejias, 2018):

• FRAMEWORK 1: Personal Change Framework
• FRAMEWORK 2: Institutional Change Framework
FRAMEWORK FOR OVERCOMING INSTITUTIONAL BIAS

FRAMEWORK 1: Personal Change Framework

1. Evaluate your (old) role in perpetuating systemic bias.
2. Define your (new) role in breaking down systemic bias.
3. Cultivate allies.
4. Create a movement.
FRAMEWORK FOR OVERCOMING INSTITUTIONAL BIAS

FRAMEWORK 2: Institutional Change Framework

1. Set a clear intention.
2. Lead with data.
3. Diagnose accurately.
5. Reconstruct with objectivity.
6. Build in accountability and ongoing measurement.
Step 1: Evaluate Your (Old) Role in Perpetuating Systemic Bias

This step is important because all of the work that deals with interpersonal strengths requires a healthy dose of self-awareness.

It is difficult to be a credible ally and change maker when you are actively perpetuating the problems you aim to correct.

When you identify systemic bias at play, it is critical that you do the hard work of understanding the type of bias, its ramifications, and your role in perpetuating it.
EXERCISE 1

1. What specific bias is at issue?
2. How is this bias affecting me?
3. How am I benefitting from this bias?
4. How am I hurt or limited by this bias?
5. How is this bias affecting my colleagues and this organization’s stakeholders?
6. How might this bias benefit specific demographics?
7. Which groups are hurt or limited by this bias?
8. How will erasing this bias help the aforementioned groups?
9. Who might feel threatened by an attempt to erase this bias?
Step 2: Define Your (New) Role in Breaking Down Systemic Bias

Now that you have evaluated your past role in perpetuating systemic bias, it’s time to define your new role in erasing it.

• Give yourself and others grace as you embark on this journey.
• It is also hard to avoid becoming angry, bitter, and jaded about the whole phenomenon.
• Your purpose in this endeavor is to improve opportunities for people.
• You need to stay strong, maintain focus, and remain as optimistic as possible.
• Compare your old role to the goals you have for breaking down systemic bias.
EXERCISE 2

Role Definition Reflection Questions

1. What is the contribution you want to make as it relates to the specific institutional bias you’ve identified?

2. What power/leverage/influence do you have within the affected institution?

3. How does your current professional role interact with the institutional bias you’ve targeted for erasure?

4. How committed are you to staying the course during the bias erasure journey?

5. What are you willing to sacrifice to ensure the success of this endeavor?

6. Are you willing to personally champion this cause?

7. What credibility do you have or can you establish to authentically represent this cause?
Step 3: Cultivate Allies

This step is arguably the single most important step you will take in preparation for erasing institutional bias. Cultivating allies is critical precisely because we cannot affect a substantial, sustainable change at the systems level of an institution without a cohort of like-minded people working toward a shared goal.

There is a self-perpetuating phenomenon within systems that allows institutional bias to persist even as players are rotated in and out of the ecosystem.

With countless individuals either deliberately or inadvertently supporting biased structures, it will take a village to counter that energy.
Cultivating Allies Reflection Questions

1. What is my message? (Hint: It’s about the institutional bias you’ve identified.)

2. How will I handle objections and naysayers?

3. How will I communicate my level of commitment?

4. How will I make space for others to participate with me?
Step 4: Create a Movement

When you’ve got a bunch of people dancing with you in the metaphorical park, you’ve got yourself a movement. A movement is just a group of people who share a collective passion to get something done.
FRAMEWORK FOR OVERCOMING INSTITUTIONAL BIAS

FRAMEWORK 2: Institutional Change Framework

1. Set a clear intention.
2. Lead with data.
3. Diagnose accurately.
5. Reconstruct with objectivity.
6. Build in accountability and ongoing measurement.
Case Study: Andrea

The first time I wrote a job description, I noticed that pretty much only men were applying. When I started to dig into why, I realized I was playing into institutional bias in the way I wrote the job description. I actively sought feedback and was able to significantly change the ratio of women on our team. We also required everyone to take unconscious bias training so that we can be aware during recruiting.
CASE STUDY: ANDREA

1. Evaluate your (old) role in perpetuating systemic bias.

Andrea was open to the idea that maybe something she was doing, was contributing to the problem. Andrea came up in the age of engineering where women were in a tiny minority. As a result, the organizational standards were historically developed to accommodate the needs of men. Andrea’s behavior defaulted to the established male-oriented standards. She likely perpetuated the male perspective because it was the dominant framework to which she had become accustomed.

2. Define your (new) role in breaking down systemic bias.

She decided that she could be the one to rewrite the norms and compose a female and parent-centric narrative. She defined a proactive role in breaking down systemic bias by becoming the person who wrote the new job descriptions and spearheaded women-centric programs in tech environments.
3. Cultivate Allies Evaluate your (old) role in perpetuating systemic bias.

As a leader, Andrea is good at getting people on board with ideas. She was able to point out the problem and help people understand her desire to find solutions. She got her team behind her and ran her thoughts by others in the field who acknowledged the validity of the bias issue she had identified.

4. Create a Moment Define your (new) role in breaking down systemic bias.

Andrea became a champion for women's advocacy in tech. She started with her own company and spread her thought leadership throughout the industry by doing keynotes, writing articles, and taking the lead by personally funding initiatives that benefit women and people with children.
1. **Set a clear intention.** Andrea noticed that only men were applying to the jobs she was posting. She decided to take action to see how she could increase the number of women applying and being hired.

2. **Lead with data.** Andrea did not have the female representation she wanted, so she set out to sharply increase the percentage of women in her company and in leadership. Her goal was to have 60 percent women in leadership roles.

3. **Diagnose accurately.** Andrea could have assumed that women were simply uninterested in the company or the positions she was offering. She knew that there were qualified women in the job market. She knew that she wanted to hire men and women. So she concluded that something her company was doing was preventing women from applying.

4. **Deconstruct: Eliminate subjective processes.** Andrea examined her actions and realized that her language was inadvertently male-centric. She diagnosed the problem as being one of how the company communicated its needs. The desire to hire women was there, but the supporting behaviors were not present.

5. **Reconstruct with objectivity.** Andrea scrubbed the masculine language from the postings and rewrote the job descriptions to be more objective and inclusive.

6. **Build in accountability and ongoing measurement.** Andrea maintains a 60 percent female leadership structure and continuously monitors the gender diversity at her company.
Case Study: Lisa

I worked at a small Research Laboratory as a physics where there was no formal yearly evaluation. All the supervisors were white and majority were male. The office receptionist, accountants, legal assistant, and/or medical billers were mostly minority women, while the personal assistants were white women. Then you add in what I call the “back office curse.” Leaders never approach these staff members with good news and thanks. They were quick to point out errors. It was perceived by the receptionist, medical billers, legal assistants, and accountants that the leaders had no understanding or appreciation of their daily contributions to the company or cared about their careers. This was due to the absence of a performance development system and appraisal system. It was easy for these staff to question whether it may have something to do with being a minority. I met with staff, learned what they liked and did not like about their current jobs, or listened to their process issues. I tried to find solutions.
CASE STUDY: LISA

1. **Set a clear intention.** Lisa wanted to help the back-office team feel more included and valued.

2. **Lead with data.** Lisa noted that the demographics of the supervisors were all white males, the assistants were white females, and the remaining support staff was minority women. Job descriptions are no longer legally permitted to include race and gender, so some sort of bias was clearly at play to create such consistent racial and gender divisions by job classification and seniority.

3. **Diagnose accurately.** Lisa did not assume she understood the behaviors and circumstances that caused the back-office staff to feel marginalized. She engaged in a qualitative research process by meeting with them and listening to their experiences.
4. **Deconstruct: eliminate subjective processes.** Lisa disrupted the status quo by lowering the invisible wall between the back-office staff and the front office. In the absence of objective facts, people typically fill in the blanks with assumptions. Lisa’s story includes several descriptors that illuminate how the front office felt about the back office and/or how the back office felt they were perceived:

- Unappreciated
- Invisible
- Misunderstood
- Unintelligent

She helped lower the invisible wall by creating opportunities for the two offices to interact outside of the awkwardly segregated work environment.
CASE STUDY: LISA

5. Reconstruct with objectivity. Lisa instituted new objective systems to combat the old ones that allowed room for subjective assumptions. She created trainings that allowed the full staff to participate on equal footing, and implemented systems that allowed the back office to demonstrate their knowledge and institutional value. Inviting the back office to manage the new systems disrupted the marginalizing status quo by providing objective evidence that they were knowledgeable, intelligent, informed, and valuable to the organization.
6. **Build in accountability and ongoing measurement.** Lisa’s organization chose to apply for a Best Places to Work award. This meant that staff had to complete a survey every year. They received a very good overall score, but they had issues with morale which was affecting hiring and recruiting, so it was a great way to address both issues. The survey is available online so it was easy for management to look at and really reflect on what they were doing right or wrong and address any issues. Lisa reviewed the survey with the partners and each of them came to their own realization about how poorly they were communicating and managing staff. Identifying a tool to use for ongoing measurement is a very good way to leverage objective metrics for ongoing accountability.
RACIAL BIAS (CONT.)

Case Study: Marcus

I noted that the physics students of color were retaining at my institution at least 10 percentage points behind white students. To me this was evidence of something that I had suspected from my student interactions—that the climate for students of color was poor. When I mentioned this to institutional decision makers, I was told that it’s because they aren’t as prepared for college and/or they have troubles paying tuition past the first year. I returned to the data to answer this question. I controlled for high school GPA and for financial unmet need, and the race variable was still the most powerful. It was simply their “student of color” status, not financial ability or high school preparation, that mattered to whether they stayed. Further, I found other data that the college had been collecting for years where students of color rated the quality of their peer interaction much lower than the white students did.
I approached decision makers with this insight, and they seemed interested, but didn’t change anything about their approach. They consistently seemed nervous to do anything to improve the community for students of color due to the concern for making white students uncomfortable. Because white students’ comfort mattered more. I was furious. I kept talking about it to whomever would listen. I wanted to inspire a group of informed allies who could help impact change. I came to realize that I was being viewed as unprofessional. Speaking truth about our current biased systems is viewed unprofessional!? That was a gut punch. I do not believe I was able to change the status quo at that institution, though some may point to a few small initiatives that the school started. Ultimately, I left the institution.
1. **Set a clear intention.** He was attempting to improve the scores, retention, and college experience for students of color.

2. **Lead with data.** The professor used data to make his case. She noted consistent differences in scores, retention, and experiences with peers correlated to race.

3. **Diagnose accurately.** The professor relied on more than one data set. He collected his own data and cross-referenced it with data that the institution was already collecting. He controlled for several variables to increase the validity of her hypothesis.

4. **Deconstruct: eliminate subjective processes.** The professor was unable to secure sufficient buy-in from leadership to deconstruct the biased processes.

5. **Reconstruct with objectivity.** This step was not possible without the prerequisite deconstruction.

6. **Build in accountability and ongoing measurement.** The university never got to this step because everything stalled at step four.
The professor had not thoroughly evaluated his role nor clearly defined his new role in breaking down systemic bias at the university.

Perhaps his biggest mistake was failing to secure allies before approaching leadership with the problem.

Why isn’t it enough to be able to prove the problem to leadership?

One person is far more easily dismissed and shoved aside than a large group. Had the professor’s entire department or a critical mass of his peers, and perhaps students, been on board, the impact would have been much different.
WHAT ARE THE RISK TO DISRUPTION

- Individual
- Departmental
- University-wide
- Beyond
WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS TO DISRUPTION

- Individual
- Departmental
- University-wide
- Beyond
BARRIERS TO TAKING ACTION

Identify two barriers that might prevent you from addressing institutional bias at your place of employment.
- Self-Imposed Barrier
- External Barrier

Write it down on the blank note card at your table.

Exchange cards with a person who is not standing next to you. Repeat this process three more times.
BARRIERS TO TAKING ACTION (CONT.)

Consider the following questions:

1. What were the barriers and solutions you have read (themes)?
2. How did you relate to these?
3. What if we allow barriers to get in the way and we do not act – what are the consequences?
4. What solutions are missing?
   • Self-Imposed Barrier
   • External Barrier
CLOSING ACTIVITY

Write your full name and email address on one side of the index card,

On the other side, write down one thing you will do in the next four weeks to respond to institutional bias at your place of employment.

I will collect these cards and email them to everyone (individually) four weeks from today.
### The Action Continuum

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Actively Participating</th>
<th>Denying, Ignoring</th>
<th>Recognizing, No Action</th>
<th>Recognizing, Action</th>
<th>Educating Self</th>
<th>Educating Others</th>
<th>Supporting, Encouraging</th>
<th>Initiating, Preventing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Supporting Bias ➔ Confronting Bias
THANK YOU!

Please direct questions/comments to: Joseph M. Williams

jmw5dj@virginia.edu
SELECTIVE REFERENCES


SELECTIVE REFERENCES


Heilman ME, Haynes MC. No credit where credit is due: attributional rationalization of women’s success in male-female teams. J Appl Psychol. 2005 Sep;90(5):905-16.


