**The Flip Side: International-Student Bias**

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**WRTG 3020**

**19th October 2021**

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         After spending almost two years outside of the United States due to the Covid pandemic, I had forgotten many things about my experience as a student in a different country. During my senior year, I moved back to the US and into a new house where I met one of my closest friends here in Colorado. This roommate, who is originally from Long Island, is a history major at CU Boulder and has plenty of knowledge about many countries and cultures around the world, so he and I always enjoyed discussing and sharing knowledge about different places and times. On a night out, I mentioned to him how I had always been surprised about the size of food servings in the United States. I had traveled around many countries and never saw such a big amount of food for a single person anywhere else. And I had always assumed, without ever giving it a second thought, that this was just simply because people in the US liked bigger portions. I had always lived with the stereotype that American culture, in general, was about having everything be bigger. Or put more bluntly, I lived with the stereotype that Americans are simply fat. But, when I discussed this with my new friend, he mentioned that the reason behind this was that serving sizes are bigger in the US because it is expected that any leftovers would be taken home. I was completely shocked. Not only because I had never thought of that, but also because I had always considered myself to be quite open-minded and non-judgmental. But there I found myself making assumptions about other people without even questioning them, and thus, the motivation for writing this essay arises.

               This paper will focus on implicit bias and the consequences it has on both our mindsets and our approaches to new cultures, particularly the implicit biases of international students towards US culture. The first part of this essay will focus on defining the terms “Implicit”, “Bias”, and “Implicit Bias” and why it is important to discuss it and understand it. The second will show the connection between science and personal examples of implicit bias like the one described above. And to conclude, the final part will describe ways in which awareness of these biases can be developed in order to create better and more understanding relationships with people from different places around the world.

**Literature Review**

The main area of study on this essay is implicit bias, its psychological background, and how to overcome it. Specifically, addressing the issue of the implicit cultural biases of international students towards US students and US culture in general. Although this paper will be focused on an assessment of my personal experience with the topic, there are articles and studies on which I will base the research in order to support my analysis. The three sources on which I will focus are: “How to think about implicit bias” by Keith Payne, Laura Niemi, John M. Doris, “Six Lessons for a Cogent Science of Implicit Bias and Its Criticism” by Bertram Gawronski, and “Implicit Bias: Scientific Foundations”, published by the California Law Review.

         The first article focuses mainly on addressing why implicit bias is relevant, especially in our days. According to Payne, Niemi, and Doris, stereotypes that arise due to implicit bias are not inherently a bad thing, but rather a mechanism for the brain to process new information, as well as adapting to new environments. They then proceed to discuss different tests used to measure implicit bias, and how relevant it is to understand the consequences of it in our day and age (Payne, Niemi, and Doris, 2018).

         The second source, a research paper by Gawronski, discusses six lessons that psychologists have studied about our perception of implicit bias. According to Gawronski (2019), the lessons are the following:

                     (a) There is no evidence that people are unaware of the mental contents underlying their implicit biases.

                     (b) Conceptual correspondence is essential for interpretations of dissociations between implicit and explicit bias.

                     (c) There is no basis to expect strong unconditional relations between implicit bias and behavior.

                     (d) Implicit bias is less (not more) stable over time than explicit bias.

                     (e) Context matters fundamentally for the outcomes obtained with implicit- bias measures.

                     (f) Implicit measurement scores do not provide process-pure reflections of bias.

         The third source, a journal article written by Greenwald and Kiege (2006) describes the scientific background of Implicit Bias, its roots on Freudian theory and the Unconscious, its impacts on discrimination law, and how the notion that all of our biases are conscious is incorrect.

**What is meant by “Implicit”, “Bias”, and “Implicit Bias”?**

In order to make a more compelling argument about the impact that implicit bias has on the process of establishing and maintaining relationships with other people (international students and American students, in this case), a few key concepts must be defined first.

         The idea of the Unconscious and how it influences human behavior has roots in Freudian theory. Although Freud’s theories never had empirical results to support them, during the past few decades, scientists have shifted focus back to the field of non-conscious behavior (Greenwald and Kieger, 2006). The definition of “implicit” could be better understood by first looking at the definition of “explicit”. According to Greenwald and Kieger:

*“A belief is explicit if it is consciously endorsed. An intention to act is conscious if the actor is aware of taking an action for a particular reason”* (Greenwald and Kieger, 2006).

         Thus, “implicit” can be defined as: An act, intention to act, or belief that is not consciously endorsed and that the actor is unaware of a specific reason for it.

         In terms of the definition of “Bias”, Greenwald and Kieger define it as follows:

*“The term ‘Bias’, sometimes referred to as ‘Response Bias’, denotes a displacement of people’s responses along a continuum of possible judgments”* (Greenwald and Kieger, 2006).

         Put in a simpler way, Bias can be understood as an inclination towards a particular response among a variety of possible options. And although bias can have both positive and negative consequences for individuals, groups, studies, etc. The definition of bias that will be used in this essay focuses on the negative, or at the very least limiting, interpretations of bias.

         Thus, the definition of Implicit Bias that will be used in this paper can be summarized as follows: A non-conscious belief from an actor (which lacks awareness of a specific reason for that belief) that predetermines a range of limited options for possible responses to a certain situation.

**Why is Understanding Implicit Bias Important?**

         Having a deeper understanding as to what is referred to by implicit bias in this paper, the relevance of understanding and discussing implicit bias must be brought forth. Issues about implicit bias have become more prevalent in the past few decades, as society gives more attention to social injustice, discrimination, and other similar problems that might (or surely do) have roots in implicit bias.

         Often, people believe that they are aware of all possible biases they might have. But, as described by Payne, Niemi, and Doris:

*“One reason why people […] are skeptical of implicit bias might be pretty simple: it isn’t nice to think that we aren’t very nice. […] many of us are more biased than we realize. And* *that is an important cause of injustice—whether you know it or not.”* (Payne, Niemi, and Doris, 2018)

         Something that might be even more troubling than a lack of awareness of personal biases is a lack of knowledge about the true origin of implicit biases. Whenever a stereotype comes to mind regarding a certain individual, group, or culture, this displays a natural process of the brain. A process that involves generalizing, noticing patterns, and make decisions based on these assumptions (Payne, Niemi, and Doris, 2018). This is a process that has helped humans survive and evolve in the wild. Homo Sapiens might not have been able to thrive if they did not assume that other species might be dangerous. Thus, implicit bias is merely a tool that brains developed over time, but that can still (and usually do) have negative consequences in modern societies. Moreover, here lies the importance of being aware and discussing the possible consequences of implicit biases.

**My Experience with Implicit Bias**

As an international student, it is very natural to adopt the role of the “stranger” when coming to the US for the first time. This could be said about any person moving into a different place with a different culture. As creatures of habit, people make assumptions about their surroundings in order to adapt more easily to their new environment. These assumptions are created based on a variety of different feelings and emotions that the person might be experiencing during this transition. As discussed above, this is exactly how implicit biases are formed. These assumptions are not only exclusive to the person entering a new environment but also are created by the people who currently live in it. This creates tension between people from both sides and severely influences the relationships one might be able to establish, especially if either side fails to become aware of the assumptions they are making before truly understanding the other person.

         Personally, I have faced many instances when my implicit biases had taken over my actions without me having any sort of notion about their existence. Even after spending more than three years sharing with Americans and American culture, I still found myself making various assumptions that had narrowed my scope of perception in terms of what types of relationships I perceived I would be able to develop during my time as a student.

         There are two different types of assumptions that I would like to highlight that were particularly illuminating in terms of helping me identifying my implicit biases:

1.   Assumptions I currently had before coming to the US.

2. Assumptions I developed during my time in the US.

         In Paraguay (where I am originally from), and in most of South America, there is a strong influence from US media. The music we listen to, the movies and tv shows we watch, social media apps, etc. Are mostly originally from the US. One of the assumptions that I had made even before coming here, based on media I consumed, is that US culture likes things big. Big meals, big drinks, big cars, big houses, etc. I had always assumed it was just a different culture, and thus, there was no reason to judge it as good or bad, but simply different. But I always kept it on the back of my mind whenever I encountered myself in any situation that could be more easily explained by this assumption (rather than discussing it with a local to see if this was true).

         Regarding assumptions I made during my time in the US (and this is true for other friends of mine that are international students), some of the most defining ones include: perceiving Americans as a lot more individualistic and harder to connect with. Party culture not being “as fun” as other places. And even some oversensitivity on political correctness. I had never though about any of these before coming to the United States.

         The reason why I differentiate between these two instances of the development of assumptions is to illustrate how implicit biases are constantly evolving and reshaping. Their roots are personal experiences and situations that lead me to develop specific notions about a certain culture that made it easier for my brain to process the different environments in which I found myself. And although these assumptions helped me understand and navigate my time as a student, they also limited my perception in terms of the ways in which I perceived I would be able to connect with people from the US.

One assumption that I always felt limited my willingness to connect with Americans was their party culture being boring. I had always felt like the people my age only seemed to focus on having many drinks and just being drunk. For me, that was something I enjoyed doing when I was 17 years old, not 22. Not only that, but also the fact that there was some heavy drug use in some of the parties I attended. As an international student, I could not take the chance of being associated with drug use or I would risk being deported. This led me to perceive partying in the US was just bad in general, and thus I refrained from going to any other parties after that. This assumption proved to be helpful later on. I had heard stories about international students getting deported for being associated with illegal drug use. Therefore, my bias towards not going to parties, or meeting with people that frequented such parties, ended up being something very helpful in order to keep me safe.

**How to Become Aware of Implicit Biases**

Lesson 3 from Gawronski’s research states that *“There is no basis to expect strong unconditional relations between implicit bias and behavior”* (Gawronski, 2019). After various studies, scientists have failed to find a strong correlation between behavior and implicit bias. And thus, it cannot be stated that implicit biases will inevitably influence our behavior. Although Gawronski’s work focuses more heavily on the methods utilized to study implicit bias and their strengths and weaknesses, one important conclusion can be drawn from this third lesson: humans have the power to control their reaction towards a specific situation, person, or culture, regardless of their underlying assumptions and implicit biases. This is crucial because, even though human relationships might be filled with pre-made assumptions about others, people still have the ability to dictate the shape, form, and depth of their connections with others.

         As discussed, implicit biases have origins as old as humankind. Humans evolved and thrived due to their ability to live in communities that shared similar characteristics. This is true both for physical as well as psychological characteristics. Making assumptions that helped us survive outside threats was, and still is, an intrinsic aspect of our minds. Moreover, assumptions and biases are neither good nor bad, they are merely a tool that can have either liberating or limiting effects, depending on how they are used, as described by my previous experiences.

         I have highlighted many different assumptions and implicit biases I developed during my time as an international student in the US. Regardless of the fact that I first came here with an open mind and trying to understand this different culture, I still found myself making assumptions based solely on my experiences. Talking to Americans, like my roommate, is what truly helped me become aware of the biases I had developed over time. This had a significant impact on the way in which I perceived this different culture. It is the process of gaining insight from something beyond our own experiences that truly helps us become aware of our own implicit biases. And this is, for me, the most important takeaway from my experience. It is not the fact that we develop biases and assumptions that matter, but rather that we have the ability to become aware of them through reflection and sharing with other people. And even more important is that we have the power to change our perspective and see the world through more eyes than just our own.

**References**

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