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Unconscious Bias: May Micro-Affirmations Provide one Answer?

A commentary by Professor Mary Rowe on the New York Times article, "[Is the Professor Bossy or Brilliant? Much Depends on Gender.](#)"

A painstaking "Big Data" study, by Professor Benjamin Schmidt of Northeastern, affirms half a century of analyses about unconscious sexism. There have been hundreds of studies of micro-aggressions, micro-inequities, and unconscious bias. These studies help us to understand the persistence—and effects—of racism, religious and ethnic bias, homophobia, and discrimination against those with disabilities—as well as classism, and discrimination against women. A number of MIT Sloan faculty have contributed to this work. Unconscious bias is firmly established as real.

We need similar studies about what actually works to prevent, ameliorate, and remedy the effects of unconscious bias. Many individuals and organizations address these questions. Some parents work to introduce their children to toys, games, books and sports that cross gender lines. School systems work proactively to support children of different backgrounds to achieve success in science and mathematics.

Higher education has adopted "serious search and recruitment," mentoring systems, and many programs to teach faculty, staff and students about conscious and unconscious bias. Corporations like Intel and Google have recently performed careful analyses of their employee and management ranks and have launched major diversity initiatives, including efforts to deal with unconscious bias. Training bystanders, to act and/or report their concerns about bias, shows some promise.

In 1973, as an MIT Ombudsperson, I began to collect and analyze hundreds of reports of micro-discrimination against faculty, students, employees and managers who were "non-traditional" in their environment. I named these acts "micro-inequities." Like so many others, before and since, I then worked with my colleagues on institutional change and progress.

But I wondered: if some bias is unconscious, what can I, myself, do about my own unconscious bias? If it is unconscious how will I know? I began to study managers and faculty who appeared very successful in diversity and inclusion. From this research I launched some hypotheses about "micro-affirmations" as one antidote to micro-inequities. Here is why I think affirming behavior may help.

1. Blocking unconscious bias: I reasoned that we could try to practice—all the time—affirming the achievements of others. If we always look for excellence in the work of others and are universally respectful, may we be able to block our own unconscious bias?
2. Ameliorate damage: Can micro-affirmations (for example in affinity groups and mentoring programs) make up for some of the damage caused by unconscious bias?
3. Meeting a core emotional concern: Since research suggests that appreciation and affirmation are core concerns for all of us, may this plan help in making the work place more productive?
4. Evoking reciprocal affirmation: Since research suggests an impulse toward "reciprocity," may affirming behavior spread, as we respond to support from others?
5. A possible role-modeling effect: Research suggests that people are sensitive to the morale and happiness of those around them, and especially sensitive to the behavior of a local manager. If managers, bystanders, and others are role models for affirming behavior, will some others follow suit? Peers and bystanders are often the most important actors because they are most likely to be present where people act in a biased fashion.
6. Rectifying our own unconscious bias: Research suggests that behavior follows attitudes. Attitudes also can be changed by behavior. If we consciously improve our behavior may we lessen our unconscious bias?

As you read this, perhaps you have additional thoughts about how to deal with micro-inequities, and about the potential effectiveness of micro-affirmations? Plainly we need ideas and evidence from both research and practice.

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