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# Why Subtle Bias Is So Often Worse than Blatant Discrimination

*by Eden King and Kristen Jones*

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Headlines today are filled with blatant examples of workplace bias, from employees who give black coworkers nooses, to pay disparities in soccer, to supervisors' admonitions that women need to "get along with the boys." These are obvious, inflammatory, and offensive behaviors that deserve vigorous scrutiny.

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Yet attention to bias's blatant forms should not divert attention from its subtle ones. Indeed, social science data shows that people are much more likely to encounter subtle forms of bias than overt ones. HR professionals no longer post signs reading "blacks need not apply," and managers rarely catcall their female subordinates. Instead, managers might ignore the input of a woman or praise the eloquence of a black employee. These latter behaviors often are unintentional and can reflect unconscious beliefs about characteristics of women and people of color.

Some might argue that the general evolution of discrimination from obvious to subtle may be evidence of social progress. Unfortunately, however, our research shows that the new kinds of bias can be even worse than the older kinds.

To directly test the relative effects of subtle and overt discrimination, we gathered every study we could find that looked at relationships between discrimination and outcomes such as career success and satisfaction, stress, turnover, performance, and physical and mental health symptoms. We carefully coded the nature of discrimination that was reported (subtle or overt) in 90 separate samples.

The results of this meta-analysis confirm that experiencing any kind of discrimination has negative consequences. But more importantly, the results show that across every job and individual outcome, the effects of subtle discrimination were at least as bad as, if not worse than, overt discrimination. Subtle discrimination has not-so-subtle effects on employees and their performance at work.

One of these effects stems from the very human fact that we try to understand why people treat us the way they do. For example, if a female employee is told by her boss that she will not be given a challenging assignment because "women are not suited to handle that type of pressure," it's relatively easy to identify the cause of the behavior: blatant bias. If the boss tells the female employee that he doesn't believe she is ready for this kind of pressure, however, the reason is less clear. Is it because she is a woman? Or is the boss rightfully concerned, having the best interests of the employee at heart? People will spend a lot more time ruminating and trying to figure out the latter situation than a clear-cut case of sexism. This rumination, the longer it continues, can be significantly depleting to cognitive and emotional resources.

Another reason subtle discrimination is stressful is because of its higher frequency as compared to overt instances of discrimination. Because targets may be confronted with these slights on a daily, even hourly, basis, the negative effects of subtle discrimination may build and accumulate at a rapid pace.

Finally, subtle discrimination is damaging because there is little or no legal recourse. This reality was highlighted recently when Ellen Pao lost her case against her former employer, venture capital firm Kleiner Perkins Caufield & Byers. In her testimony, Pao cited several instances of subtle gender bias at the firm, including being designated as the note taker during meetings, being disadvantaged as a result of her pregnancy, and feeling pressured to balance assertiveness with warmth because of her

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gender. After the five-week trial, a jury of six men and six women concluded that none of Pao's claims had legal merit. This is consistent with our analyses of discrimination cases in federal court dockets: Only overt and intentional forms of bias (not subtle and unintentional ones) were associated with decisions favoring plaintiffs.

If it is so difficult to identify and assess subtle bias, what can managers and organizations do? Workplace scientists are trying to answer this question. One clear conclusion is that opportunities for biases to infect decisions should be limited. For example, structured interviews (e.g., fixed format with a fixed set of questions to be answered based on the job in question) are better predictors of employee performance than unstructured interviews (open format, fluid conversation) are, because less structure leads to more opportunities for bias to creep in. This includes the non–job related chit-chat that often occurs between an interviewer and applicant before an interview begins; subtle behaviors in this informal part of the interview can affect the likelihood of an employment offer.

Another conclusion is that awareness alone is insufficient. Efforts to reduce bias must pair increasing awareness with behavioral goals and strategies. Research has found evidence supporting the effectiveness of several strategies that can be implemented to reduce bias. For example, practicing mindfulness, or the process of focusing on the present and observing one's thoughts as events outside of the self, may help to reduce subtle bias. Another promising strategy is the use of empathy-related techniques like perspective taking, which prompts people to consider the experiences of individuals who are different from themselves. Similarly, adopting an identity-conscious perspective (e.g., accepting and considering different identities) rather than an identity-blind mindset (ignoring or denying stigmatized attributes such as race and gender) can reduce bias. Finally, deliberately setting pro-diversity goals has been found to enhance diversity-related attitudes and behaviors.

Busy managers may be tempted to direct their attention only to the most obvious and blatant forms of discrimination, in part because they're easier to identify and address. But our research shows that managers need to start sweating the subtle stuff. Gone unchecked, the little things may be affecting your employees and your organization in troubling ways.

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