

CHAPTER

2

“BUT EVERYBODY DOES IT”

CHAPTER FOCUS QUESTION

Are biases only held by members of “majority” populations?

As you read this, you may be thinking that you are one of the good guys who sees past skin color and accent and lifestyle. You may have been driven to pick up this book because you are a target of bias, but certainly (or so you think) not because you are a perpetrator. Admittedly, you probably are more innocent than the man who commits a hate crime or the woman who uses a racial slur. I wager, however, that you have your own share of biases and, like the rest of us, have something to learn about seeing people more accurately.

No group is blameless when it comes to bias. Sure, some biases are launched from a more rarified height by the most powerful and hit their targets with greater force. But, ultimately, bias is bias. No one group's bigotry has any more or less importance than another's. Thus, these pages are devoted not one bit more to the task of helping men honor women than women honor men; to helping Christians respect Muslims than Muslims respect Christians; or helping whites respect blacks than blacks respect whites. This book is as concerned with reducing the biases of a person with a disability as reducing those of the fully abled; it is as directed at

heterophobes as at homophobes. No one group is more a beneficiary or more a target than another.

In that connection, these pages are filled with all kinds of biases and all complexions of villains. White villains, Asian villains, gay villains, and even a disabled villain or two. Susan, an employee at the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission of all places, is one of these offenders. Here's what she says about some of her most disliked clients.

I don't want to put one group down, but when I listen to EEOC complaints, it always seems that it is the black people who are most angry and unreasonable. It makes my job very difficult and sometimes I just stop caring.

White racist, you say? And such a misfortune that she is employed at that particular job? You may be surprised to learn that Susan is black, and she is also frustrated and overloaded. And, as is the case with so many of us who struggle against our own biases, she may not be such a villain after all.

If you still need convincing that the only bias we need to fight lurks in the hearts of the so-called Anglo-Saxon majority, consider what happened as I rode from the airport with the Jewish owner of a small limousine service. The driver was all too willing to dump his biased views on a total stranger.

I had barely stowed my luggage when the man began complaining about his difficulties in getting reliable employees. He said proudly that he would hire anyone—blacks, Spanish, Greeks—anyone except, as he put it, “rag heads.” Claiming that “they are all bums,” he admitted, with little awareness of how this same scenario might have played out against his own immigrant parents, that “when they call and I hear the accent, I say the job is filled. As far as I'm concerned, those rag heads ought to go back to where they came from.” When I asked him how he knew they were all so bad, this otherwise apparently intelligent man responded definitively: “I hired one once and he was no good. Once burned, I've learned my lesson.”

I thought of this obviously frightened man on September 11, 2001. The events of that day no doubt fueled his hatred and his fear. It takes little imagination to picture the ugly scene should another of those whom he called "rag heads" ever again approach him for a job.

Another myth about bias pertains to men and women. Somewhere we got the idea that sexism only lurks in the intolerant hearts of the male of our species. Well, take a look inside this shuttle bus as it loaded up the first morning of a women-in-technology conference and you'll see how wrong this assumption is. Things were fine as long as there were only women on the bus. Then, suddenly, everything changed.

As the conference attendees gradually boarded the shuttle, every new female passenger was greeted with enthusiasm. Each was asked where she was from and what brought her to the conference, and was offered other verbal niceties designed to make her feel welcome. Also, more often than not, someone would move her laptop case and invite the newcomer to sit down. Then, as if he were an apparition from Mars, a man mounted the steps. He was about 40-years-old, white, five feet ten inches tall, pleasant looking, and, judging from his deliberate stare straight down the center aisle, more than a little uncomfortable. Why? Because not one woman greeted him. No cheerful hellos, no words of welcome, no polite inquiries were issued to relieve his discomfort, and most telling of all, not one woman offered him a seat beside her.

To be fair, that those women were so inhospitable does not automatically mean they were biased against men. As we'll see in Chapter 3, bias is an attitude, not a behavior. In the absence of mind-reading skills, there is no way I could know how they felt about this man or men in general. The only way to find that out would be to ask them why they were so cold to the lone male on the bus.

That is, in fact, exactly what I did, and what I found out was not good. During my conversations with several of those women, I heard biases like, "Men don't care about getting more women into technology"; "Men don't want to help women. What is he doing at the conference anyway?"; and,

"You know how men are. He probably was just here to spy." I learned something sad that day: sexism runs in both directions.

Susan, the limousine driver, and many of the women on that bus no doubt have had plenty of experience as targets of bigotry. You would think that they would have learned from that pain and been determined not to inflict it on others. Sadly, cases like these, and dozens of others throughout the book, show us that human thought processes are often not logical and, as one contributor put it, "Suffering does not always bring enlightenment."

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- One of the common misconceptions about biases is that they are held only by the so-called "majority" population. In fact, members of any group are capable of holding inflexible beliefs about particular categories of people.
- Although the biases held by the most powerful are apt to do the greatest harm, it is the responsibility of us all to work on the biases that we hold.
- It is a sad truism that being the target of bigotry does not immunize any of us from becoming biased ourselves.