



There's no such thing as NON-JUDGEMENTAL

Realising this is important to putting in place measures to mitigate against the biases we all have, says Arlene Weekes

It was in the 1950s that Felix Biestek, a priest and professor of social work, became one of the first academics to write extensively on the effects of judgemental attitudes in social work practitioners.

He argued that it is wrong for social workers to assign guilt or innocence to the narratives shared with them by clients (service users), arguing that if the people they work with fear blame and judgement, they will not be open about themselves. As a result of this reasoning, Biestek claimed that it is essential for professional social workers to display and deploy a non-judgemental attitude.

Biestek recognised, however, this is not easy for professionals to achieve in practice. In part, this is because 'a non-judgemental attitude' is difficult to define: while social workers may be unanimous in considering it a basic concept, there is no universal agreement on what the term actually means.

Another, and perhaps even more powerful factor which inhibits the development of non-judgemental attitudes, is our behavioural make-up as human beings. Basically, we are naturally, and almost unavoidably judgemental. This has been demonstrated by many major research studies and has led to the idea of 'cognitive bias', which describes a human tendency to allow personal values and unconscious prejudices to inform our decision-making.

Since the concept was first introduced in the early 1970s, cognitive bias has become the subject of a large body of literature, describing how its effects surface in almost every walk of life. And the overall conclusion of this literature

is clear: any suggestion that human beings are naturally objective and non-judgemental is fundamentally flawed.

My research for my PhD examines the effects of this conclusion in a social work context and contends that it is impossible to avoid stereotypes and generalisations. Furthermore, when individuals form groups in order to make recommendations, this tendency to be judgmental as a result of unconscious prejudices is just as powerful. In fact, it can be more so.

There is evidence that groups can exhibit what psychologist Irving Janis termed 'groupthink' – a mode of thinking in which the desire to achieve group unanimity overrides individual freedom.

Whether at an individual or group level, such a tendency is obviously undesirable, as it can, and often does, lead to flawed decisions.

While much has been written about the effects of unconscious (cognitive) bias in many fields of professional life, there is a need for a better understanding of how these biases impact the decision-making of social workers generally and in particular the recommendations of adoption and fostering panels.

In my 24 years experience as a social work manager, including 15 years chairing child protection conferences and adoption panels, I have seen many instances where panels or individuals reporting to them, seem to be making recommendations or judgements based on subjective interpretation, rather than evidence-based reasoning.

I have often wondered about the extent to which this

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subjectivity is informed by personal biography. It seemed to me that through the use of an awareness process I previously developed which I call Effective Personal and Professional Judgement (EPPJ), we could enable panel members to be more conscious of their own biases and thus help them make non-discriminatory recommendations.

My PhD research had several objectives, but the main aim was to understand ways in which the biographies, attitudes and values of adoption and fostering panel members influences their role and recommendation-making.

Findings

One of the most notable – and noticeable – aspects of the interviews conducted for my study was the clear narrative separation of professional and personal life by interviewees. Almost all participants presented the professional side of their life in a positive and progressive way, while their personal lives were, for the most part, presented in a ‘defended way’.

Where an interviewee was prepared to expand on their personal life, they appeared to be very selective in the information they disclosed. This cautious and evaluative approach of the majority of the interviewees calls into question whether panel members appointed for their expertise are sufficiently able to recognise embedded prejudices against those attending panel sessions.

This suspicion was reinforced by the fact that panel members were often observed to be critical of the work of social workers, as well as aloof toward the realities of practice and highly assumptive – even discriminatory – in terms of their views about the lives of prospective adopters or foster carers, and actual foster carers.

As things stand, the qualification for contributing to a panel is the individual’s personal or professional experience – but this is of little use if individuals are not self-aware in terms of their own prejudices. The question is: what can be done to promote such self-awareness and combat unconscious bias?

Recommendations

The roots of the answer to this question lie in the principle argument of my thesis, which is based on the notion that any belief that us humans can be non-judgmental is fallacious. The aim then becomes to support, educate and empower people to be consciously aware of their inherent personal and professional biases.

The starting point in achieving this must be to recognise that when an individual claims to be non-judgmental, they are denying the existence of both internal prejudices and external systemic inequalities. By denying these aspects of themselves, they are missing an opportunity for real reflection.

The responsibility for managing this lies with both the individual and the professional system in which they operate. The challenge lies in ensuring that individuals understand and own their biases, and that, once understood, this can be used in a positive, rather than negative, way.

How can this be done? A key finding of my study was that people tend to fall into one of four categories. These categories form what I call the consciousness and constructiveness, axle.

High consciousness and high constructiveness

These individuals have a continuous dialogue with themselves about their views, and about which experiences are helpful to call upon at any point, so that these impact positively when undertaking tasks.

Low consciousness, high constructiveness

These individuals leave their complex histories behind when they enter ‘work mode’ in order to remain ‘professional’. The result is a somewhat arid and aloof attitude.

Low consciousness, low constructiveness

These people carry the burden of their complex lives around with them and it appears to drive much of what they do. This is usually experienced negatively as these people rarely demonstrate a reflective dialogue with themselves. This raises the question of how a person can be a useful panel member if they are dislocated from or ruled by their personal biography.

High consciousness, low constructiveness

My study found a panel member is unlikely to be highly conscious and, at the same time, ineffective. Although it is acknowledged that it is possible that an individual is having a bad day or is particularly triggered by certain material, aware individuals will not usually be located here.

An awareness process I have developed which I call Effective Personal and Professional Judgement (EPPJ) helps people analyse where they sit on a quadrant of these four categories. This, in turn, enables them to be more conscious of their own biases, and thus help them make non-discriminatory recommendations.

This concept could have a wide impact. It could, for example, be used when considering team recruitment and membership, ensuring that teams are limited to one or two individuals in the low consciousness/low constructiveness quadrant, while recognising that teams and groups may benefit from these individuals to produce a challenge to those in the reflective and professional quadrants.

In ‘good’ panels and teams, individuals can be supported to use their personal biography, so they function effectively. A team or panel may benefit having some members from the low consciousness/high constructiveness quadrant. The cross-case analysis in my research found that some panel members, though guarded about the information they shared, demonstrated an ability to remain on task.

If our aim is to cultivate more effective social worker analysis and assessments people need to be encouraged to share their experiences and selves.

Arlene Weekes is a practicing social worker and trainer and an independent adoption and fostering panel chair

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‘Empower people to be consciously aware of their inherent personal and professional biases’