

Leveraging linguistic anthropology to analyze everyday bias

Breakout discussions

1. *Nominate a “reporter” who will report back to the full group at the end of the discussions.*
2. *Read through a scenario and work together to answer the questions.*

Scenario 1

Sarah, a grad student, is talking to Erica, her department admin, about logistics for a conference she is planning. Lars, a full professor, is passing by and hears her. He walks into the admin office and starts speaking immediately, right in the middle of Erica’s sentence. He says, “Hey, Sarah, I need you to come to my office. I finally have time to talk about the index you’re doing for my book.” He then turns around and leaves.

1. What’s problematic about Lars’s behavior?
2. How do you think Erica feels at the end of this interaction? How about Sarah?
3. How do hierarchies and boundaries play a role in the bias expressed here?
4. How does socialization play a role?
5. *Bonus considerations:* Who should be responsible for making Lars aware of the bias? What could be dangerous in this situation?

Scenario 2

Juanita is Black, and grew up in the Dominican Republic. She’s professional-track faculty at a campus center and comes to give a talk at her university’s Language Science Center. The faculty member who introduces Juanita uses the word “exotic,” because it is the center’s first time hosting a speaker from her subfield. After her talk, a professor opens by saying, “Well, that was surprisingly articulate. I’m impressed.” Other faculty members grill her, speaking forcefully and loudly, and some critique her for being insufficiently quantitative (her subfield is qualitative).

1. How do think Juanita feels after her talk. Why? If Juanita’s professional socialization was into a different form of post-talk Q&A, how might this version land with her?
2. What’s going on in terms of hierarchies and boundaries?
3. Where do you think there might be gaps between intent and impact? How about perspective taking?

Bias Alerts

1. Someone gets marked too low because of the group(s) they belong to.
2. People get angry because someone “doesn’t know their place.”
(Usually because that person belongs to a low-status group or groups but also has real authority at work.)
3. “Unusual” people get left out, forgotten about, or otherwise marginalized.
4. People feel compelled to notice – and then talk about – difference.
5. People get nervous when an “outsider” is in their space.

Takeaways

- 100% of humans are biased.
- Yes, even you. Right here, and right now.
- Academia and the military are the two most rigidly hierarchical professions out there.
- Unfairness is not absolute – it is relative. Even a little unfairness feels *terrible*.
- If the unfairness is not happening to you personally, it is easy to feel unmoved and just not care about it.
- We are socialized into our understandings of what is communicatively appropriate.
- Because we encode so much social meaning in *how* we say things, it can make identifying and discussing bias complicated.
- Hierarchies, boundaries, and socializations are the three concepts you need to identify and discuss bias in everyday interpersonal interactions.
- Perspective taking is a cognitive skill that plays an important role in discussions of bias.
- We often forget to do both parts of perspective taking: 1) switching roles in the scenario *and* 2) considering the impact of different lived experiences and perspectives.
- Just because something isn’t painful or problematic to you doesn’t mean it’s ok for everyone else.
- People will often double down on behavior they don’t see as problematic when they’re asked to not do it by someone in a “subordinate” group.
- It’s not your fault you’ve been programmed to be biased. But it *is* your responsibility to identify bias and work to do better. Make sure your impact is as good as your intent.