

Unconscious bias and race in career guidance practice

Emma Bolger and Uuganaa Ramsay provide some practical insights into how we can take action in our work through self-awareness and allyship.

As career guidance professionals, we must acknowledge our biases and recognise and challenge systemic oppression in ourselves, others and society. The work of guidance professionals engages with social justice agendas and so we need to understand how everyday, structural or institutional racism and bias impact on the work we do. In this article, we focus on how career development professionals can actively mitigate their own biases in their public-facing roles and the practical positive action approaches that can be taken to address racial stereotyping and oppression.

Where are you at?

We expect you to have some understanding of how racism presents in society and have provided some resources at the end of the article for further reading. We hope to help you to understand how to be an active bystander, an ally who takes a proactive stance and takes direct action to amplify the voices of those who are oppressed. Our specific focus is race in our careers work, but we will also cover some key points relating to unconscious bias and our concerns about the limitations of its use in equality and inclusion training.

Our aim is to encourage you never to accept anything unquestioningly. Your initial responses, expectations and perceptions might be wrong. Right now, you should be thinking: who wrote this article? Are they able to lead the way on this topic? We can offer some insight but those you should speak to are around you in the real world. Speak with ethnic minority careers advisers and listen to your ethnic minority clients to learn about their experiences, rather than make assumptions.

Professional values

Career guidance is a profession, so those who work in it must uphold professional values. Professionals are assumed to have expertise, adhere to ethical codes (e.g. the CDI Code of Ethics), build and maintain appropriate workplace relationships, advocate for their profession and undertake ongoing continuous professional development. These qualities are upheld by members of the CDI's Professional Register. To uphold such values, understanding and challenging privilege and disadvantage in our sector is essential. Bias and stereotyping affect our clients' past, current and future career journeys.

Challenging our unconscious biases

While we do not consciously subscribe to concepts which oppress others, we and other allied professionals may make assumptions about individuals' career ideas, or value them and their actions unequally. The term 'unconscious bias' has been often used in equality and diversity training in recent years, but in many cases poor quality training leads to a surface understanding of the concept. The limited-scope training that is commonly offered such as a 30 minute 'interactive' training module, does not immediately lead to staff having competency to deal with all matters of race, gender and beyond. Yet this type of training is prevalent in many public and private sector bodies employing career and employment professionals.

Unconscious bias is something you form outside your own conscious awareness. It happens automatically, is triggered by your brain making quick judgments and assessments of people and situations. It can impact on your instinctive reactions, or the split-second assumptions and decisions you make. Your biases will be influenced by your own background, environment and experiences. You can develop the ability to check your thoughts and become conscious of your own biases, but bias can still prevail. The way you perceive people can continue to be based on assumptions and stereotypes. To become aware of your unconscious and implicit biases, you might take an Implicit Association Test, but the results are valueless unless you are willing and equipped to do something with them.

How does stereotyping affect career guidance?

The list of characteristics or aspects of appearance you might 'respond' to in a client is endless, but it is important to consider where race informs those reactions. Privilege is apparent in every arena of our lives and in the messaging that we, and our clients, receive through TV, film, mainstream media, alternative media, social media, family, friends and peers. These messages can all perpetuate notions of certain behaviours and attributes pertaining to race, creating stereotypes that place limitations on aspirations and ambitions. The effects on career decision-making are wide ranging, from inequality in subject and occupational choice, leading to inequality in the labour market, to issues with mental health and wellbeing. In short, career decisions contribute to systemic racism.

Race and career decision-making

Where might you start to build a better understanding of race as a career issue? The McGregor-Smith Review (2017) into race in the workplace made it clear that better data collection (alongside improved accountability, awareness raising) is a clear approach to better

understand how race impacts on working lives. Data on employment, unemployment, pay and income, and benefits includes ethnicity data. Do you access this for your region, or by sector or employer? Consider how this knowledge can feed into your frontline practice.

Within career guidance interviews, how might cultural stereotyping of people from minority ethnic backgrounds present? How might individuals self-restrict their career options due to their race? The OECD (2018) highlight how race, ethnicity and migrant status clearly influence young people's career aspirations and employment outcomes. Examples from our own practice include the perception that young people from Chinese and Indian backgrounds are encouraged to go into cookery or hospitality careers because of their family business connections, whereas someone from a Filipino background may be encouraged to go into nursing as that 'seems to be typical'. Sometimes other allied professionals we work with might build a picture of a young person according to assumed family traits and reputation and pass on their "knowledge" to clients or to other professionals; we have observed the assumption that young people from Chinese or Indian backgrounds are better at certain subjects than their peers from Pakistani or Black British families. We are sure you could easily add to this list of assumptions about ethnic minority backgrounds.

Addressing biases

We must take action to address bias, and in turn work to systematically break down the barriers created by privilege. Let's focus on the impact of race on our practice and immediate action. Many of these points are applicable more widely to other disadvantaged or underrepresented groups, and therefore remind us that our work must always consider intersectional disadvantage.

In career guidance interviews or group work, we might focus on:

- who we listen to most intently and how we listen to them
- how successful we think a client will be in a role they apply for
- how suitable we think a client is for an occupation or role
- how much effort we perceive a client to be making.

Let's imagine these focus points in our practice and with consideration of what the client also brings to the guidance session. Working with young people in particular, it is important to understand potential cultural pressures towards choosing certain careers. In some cultures, family and parents play a big role in career decision-making and as career guidance professionals we may deal with not only the young person in front of us but also their complex

family politics. We have all seen children who have been encouraged to study certain subjects and who may disregard careers they might be suited to due to family or peer pressure. Some clients may dismiss options if they don't fit their view of what's 'for them' and there is often a societal pressure to end up in a highly-paid, high prestige job. Other clients may find even the concept of a "career" intimidating and feel they have no entitlement to one.

By challenging clients appropriately, you can help people avoid falling into stereotypical roles that play to structural inequalities in their career planning. Are your clients aware of the stereotypes and biases that may have influenced them in their past? Do they feel they have to look/dress/behave in a certain way to be in a particular employment?

Where next?

Work on this topic is also considering the issues of representation within our own sector and entry barriers to our profession which are heightened by race. In our profession there is a lack of representation from ethnic minorities. In short, we do not look like all the communities we claim to represent and must address this.

Suggested separate boxes:

Scenario:

Imagine a young person walking into your office for career guidance wearing a head scarf and telling you they are planning to study multimedia and journalism in higher education. Are they from a specific background? What have you assumed it to be? What happens if we change their race? Or gender? Are you imagining an accent? Body language? How about we say the same young person wants to work in the career guidance profession? Would your advice be any different?

Scenario:

You and colleagues, all careers advisers, attend a careers fair. One of your colleagues is from a minority ethnic background. During lunch break you all use the staff room. A staff member greets your colleague by saying, "Nǐ hǎo", even though your colleague doesn't speak Mandarin. Your colleague smiles and says, "Hi, nǐ hǎo, that's all I can say too." Another staff member walks in, sees your colleague and says, "Nǐ hǎo". The first staff member says, "Oh, she doesn't speak Chinese. You think they all do, don't you?" As a colleague, what will you do in this situation?

Take an implicit association test

You can take an implicit association test to discover your own unconscious biases at <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html>

References

Musset, P. and Mytna Kurekova, L. (2018), "Working it out: Career Guidance and Employer Engagement", OECD Education Working Papers, No. 175, OECD Publishing, Paris.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/51c9d18d-en>

McGregor Smith, R. (2017) Race in the workplace: The McGregor-Smith Review. Available: www.gov.uk/government/publications/race-in-the-workplace-the-mcgregor-smith-review

Further reading

Eddo-Lodge, R. (2018) *Why I'm No longer Talking to White People About Race*

Angela Saini, (2020) *Superior: The Return of Race Science*

Black Lives Matter: <https://blacklivesmatter.com>

Anti-racism resources for white people: bit.ly/ANTIRACISMRESOURCES

The Anti-Racist Educator www.theantiracisteducator.com

Guide to Allyship, an open source starter guide to help you become a more thoughtful and effective ally: <https://guidetoallyship.com/>

National Centre for Diversity: <https://nationalcentrefordiversity.com/>

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