

JUST 3 REASONS UNCONSCIOUS BIAS TRAINING DOESN'T WORK

BECAUSE IT WAS NEVER INTENDED TO UPROOT BIAS

The origin story of UBT (unconscious bias training) actually lies with compliance mitigation and legal risk: it was invented in the offices of corporate legal counsel in the US in the '60s and '70s. Corporations needed to find a way to avoid being hauled in front of the EEOC for violations of the then-new protections under the 1964 Civil Rights Act. They needed to be able to point to something they were doing that was “intended” to mitigate—in particular, at that time—racial and gender bias.

But why should the origins of UBT give us pause?

Because “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.”

These are the words of Audre Lorde, the self-described “black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet.” She went on to clarify by asking, “What does it mean when the tools of a racist patriarchy are used to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy? It means,” she went on, “that only the most narrow perimeters of change are possible and allowable.”

So when it comes to UBT, we might start by asking ourselves, how much change can we expect to come from an intervention that was designed by the guardians of the status quo, who were themselves perpetrators of discrimination?

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BECAUSE IT IS BUILT ON A FLAWED THEORY OF CHANGE

The theory of change underpinning UBT is this: if we can create awareness about the unconscious bias(es), we should be able to act on that awareness and interrupt bias in action. In other words, for example, if someone can realize they have a bias against older people, they should then be able to choose not to act in accordance with that bias, and thereby buck that bias.

While this might seem like a logical theory of change on the surface, it hasn’t played out in the research on unconscious bias, or on other unconscious processes.

Consider this theory in another context: health and wellness. You might become aware of the need to manage stress, increase muscle mass, and eat more fibre. You can be strongly motivated to want to connect awareness to action. You can become educated about those particular issues. But when it comes down to the many hundreds of decisions you make every day—from when to go to bed, to what to eat at a restaurant, or how to move move your body—these decisions are influenced unconsciously and consciously by all kinds of internal and external factors, from satiety hormones, to smells in the environment, to emotional reaction to stressors, and so on.

This illustrates what scientists have dubbed the “intent/action gap”... it describes the difficulty humans have in connecting their knowledge, awareness, and intent with their actions, decisions, and behaviour, particularly when the latter are shaped by unconscious processes.

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BECAUSE IT LEADS TO AN OVERCONFIDENCE IN OUR ABILITY TO BE LESS BIASED

Even among people who care deeply about behaving in equitable ways, UBT can create a false sense of your ability to interrupt your own biases. Take the following study, for example: at a veteran’s hospital in the US, staff were given unconscious bias training in order to equip them to more equitably and empathetically serve their patients. 90 days after the training, 91% of the participants “strongly believed they had been successful in applying the training in their clinical or administrative practice.” In other words, these people who care about their work, care about their patients, and have a desire to interrupt the bias in their day-to-day work, also believe—strongly—that they’ve been able to do that for their patients, thanks to their training.

Patient experiences, however, were also being studied before and after the training. And despite the enthusiastic and optimistic evaluations of staff regarding their ability to interrupt their biases, patient experiences had not changed.

[READ THE STUDY](#)

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