Unconscious Bias Training: The ‘Silver Bullet’ for Gender Equity?

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Western Governments concerned about the lack of gender equity in their workforces are increasingly seeking to address the negative effects of unconscious biases on employment decisions to counter the effects of hidden prejudices. Although unconscious bias has received limited attention in the human resource literature, social psychology literature has identified inadequacies with this practice, including that such training may entrench and normalise unconscious biases. We argue that the popularity of unconscious bias training invites agencies to view this practice as a ‘silver bullet’ to achieve gender equity, but that its effectiveness is likely to be limited unless accompanied by sustained interventions to address discrimination. Further, the impacts of unconscious bias training need to be rigorously evaluated to assess whether government resources are being effectively utilised. Consistent with international research, such an evaluation may reveal that unconscious bias training has unintended negative consequences, but that the training can be improved to reduce these consequences.

Key words: gender equity, Australian public service, public sector, unconscious bias, implicit bias, diversity management training

The public sector has long been a leading employer for women, providing job security, good wages, and flexible working conditions (Rubery 2013). However, women continue to be under-represented in the most senior levels of the Australian Public Service (APS) and over-represented at lower levels and in part-time employment (APSC 2016a; Williamson and Colley forthcoming). The Australian Government has recognised the existence of obstacles to women’s progression in the APS and in 2016, released a gender equality strategy to address these barriers (APSC 2016b).

The APS gender equality strategy, like other gender equality/equity strategies being rolled out in the public sector, aims to address gender imbalance by ‘changing culture through leadership, flexibility, and innovation’ (APSC 2016b:3). It outlines practices to improve equality across the employment life cycle, such as reviewing job descriptions to remove gendered assumptions; career development initiatives to increase the number of women in leadership, such as implementing targets; and changing working practices to increase flexibility, such as adopting a ‘flexible by default’ approach to job design and working arrangements (APSC 2016b).

As well as changing workplace practices, gender equality strategies aim to create gender equitable cultures. A central component of creating a more gender equitable culture entails addressing the existence and operation of unconscious biases to enable women to be recruited into certain roles and promoted to senior positions (APSC 2016b:4). The provision of unconscious bias training to APS managers has formed a major component of this push. In this article we consider the effectiveness of
such an approach, identify limitations of this training, and suggest improvements to current approaches to bias mitigation.

Addressing unconscious bias is undoubtedly popular in the public sector. Australian State governments are engaging consultants to train staff to recognise and mediate their unconscious biases (Government of South Australia 2016) and releasing related guides (Victorian Government 2016). Internationally, unconscious bias training is a cornerstone of many gender equity strategies (OECD 2014). In the United Kingdom, more than a quarter of civil service employees, around 110,000 people, have undertaken this training (Heywood 2016). In mid-2016, the US government stated that all public sector employees – some 2.8 million – would undertake unconscious bias training (US Bureau of Labor Statistics 2017; US Office of Personnel Management 2016). The trend of providing unconscious bias training shows little indication of waning.

We question, however, whether unconscious bias training risks being seen as a quick and expedient ‘silver bullet’ to vanquish inequality and discrimination. As two diversity consults state, ‘...it looks like organisations around the world are addicted to quick fixes on big challenges. Now the turn has come to unconscious bias awareness training as THE SOLUTION for fixing inequality . . .’ (Nielsen and Kepinski 2016, capitals in original).

Practitioners are beginning to question the efficacy of unconscious bias training, reinforcing academic concerns (Emerson 2017; Nielsen and Kepinski 2016). Academic research finds that the effectiveness of unconscious bias training is still largely unknown (Paluck and Green 2009; Price et al. 2005), and some studies suggest it may even backfire. In extreme cases, telling people to resist their biases has been shown to have the opposite effect and entrenches stereotypes (Apfelbaum et al. 2008). Similarly, other research finds that spreading messages that biases are involuntary and widespread effectively normalises the bias, resulting in more prejudice, not less (Duguid and Thomas-Hunt 2015).

There are several reasons to question the efficacy of unconscious bias training. Research suggests that most people suffer from a ‘bias blind spot’ (Pronin 2007:38) in which they are able to perceive biases in others, but not in themselves (Pronin et al. 2004). Even when individuals do acknowledge their biases, evidence suggests that voluntary suppression of biases does not work (Lenton et al. 2009). Requiring employees to undertake mandatory training also has limited effectiveness, as employees are less likely to learn when coerced (Dobbin and Kalev 2016).

Others find that while training can be effective in reducing stereotypes under limited conditions (Devine et al. 2012), it does not necessarily lead to increased diversity or gender equity (Dobbin et al. 2007:24). APS agencies’ decision to focus on unconscious bias training, therefore, may not be based on solid evidence but on arbitrary factors, such as competitor practices, management ‘fads’ promoted by consultants (Roman 2015:455; Williams 2004) and other ‘dubious reasons’ (Kulik and Robertson 2008:266).

Using the APS as a case study, we analysed all 18 APS departments’ gender equality action plans (which sit underneath the APS gender equality strategy) to identify their approach to reducing bias. Our analysis reveals that as of December 2017, 17 of the 18 departments that had an action plan were committed to conducting unconscious bias training, or addressing unconscious bias in some manner. The majority of departments (11 out of 18) stated they would conduct unconscious bias training for their employees. Of these, only three departments would provide the training to all staff. The others would provide training to managers, or recruitment panels, and in a further three agencies, the candidates for the training were unspecified. None of the strategies contained a longitudinal element to reinforce the training and only one was committed to evaluating the impact of the training. For the majority of agencies (11), training was the only strategy to be implemented to directly redress unconscious bias.

The gender equality action plans do not include details of the unconscious bias training, as they nominate broad initiatives to be taken. However, we also interviewed managers who
had undertaken unconscious bias training. We interviewed 104 APS managers in the second half of 2016 about the progression of gender equality in their agencies. Twenty-seven had undertaken unconscious bias training – either online or in a one-off workshop. Nearly all supported these programs, however, several expressed concerns that the training paid ‘lip service’ to gender equality. Although the training was a visible manifestation of organisational commitment, it did not address the systemic issues driving gender inequity. This finding reinforces previous research that has found that unconscious bias training focuses on individual behavioural change, without acknowledging and addressing systemic discrimination (Noon 2017).

Research on the effectiveness of unconscious gender bias training has yet to be undertaken, however, the following two examples of strategies to mitigate unconscious race bias; and progress gender equality may enable practitioners to strengthen the efficacy of unconscious gender bias training. Firstly, Devine et al. (2012) showed long-term reduction in implicit race bias with a multifaceted intervention that combined bias training with targeted strategies to reinforce learning over an extended time period. The greatest reductions in bias were observed in those already concerned about the effects of discrimination, and who reported using the researchers’ strategies.

Secondly, Kelly et al. (2014) conducted a staged intervention aimed at reducing work–family conflict and employees’ stress. The first stage required managers to undergo training; they then identified desirable changes in the way they managed to enable employees to more effectively combine work and family commitments. The second stage involved managers logging incidences of when they implemented these behaviours. They also received ongoing, personalised feedback and metrics to enable self-reflection. A month later, managers then shared stories on successful techniques. A third stage involved teams undergoing training and identifying new ways of working to increase workplace flexibility, which they then implemented. The focus on a multi-level and collective identification of ways to change behaviours resulted in reduced work–family conflict for employees and organisational benefits from less-stressed employees (Moen et al. 2016). This example highlights the usefulness of adopting a staged, iterative approach to changing behaviours to progress gender equality, and one that can be applied to addressing unconscious biases.

APS agencies have sent strong signals that they are committed to progressing gender equality, including through addressing unconscious bias. There are several ways, however, by which initiatives to reduce bias can be improved. Firstly, unconscious bias training needs to be complemented by affirmative action measures, such as setting targets to increase the numbers of women in leadership or in male-dominated areas. All of the APS gender equality strategies detail a range of actions that will be undertaken – unconscious bias is not the only tool being deployed. Secondly, practices that go beyond training are necessary. Unconscious bias training needs to be incorporated in broader workplace interventions that are ongoing, staged, iterative, multi-level, and collective, as detailed above. Thirdly, the implementation and effectiveness of unconscious bias training needs to be evaluated. Without controlled evaluations of unconscious bias training, its effectiveness will continue to be unknown (Huet 2015).

An evaluation of the impact of unconscious bias training in agencies may indeed be occurring, however, no publicly available information has indicated this is happening. Without more robust data, agencies will continue to invest resources in such training, with limited awareness of its effectiveness. Just as the Australian government has recently evaluated blind recruitment (Behavioural Economics Team of the Australian Government 2017), unconscious bias training also needs to be evaluated to ensure that resources are being targeted towards the most effective initiatives. Consistent with international research, the Australian Government may find that unconscious bias training can be improved to ensure that any negative impacts can be addressed. Doing so will contribute to ensuring that unconscious bias training is
more than a ‘silver bullet’ to achieve gender equity.

References


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