

Culture and Related Concepts

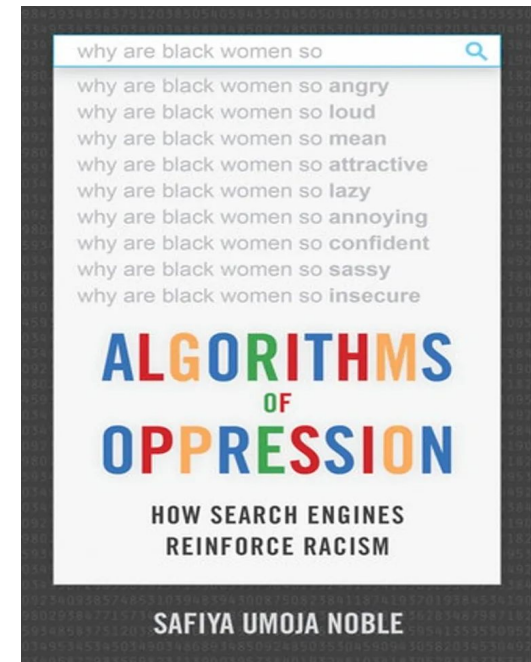
Lecture 10

Culture, Knowledge Production, Biases and Technology

Artificial Intelligence (AI) - Changing the world.

For better or worse? - NO clear answer

Rising Concern in AI - Bias! (and ethics)



Book: **Algorithms of Oppression** by **Safiya Noble**

Text based on over six years of academic research on Google search algorithms, examining search results from 2009 to 2015.

Book showed how online search results are far from neutral. Instead they replicate and reinforce racist and sexist beliefs that reverberate in the societies in which search engines operate. Ex: Search Beautiful Women - Invariably all white women ; Search Porn Stars - More Black Women

After the release of the book, Google took onto criticism and addressed many of its biases.

Can algorithms be biased? - YES!

Ex: Google Photos tagging a Black Woman's picture as Chimpanzee

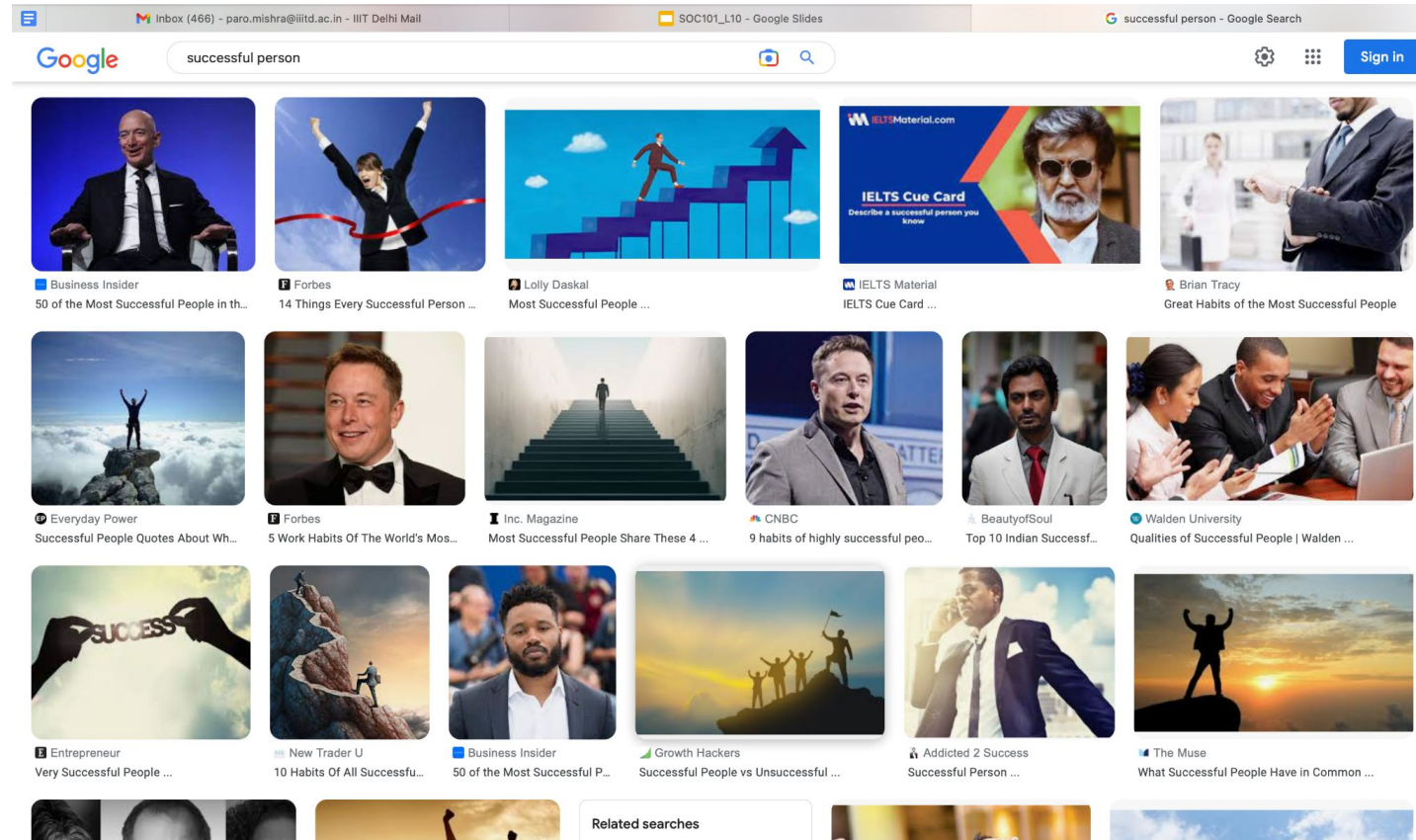


Ex: In 2015, Amazon realised its employees **hiring algorithm was biased against women**. algorithm was based on the number of resumes submitted over the past ten years, and since most of the applicants were men, it was trained to favor men over women.

Ex: Shivangi Narayan's work on Predictive Policing in Delhi - Marking out lower class areas as hotbeds of crime- invariably **crafting socio-economically depressed castes as criminal**

Ex: My own work on Femtech shows that **AI is biased around fertile body**, i.e., bodies that can procreate or produce children.

Most recent: I searched “Successful Person” on Google in 2023 and apparently google thinks that largely only one particular gender (male in this case) can be successful!



Point is that the Algorithms are created by people, and we all carry biases and prejudices which we write into the algorithms we create.

It is important for scientists to exhibit cultural and social sensitivity in creating machine learning based models - This is why we need to understand people and their culture!

Who is a **cultured person**? what are their characteristics?

EVERYONE HAS CULTURE !

- Sociologists and Anthropologists would say “Every human being is cultured”
- Imagine 7.9 billion (2021) people of a single biological species and displaying remarkable differences among them.
- - Macro level differences– Nationality, religion, festivals, dress, food
 - Micro level differences- conventions, practices, gestures, beliefs, objects
- Let's look at some examples

Dress Codes during important Life events - Deaths, Marriages



Different Norms around Kissing / Displaying Affection

Europe allows kissing in Public; Chinese only kiss in Private



French kiss once on each cheek



Cambodian groom touches nose to Bride's cheek



Americans kiss on lips in wedding



Food Practices



Some common food

Also food! - Common food in South-east Asia



Although we all belong to same species, have largely similar biological needs, we have developed different ideas about how to live in the world

- What is pleasant and what is repulsive
(The food example!)

- What is polite and what is rude
 - In china asking about salary is fine
 - it is considered rude in Europe



- Beautiful (OR ugly?)



Body Scarring in Southern America & Africa



Shaved heads in Kenya

What is Culture?

- This capacity for startling difference is the expression of human culture
- Sociologists define 'culture' as 'the designs for living'
- Definition: Culture is the complex whole that consists of all the ways we think and do and everything we have as members of society (Robert Bierstadt, 1974)
- Characteristics of Culture:
 - Culture is shared
 - It is acquired
 - Elements make up a complex whole
 - Transmitted from one generation to other- mostly through language!
 - It is learned through socialization and social interaction
 - Toolbox of solution for 'everyday' problems

Culture includes
both **Thoughts** and
Things

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graph TD; A[Culture includes both Thoughts and Things] --> B[NON-MATERIAL CULTURE]; A --> C[MATERIAL CULTURE]; B --> D[The intangible world of ideas created by members of a society]; C --> E[It constitutes the tangible things created by members of a society];
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NON- MATERIAL
CULTURE

The intangible world of ideas
created by members of a society

MATERIAL
CULTURE

It constitutes the tangible things
created by members of a society

- **Non-material culture** will include the totality of **knowledge, beliefs, values, mannerisms and rules for appropriate behaviour.**
- **Material Culture** consists of all **human technology - from simplest to the most complex.** All the things human beings make and use
- Material culture provides a buffer between humans and their environment
 - *Human beings make culture and culture makes human beings*

Some important Related Concepts

- Culture Shock
- Ethnocentrism
- Cultural Relativism
- Cultural Lag
- Global Culture
- Globalisation

Culture Shock

- **Difficulty that people have in adjusting to a new culture markedly different from their own is called 'cultural shock'.**
- Sense of frustration one may experience on coming in contact with a very different culture or even new elements in one's own culture.
- Jonah Blank, American Sociologist amused to see Indians touching cow dung



Other Examples

- Practice of Leviratic Marriages in Haryana
- Imagine travelling in Japan on a Metro
- Mostly lack of toilet papers in toilets in Morocco, Asian and Southeast Asian countries like India, Thailand and even parts of Africa – leaves westerners frustrated.
- Another tradition in Japan is to name Junctions rather than Streets- Leaves Europeans very confused.



Ethnocentrism

- Ethnocentrism is the practice of judging another culture by the standard of one's own culture.
- It springs from considering your culture as better/superior over other.
- Examples
 - American calling a Guatemalan's home filthy cause it is made of packed dirt; cowdung mopped floor in rural India – used also for purificatory purposes in rituals
 - Hindus calling Muslims adulterous because the latter practice Polygamy [Fact: The latest NFHS data from 2019-20 shows the prevalence of polygyny was 1.9% among Muslims, 1.3% among Hindus and 1.6% among other religious]
 - Or countries practicing Heterosexuality calling others allowing homosexuality as corrupt, immoral, value-less.



- Some level of ethnocentrism can emerge from emotional attachment to your culture
- Ethnocentrism can lead to heightened distinctions between 'Us' vs 'Them'
- It can also lead to conflict and tension - think of genocides, colonization, wars, insider/outsider movements, bullying/discrimination, Intolerance - can have very real and violent consequences

Cultural Relativism

- This is useful way to avoid ethnocentrism
- Cultural relativism implies that social groups and cultures must be studied and understood on their own terms before valid comparisons can be made.
- It is a way of doing objective cross-cultural research
- Study the world from the point of view of 'them' rather than 'us'
- Women's Feet binding custom in China - for us deeply problematic ; for them linked to markers of status and beauty.
- Example: Western scholars studying Marriage practices in India and looking at arrange marriage as 'problematic' . But what happens once you examine arranged marriage in the context of Indian culture

Benefits and challenges of cultural relativism

- It is a difficult approach to adopt because not only is to understand the other culture but also suspend one's own way of looking at things
 - Can lead to objective insights about other cultures
 - Promote Cross-cultural Empathy
 - Respect for differences
- However, this also poses some challenges
 - Virtually any kind of behavior is practiced in some part of the world ; does it mean everything is equally right? There are no simple answers to such questions
- But cultural relativism can help us resist making snap judgments so you can observe things with open minds

Cultural Lag

- We all know that cultures change - Social Change
- Material culture/ technology especially changes faster than non-material culture.
- William F. Ogburn (1922) coined the term 'cultural lag' because he observed some aspects of culture change faster over other aspects
- It refers to the notion that non-material culture takes time to catch up with material culture and technological innovations.
 - Adaptive conditions do not change as quickly as Material Culture. This delay is cultural lag and it can often lead to social problems
 - A period of maladjustment occurs in the process of material change

•Examples:

- When e-governance was rolled out in 1980s, bank employees, railway booking officers had in adjusting to computers and internet
- Smart classrooms/ web can enable learning but teachers have not been replaced - Covid a great example - return to in-person learning
- Huge advances in medicine but very slow acceptance of birth control methods, particularly amongst men ;
- Lack of trust rural people/older generations have in e-wallet payments
- Test-tube babies / Egg Donation/ Sperm Donation - viewed as deeply problematic as they complicate ideas of parenthood, motherhood, fatherhood ; related donor-led conception in IVF still equated with incest