

‘Training by any other name would be as problematic’: Thinking about unconscious bias and unconscious bias training

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Abstract

This article presents a brief discussion of the vicissitudes of Unconscious Bias Training (UBT) taking its focus from the original critique of Race Awareness Training in the work of Sivanandan. UBT’s three central elements demonstrate the problems of what this author argues is essentially a focus on the transformation of the (white) individual as opposed to tackling the social structures which underlie discrimination.

Keywords: Unconscious bias, training, equality, diversity, inclusion

Introduction

Unconscious bias, and forms of training to eradicate it, are everywhere and experts claiming to eradicate it are ubiquitous. In many respects, this is a form of Race Awareness Training after Sivanandan (1985), except that this new training regime, we will see, claims to be able to eradicate all forms of bias without the need for structural change. Sivanandan traced the history and development of forms of anti-racist training from their inception in the USA and, in particular, the work of Judith Katz (1978) on corporate diversity training, to those forms of training developed in the 1970s and 1980s in the UK. Sivanandan’s critique was three-fold: the training was ineffective in moderating racist beliefs and behaviour; the emphasis was on working on individuals and ignoring the wider social structures that underpin racism; and, finally, the training failed to recognise the significance of social class in the generation and maintenance of racism. It is my contention that unconscious bias replays and reiterates these failings whilst also offering a blanket solution to all forms of bias, whatever their origins and motivations.

A search of Google scholar suggests nearly 82,000 publications on Unconscious Bias Training (UBT) since 2010. A more detailed and ‘forensic’ analysis reveals a wide range of concepts that seem to be contained within the idea of UBT, including unintended bias, subconscious bias, implicit bias, mental contamination, confirmation bias, affinity bias, attribution bias and conformity bias. It is unclear why there is this conceptual complexity. Perhaps it is because bias covers every aspect of human social relations or because it produces and legitimises a series of highly marketable training programmes. I would like to take the three elements of UBT in turn in order to

see how useful they are as part of strategies to tackle forms of exclusion including racism.

Unconscious

The word 'unconscious' has what we might call common sense meanings, but also very specific, technical meanings within psychology and psychotherapies. Much of the analysis of the unconscious in UBT is a mix of common-sense and some specific psychological function. As I will argue below, there is little focus on psychodynamic approaches to the unconscious. Unconscious bias tends to be seen in two contexts: the first is as a psychological mechanism, for example, implicit associations; and the second is based in brain processes, where the problem is hard-wired into the brain or particular parts of the brain, for example, the amygdala. Some psychological explanations then see the psychological issues as being rooted in this hard wiring (Azarian, 2018). The following statement made by a provider of UBT neatly sums up the psychology/biology/evolution link:

'Our brain automatically tells us that we are safe with people who look, think and act similar to us. That was our survival trick on the savannah and still is useful most of the time today. The brain uses short-cuts to navigate an incredible amount of information which leads us to make snap decisions about who we prefer and who we avoid. These automatic preferences and prejudices are what we call "biases". As such, unconscious bias is the #1 contributor to a homogenous work environment and sameness thinking, thus a disabler of diversity and an enemy of innovation.' (Livingstone Institute, n.d.)

If this is the case, then bias – or perhaps the potential for bias - is in all of us. As I discuss later, the idea that bias is in all of us doesn't address specific forms of discrimination, and racism, for example, as distinct forms of othering. If it is in all of us, then, all of us, regardless of our social positioning, are biased, and for some, biased at the biological level. So, as we move away from biological theories of race we return with biological theories of bias.

If we take a more psychoanalytic approach then we would distinguish the sub- or preconscious as things that are, as it were, pushed to the back of our minds but are accessible, and the unconscious is those things that are not available to conscious thought but continue to influence how we behave. Those things, thoughts and feelings, are only accessible with psychoanalysis ('training') and can then be dealt with. Indeed, some psychoanalytic thinkers (Clarke, 1999; Hinshelwood, 2007) have seen racism as unconscious and rooted in forms of thinking that are based on processes of splitting:

'Splitting leads to the formation of strong boundaries around the "self". The "bad", the "other" is idealized, becoming larger than life, threatening and destructive. Exclusion and destructiveness ensue in defence of the "self",

against the “other”. The perceived threat becomes “demonized” in society to the extent that no good can be seen ...” (Clarke, 1999: 26).

Even if the details of a psychoanalytical approach to racism might appear to be too speculative, there are important lessons to be learned. In particular, and with reference to a psychodynamic unconscious, it is important to stress that we are dealing here with thoughts and feelings; thoughts which are often accompanied by strong feelings and emotions. We will see below that training regimes tend to concentrate on one or other of these without looking at their complex interrelationships.

All these, as Sivanandan argued, tend to individualise bias, to see it as subject to individual resolution and to ignore social structural issues. In so doing the individual, once in training, and having confessed to their bias, is absolved of responsibility.

Bias

This is (by accident or design) an inconveniently broad category with, if a simple Google search is any reliable indicator, anything from three to twelve types for which there seems to be little basis in research. This may be because the idea is that everyone has biases, perhaps some of which (e.g. bias against the football team you don't support) are less significant than others (e.g. bias against black women in the labour market) for example. The get-out here, which this range of biases (or is it prejudices?) necessitates, is to argue that what makes bias into something more serious is the power to enforce those biases. This takes us back to the old adage that racism = prejudice + power (Carmichael and Hamilton, 1968), which, of course, ignores the fact that many racists are powerless (Kaufmann, 2016). Bias may indeed involve 'wrong thinking', but thinking is rarely simply rational.

As Member of UK Parliament David Lammy has argued, some of the problems in operationalising the idea of bias were implicit in the definition of institutional racism in the MacPherson Report (1999) into the murder of Steven Lawrence:

‘The collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture, or ethnic origin. It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people.’
(Macpherson, 1994, 6.34)

Institutional racism is about processes, ideas, prejudices, behaviour, ignorance and thoughtlessness at an organisational and individual level. UBT has refined this. Now if there are institutional problems, such as failing to employ BAME staff, the solution is to deal with the biases of individuals in the organisation and, 'hey presto', things will be fine.

Further questions arise here. Can bias be positive? Can we be non-biased? Arguably in relation to the latter, it seems that bias is hard-wired into us and therefore part of our essential nature. With the former, it is about whether every bias in favour is a bias against something or somebody else. This would, of course, have important implications for positive action measures in which groups that have seen the effects of bias are helped to overcome the effects of those biases in, for example, education and employment. Maybe what we are seeing in the dominance of UBT is a move away from those positive action strategies which focus on structural change (see Further Education Unit, 1988) to a focus on the individual.

Training

Anyone familiar with the private sector, academia, the public sector and the third sector will be aware of the plethora of training initiatives that are on offer. UBT is now a major initiative and one that is seen as necessary and a way to root out bias, transform organisations and reduce intolerance and inequality. Put another way, UBT is a precondition for wider structural changes.

A number of studies have suggested that there are problems with, and limitations to, UBT. In particular, Dobbin and Kalev (2018) looked at both real world and laboratory-based studies of UBT, and suggested that these, on their own, are not a particularly effective way of dealing with diversity. They claim that Implicit Association Tests (IATs), the root and branch psychology underlying UBT, have weak effects on both unconscious and explicit bias, that two thirds of Human Resources (HR) professionals say that UBT is ineffective, and any effects decline with time. In essence, whilst we can accept the existence of unconscious bias, it is questionable whether IATs actually measure it and that they provide a basis for identifying and eradicating the ubiquity of biases.

More concerning, given that most UBT is short term, is that short-term training of any kind is more ineffective than something more intensive and long-term (Bezrukova et al., 2016). There is a series of other problems with UBT. This includes asking people to think about their biases increases bias and stereotyping (Dobbin and Kalev, 2018). UBT often also gives white people in particular unrealistic confidence in anti-discrimination programmes (Dobbin and Kalev, 2018). Where UBT is made compulsory, there are, in addition, negative reactions to what are seen as controlling initiatives leading to subsequent increases in bias (Bezrukova et al, 2016). In the case of UBT focused on race, white fragility manifests itself in feelings of exclusion and reduces support for other measures to increase diversity (Tate and Page, 2018). The dilemma is that if UBT is to work, it needs to be in the context of wider equalities initiatives, but many of these initiatives, including special, targeted programmes for those under-represented groups, mentoring, diversity task forces, are also, seemingly, of limited effect (Dobbin and Kalev, 2020).

Two things stand out that take us back to the earlier discussion of the psychodynamics of bias in general, and racial bias in particular. There is often an

unrecognised split in forms of training between those who see the issue as primarily cognitive (e.g. give me the facts and my bias will cease) and those who see the issue as primarily affective. Often, people cannot access the cognitive because of a psychic investment in discrimination.

Summary and conclusions

In conclusion, there is good evidence for the ineffectiveness of much UBT, that the idea of bias detracts from the varied and different forms of exclusion people experience, and that UBT regimes often ignore or underplay wide structural elements of exclusion.

One of the lessons of psychoanalytical work on race and other forms of exclusion (Clarke, 2003; Young-Bruehl, 1996), is that the unconscious material is often about strong negative affect, including hatred and violence. The real difficulty with UBT is that it sets aside the more overt racism of what are seen as 'real' racists and leaves the rest of (white) people to deal with their unconscious racism, to confess their manifest sins and wickedness, and to remain unaware of the role that unconscious bias plays.

'...(un)conscious bias is part of the apparatus of maintaining white racialized power by calling on the idea of ignorance, of not knowing that what is being done or said is racist because it was not wilfully said or done to hurt, to discriminate, to be racist. It came from somewhere over which we have no control – i.e. the unconscious.' (Tate and Page, 2018: 150).

If universities are to tackle forms of racism, then they need to be aware that many forms of UBT are ineffective in addressing racism and that wider structural changes are required. This is the lesson of the seemingly forgotten work of Sivanandan. The undoubted existence of unconscious bias and Eurocentric curricula should not lead us to conclude that tackling these will, for example, reduce the BAME attainment gap; that reduction is work for the whole education system. Bernstein (1970: 344-347), asserted that 'education cannot compensate for society', an assertion that is surely still relevant today.

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