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My thoughts on EDI

I feel and always felt strongly associated to EDI (equality, diversity and inclusion) due to me being part of the LGBT+ community for about 15 years by now. It is my wish and strong desire to **help addressing EDI questions** as these question are of fundamental importance to many individuals and society in general. Let me explain my own point of view why EDI matters.



EDI: What?

At its core, EDI means fairness: we must ensure that individuals, or groups of individuals, are not treated less favorably because of their protected characteristics, and are recognized and respected such that they feel welcome and valued.

EDI is not limited to a specific class of people, it is a concern for all of us. But there are of course more vulnerable people which might be discriminated because of disabilities, mental health, race, religion, gender and alike (the list is not ordered and not complete).

EDI is of crucial relevance to all domains of social, economic and political life, and also campus life, of course. It should be of high importance for all of us.

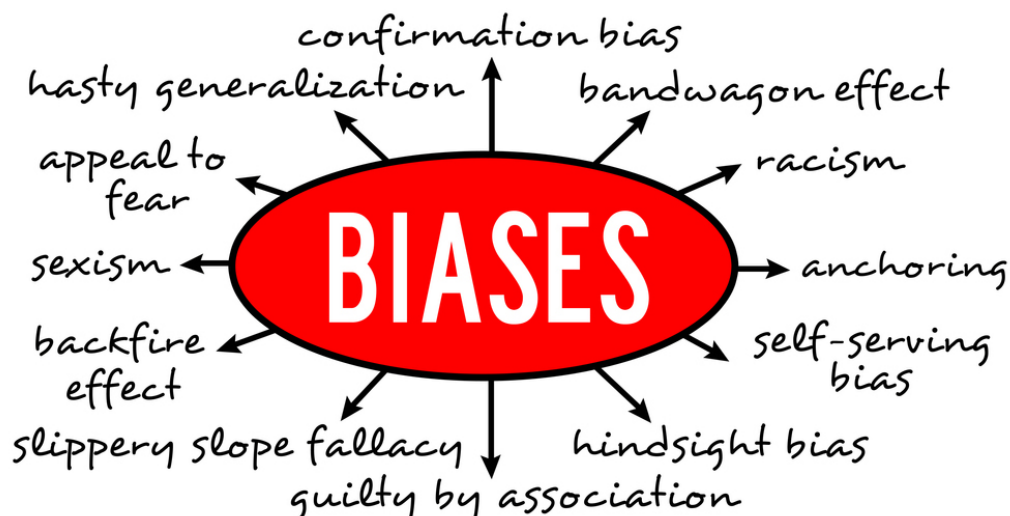
EDI: A real-life example

Despite a long history of progress towards EDI at the campus, multiple forms of inequality, discrimination and exclusion continue to mark the experience of individuals across their life course.

I personally feel that discrimination at universities (these are known to attract open-minded people) mostly happens in its subtle appearance – via the back door. Let me give you one example how discrimination enters campus life without most of us, including myself noticing.

EDI: A real-life example (continued)

The point I want to make is related to biases:



Biases are part of how our brains work and we all make them all the time. Not excluding myself.

Regarding EDI they might come in various forms. For example, although we might not be conscious of being biased against people with disabilities, but most of us probably are. Now imagine I am interviewing candidates for a Ph.D. position. The process is already very competitive, but I am (or rather, my brain is) biased and sees people with disabilities as less favorable. If I am not aware of this bias, then someone with a disability has almost no chance to get the Ph.D. position.

Why does that even matter you might ask. Let me give you an example – a real story – of why that matters!

I had the oral exam for my class “Algebraic Topology” at the end of 2021. There were 14 students in total taking the exam, and one was stuttering. The student did reasonably well and I wrote 35/50 points on my list right after the exam. The next day, before I made the final marks, I remembered that student and I wondered whether I treated them fair. So I rewatched the video of the exam I made (always make videos of your exams to double check!) and I realized that I indeed treated that student unfair. I change the mark to 40/50. Sounds like a tiny bias? Indeed, it is. But it is nevertheless important to avoid such biases: Imagine you are this student. Algebraic topology was your 102th oral exam, and you always scored worse than all your friends. Will you be encourage to push further? Probably not, right? Even the smallest bias, if it happens often enough (and they happen very often!), might change the career and perspectives of students, staff and everyone actually.

EDI: What I can do/have done!

There are some really important issues that can be changed without too much work – someone just needs to push a bit. Think about gender-neutral bathrooms in your department: very easy and cost efficient to achieve, but a lot of faculty buildings still do not have any such bathrooms. Due to my relation to the LGBT+ community I find that very disappointing – it is a crucial question for many of us including myself. During my previous position I mentioned this several times during faculty meetings and in the end the department has now one gender-neutral bathroom. This is a great example of what I can do: be nagging from time to time!

EDI: What I can do/have done! (continued)

Here are a few extra thoughts how I can help.

Regarding biases:

1. Encourage every employee to review, question, and analyze their own personal biases and assumptions. This includes myself, of course.
2. Recording instances of stereotyping as they occur to increase awareness.
3. Yearly online quizzes for all employees helping them to observe when they begin to stereotype individuals so they can refute and replace biases. This is not something I can do myself, but I would be happy to encourage to start such a system at university.

Understanding EDI in the context of time and history permits us to see the real extent of change through transformation, backlash, atrophy and retrenchment as well as inertia in the form of resistance, conservatism and apathy. It is therefore important to learn and recall the history of EDI.

Code-switching: adjusting one's style of speech, appearance, behavior, and expression in ways that will optimize the comfort of others in exchange for fair treatment, quality service, and employment opportunities.

Creating goals works, so I will apply the following to my own agenda:

1. Plan. Recruit and hire more employees from minority communities.
2. Plan. Have your employees population mirror the population of your local community.
3. Plan. Make the environment more inclusive to existing employees, increasing employee retention.

Collect candidate feedback from your team, and ask questions, e.g.:

1. Do you feel comfortable being yourself at work?
2. Are there certain aspects of yourself you feel you need to keep separate from work?
3. What could we do better to support you?
4. How do you feel our current EDI initiatives are going? What's working? Where do we need to improve?

Conclusion

Luckily, traditionally excluded and marginalized groups made inroads into the fields of education and employment, from which they were previously excluded. In many places such as universities these positive changes may give the impression that equality of opportunity has been largely achieved. Consequently, many people at campus believe that the prospects of work and employment are without bias or prejudice. Unfortunately, much of this optimism is misguided, and all of us need to fight everyday to overcome the borders of the of discrimination forced upon us by our brains. For all of us that means: Let us try to give our best!



Daniel Tubbenhauer (digital signature); May 16, 2023