



## EDITORIAL COMMENT ON PREJUDICE

### The Ugly phases of Prejudice

Most people will take exception to being considered as persons labouring under prejudice. A notorious genre of prejudice is racism, and to be called racist often draws vehement protestations obviously because not only does the concept convey negative social connotations but also because racial discrimination is an unlawful conduct, [see *Racial Discrimination Act 1975* (Cth)].

Our strident denials notwithstanding, within the recesses and interstices of our body make up are countless neurons which trigger racist behaviour. An eloquent testimony to this phenomenon is that most people unless they are 'emotionally intelligent' [see D. Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence* London, Bloomsbury Publishing 1996, 155-159] have no recollection or cognition of their behaviours which take on a racist hue.

Goleman says:

Prejudices are a kind of emotional learning that occurs early in life, making these reactions especially hard to eradicate entirely, even in people who as adults feel it is wrong to hold them. "The emotions of prejudice are formed in childhood, while the beliefs that are used to justify it come later," explained Thomas Pettigrew, a social psychologist at the University of California at Santa Cruz, who has studied prejudice for decades. "Later in life you may want to change your prejudice, but it is far easier to change your intellectual beliefs than your deep feelings. Many Southerners have confessed to me, for instance, that even though in their minds they no longer feel prejudice against blacks, they feel squeamish when they shake hands with a black. The feelings are left over from what they learned in their families as children."

He continues:

"The power of the stereotypes that buttress prejudice comes in part from a more neutral dynamic in the mind that makes stereotypes of all kinds self-confirming. People remember more readily instances that support the stereotype while tending to discount instances that challenge it. On meeting at a party an emotionally open and warm Englishman who disconfirms the stereotype of the cold, reserved Briton, for example, people can tell themselves that he's just unusual, or 'he's been drinking.'

The tenacity of subtle biases may explain why, while over the last forty years or so racial attitudes of American whites toward blacks have become increasingly more tolerant, more subtle forms of bias persist: people disavow racist attitudes while still acting with covert bias. When asked, such people say they feel no bigotry, but in ambiguous situations still act in a biased way – though they give a rationale other than prejudice. *Such bias can take the form, say, of a white senior manager – who believes he has no prejudices – rejecting a black job applicant, ostensibly not because of his race but because his education and experience “are not quite right” for the job, while hiring a white applicant with about the same background.* (Emphasis added) Or it might take the form of giving a briefing and helpful tips to a white salesman about to make a call, but somehow neglecting to do the same for a black or Hispanic salesman.

Since most racial attitudes are passed on from parents to children, from generation to generation, most people are steeped in a culture of racism without knowing it.

Goleman provides a graphic account of a typical episode of the manifestation of racial prejudice from the “Deep South” of the USA and the economic costs which it entails.

He writes:

Sylvia Skeeter, a former army captain in her thirties, was a shift manager at a Denny’s restaurant in Columbia, South Carolina. One slow afternoon a group of black customers – a minister, an assistant pastor, and two visiting gospel singers – came in for a meal, and sat and sat while the waitresses ignored them. The waitresses, recalls Skeeter, “would kind of glare, with their hands on their hips, and then they’d go back to talking among themselves, like a black person standing five feet away didn’t exist.”

Skeeter, indignant, confronted the waitresses, and complained to the manager, who shrugged off their actions, saying, “That’s how they were raised, and there’s nothing I can do about it.” Skeeter quit on the spot; she is black.

If that had been an isolated incident, the moment of blatant prejudice might have passed unnoted. But Sylvia Skeeter was one of hundreds of people who came forward to testify to a widespread pattern of antiblack prejudice throughout the Denny’s restaurant chain, a pattern that resulted in a \$54 million settlement of a class-action suit on behalf of thousands of black customers who had suffered such indignities.

The plaintiffs included a detail of seven African-American Secret Service, agents who sat waiting for an hour for their breakfast while their white colleagues at the next table were served promptly – as they were all on their way to provide security for a visit by president Clinton to the United States Naval Academy at Annapolis. They also included a black girl with paralyzed legs in Tampa, Florida, who sat in her wheelchair for two hours waiting for her food late one night after a prom. The pattern of discrimination, the class-action suit held, was due to the widespread

assumption throughout the Denny's chain – particularly at the level of district and branch manager – that, black customers were bad for business. Today, largely as a result of the suit, and the publicity surrounding it, the Denny's chain is making amends to the black community. And every employee, especially managers, must attend, sessions on the advantages of a multiracial clientele.

Such seminars have become a staple of in-house training in companies throughout America, with the growing realization by managers that even if people bring prejudices to work with them, they must learn to act as though they have none. The reasons, over and above human decency are pragmatic. One is the shifting face of the workforce, as white males, who used to be the dominant group, are becoming a minority. A survey of several hundred American companies found that more than three quarters of new employees were nonwhite – a demographic shift that is also reflected to a large extent in changing pool of customers. Another reason is the increasing need for international companies to have employees who not only put any bias aside to appreciate people from diverse cultures (and markets) but also turn that appreciation to competitive advantage. A third motivation is the potential fruit of diversity, in terms of heightened collective creativity and entrepreneurial energy.

All this means the culture of an organisation must change to foster tolerance, even if individual biases remain. But how can a company do this? The sad fact is that the panoply of one-day, one-video, or single-weekend “diversity training” courses do not really seem to budge the biases of those employees who come to them with deep prejudice against one or another group, whether it be whites biased against blacks, blacks against Asians, or Asians resenting Hispanics. Indeed, the net effect of inept diversity courses - those that raise false expectations by providing too much, or simply create an atmosphere of confrontation instead of understanding - can be to heighten the tensions that divide groups in the workplace, calling even greater attention to these differences. To understand what can be done, it helps to first understand the nature of prejudice itself.

Goleman elucidated this situation with an example of people growing up in a conflict-ridden society such as Cyprus with its Greek-Turkish polarity and animosity:

Dr Vamil Volkan is a psychiatrist at the University of Virginia now, but he remembers that is was like growing up in a Turkish family on the island of Cyprus, then bitterly contested between Turks and Greeks. As a boy Volkan heard rumours that the local Greek priest's cincture had a knot for each Turkish child he had strangled, and remembers the tone of dismay in which he was told how his Greek neighbors ate pigs, whose meat was considered too filthy to eat in his own Turkish culture. Now, as a student of ethnic conflict, Volkan points to such childhood memories to show how hatreds between groups are kept alive over the years, as each new generation is steeped in hostile biases like these. The psychological price of loyalty to

one's own group can be antipathy toward another, especially when there is a long history of enmity between the groups.

The solution to racial prejudice Goleman suggests is not to turn a blind eye on its manifestations and suggests:

To do nothing, in this context, is an act of consequence in itself, letting the virus of prejudice spread unopposed. More to the point than diversity training courses – or perhaps essential to their having much effect – is that the norms of a group be decisively changed by taking an active stance against any acts of discrimination, from the top echelons of management on down. Biases may not budge, but acts of prejudice can be quashed, if the climate is changed. As an IBM executive put it, “we don't tolerate slights or insults in any way; respect for the individual is central to IBM's culture.”

And, when people speak of affirmative action as a form of discrimination ie reverse discrimination [see C Harris, “Whiteness as Property” (1993) 106 Harvard Law Review, 1709], they are saying indirectly that they don't want to be in the shoes of people who suffer from discrimination. Thus we agree with Goleman when he says:

To the degree that people come to understand the pain of those who feel discriminated against, they are more likely to speak out against it.

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