Although the terms prejudice, bias, and discrimination are often confused and used interchangeably, nevertheless they mean very different things independently. Used together, the impact of prejudice, bias, and discrimination on society has been overwhelmingly negative, providing a foundation for systems built on fear, power, and distrust. This impact creates a nearly impenetrable barrier to inclusion and intercultural competence. Historically, these words conjure images of burning crosses, swastikas, men in white sheets, and discriminatory legal actions. Today, these words and the actions that accompany them show up in seemingly innocuous yet insidious ways. To individuals who are compassionate and worldly, it would seem elementary to avoid these three phenomena personally and professionally. However, there is a natural instinct to separate the world into us and them, and eventually discriminate against them. People are constantly balancing these dualistic perceptions as they encounter different people, places, things, and situations. Attitudes and actions in response to these encounters are sometimes intentional and sometimes unintentional, but they are normally present. This entry offers a perspective on prejudice, bias, and discrimination, describing their societal effects and providing brief stories to illustrate their human impact. Each term is examined independently, [p. 691 ↓ ] followed by a discussion of how they work together to stifle intercultural competence.

Prejudice

The word prejudice means to prejudge. Defined more fully, it is a preconceived notion or attitude based on limited stores of information or experience. It is human nature to prejudge situations, people, and things in order to decide whether they are safe and familiar. However, with little access to different people, situations, and things, it is easy to assume that one’s own experience is the true experience and everything else is deviant and therefore wrong, bad, or inferior. Also, if someone or something is perceived as unfamiliar, it can lead to the belief that it must be unsafe and, thus, a threat. Consider the example of a woman who was driving down a city street with her children in the car. When she stopped at a traffic light, she noticed a group of young men with sagging pants standing on the corner talking loudly and smoking cigarettes. Automatically and without saying a word, she pressed the car’s door lock button. She
maintained a steady gaze straight ahead, except for a stolen glance in the youths’ direction, and silently pleaded for the light to change. The woman had no personal experience in the neighborhood or community; she had only heard media reports and acquaintances’ remarks about the neighborhood as being dangerous, and she believed them without a question. Through her actions, she had effectively taught her children to fear young men dressed that way, socializing that way, and being in that neighborhood. As the children grow up, the unconscious prejudice thereby instilled will remain unless they have experiences that contradict the message. The young men on the corner could have been on a smoking break from work or waiting for the school bus; they could have been doing many things that do not involve crime. But based on the woman’s limited store of information, she assumed that they were up to no good, and she acted according to her prejudice. There is security in what is familiar, and it gives comfort; yet that same prejudice can prevent an opportunity to connect with the humanity of others whose appearance, language, or dialect may be completely different from one’s own.

Bias

Bias is a preference for or against a group, person, or thing and is generally considered to be an unfair judgment. There is conscious and unconscious bias, and both can be a barrier to social inclusion. Conscious bias is when one might knowingly give preference to an individual and feel justified on the basis of specific criteria, such as having mutual interests or being related by family. Unconscious bias is a little trickier and arguably the most common. When people are not aware of their bias, they will convince themselves that their choice and preference are fair and justified. Unconscious bias in the workplace is revealed when candidates with almost identical credentials meet with different results. In the United States, for example, with all other things being equal, candidates with traditional Anglo-American names, like James Heller or Mary Remington, may be moved forward to the next round of interviews, while candidates with names like Abdullah al-Nimur DeShawn Brown or Anastasio Poulos may see their employment journey end shortly after their resume submission. Unconscious bias typically plays out in people’s minds. The thinking goes like this: “They would not do well here because they are, say, too urban or not funny enough or not young enough” or “They will fit in perfectly because they are attractive, male, or married.” Unconscious bias is like
breathing. People only become aware of it when someone draws attention to it. Then it is almost impossible to ignore. Yet not long afterward, such awareness often recedes, and individuals slip back into an unconscious state of bias.

Conscious bias is almost always supported by fact or experience. For example, an interviewer might say, “Everyone knows that candidates who are from Oxford or Tokyo University are the best we can find.” Or the selector may say, “I once knew a guy who was from the engineering program at the University of Minnesota, and he was by far the smartest guy I have ever known. So this candidate from the Minnesota engineering program is sure to be an excellent fit.” These biases exist whether or not people are willing to admit that they have them. Organizations and corporations have cultures, and as new employees are hired into the culture, they will unconsciously make decisions as to the fit of the new individuals. When a society has clearly demonstrated what the norm is, members of the society will consciously or unconsciously buy into the norm and follow suit, resulting in bias, be it positive or negative.

Discrimination

*Discrimination* is a behavior driven by prejudice and bias to maintain the status quo. Acts of discrimination are designed to intentionally benefit one culture over another, one gender over another, one sexual orientation over another, or one religion over another. It is an act where the game being played is never equal or equitable, and if the scale becomes unbalanced, the rules change again to maintain the status quo. Discrimination is a behavior that actively prevents individuals or cultures access to opportunity. In the U.S. context, this is seen in the Separate but Equal laws, Jim Crow Laws, Indian Removal Act, Chinese Exclusion Act, Immigration Reform, and Defense of Marriage Act. They are all attempts at discrimination to benefit one group over another. Discrimination tends to keep the dominant group and their desires, beliefs, and values in the position of power and prominence. Far from being unique to the United States, the story of discrimination has been replicated globally when Sikhs have been forbidden to wear turbans, Muslim women not allowed to wear the *hijab* (headscarf), and members of various religious groups prevented from celebrating their holidays.
In 2013, an 8-year-old African American girl was sent home from a U.S. school because her hair did not meet the uniform requirements. She wore her hair in dreadlocks, and this style was perceived as unkempt and not in line with the values of the school. Because the administrators of the school were also African American, she felt rejected by members of her own culture who had adopted the norms of the dominant culture and thus perpetuated the status quo. The young girl’s story of discrimination demonstrates another impact of discrimination: internalized racism and how for the dominant group to maintain the status quo, it needs members of groups who are typically marginalized to also perpetuate the existing state of affairs.

In recent news, a complicated case came before the U.S. Supreme Court: The craft store chain Hobby Lobby filed a case to avoid providing specific contraception options to their employees as mandated in the Affordable Care Act, a politically controversial healthcare plan. The owners of Hobby Lobby felt that they were being discriminated against because of their religious belief against contraception. They took the case to the Supreme Court to challenge the constitutionality of the relevant provision of the act and won their case. They saw this ruling as a victory in preserving conservative values, but the employees who had hoped to have their healthcare needs covered felt discriminated against by the ruling because they do not hold the same religious values and beliefs as their employer.

As stated earlier, when prejudice, bias, and discrimination are combined, they serve as impenetrable barriers to inclusion. Prejudice is the attitude that leads to bias, which inevitably leads to discrimination. When individuals are able to bring their full selves into their organization, workplace, or home, they feel included and are free to have their contributions valued, encouraged, and supported. When they feel that to have access to opportunity they need to suppress core elements of their identity, creativity wanes, and commitment to the institution is nonexistent or at best tentative. It is not unusual for employees who leave under such circumstances to file discrimination charges against their former employer.

Being aware of the impact of these words individually and collectively is crucial to intercultural competence. Communicating effectively across cultures requires curiosity, empathy, compassion, and a strong sense of self. Being aware of cultural injustice can connect one to others who may have experienced ill treatment. Sadly,
no one is immune to prejudice and bias, although some cultures may be able to avoid outright discrimination. The key is to recognize that no culture can escape the allure of *keeping things as they are* or the perception that there is an ongoing competition for scarce resources. That realization, coupled with intercultural tools, will help equip the interculturalist with unmatched skills to communicate effectively across cultures.

Discussion of issues of power and advantage in academic programs and workshops that develop intercultural competence balances the content between global and domestic issues. Although it can be an uncomfortable subject whose roots are based in social justice, appropriate sequencing in a program when the learners have been carefully prepared can be effective in lowering the risk. These concepts, power and advantage, lie at the foundation of prejudice, bias, and discrimination. Interculturalists who recognize this are better equipped to understand how the prevention of access affects the way many people are able to function in any given society.

*See also* Civil Rights; History of Diversity and Inclusion; Intercultural Sensitivity; Racism, Institutional; Racism, Interpersonal

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Further Readings


