

## NAVIGATING COMMUNICATION BIAS IN ACADEMIA

Andreea PELE

Politehnica University Timisoara, Romania

**Abstract:** Regarded as a stronghold of knowledge, intellectual pursuits, and meritocracy, the academic space still has to contend with the one of its biggest, and invisible, foes, namely communication bias. Because these spaces are populated by people, communication bias is alive and well even here, behind the walls of educational institutions, where objectivity and critical thinking are greatly valued. This article examines the idea of communication bias in academic settings, emphasizing the different manifestations and effects of the phenomenon. It also suggests measures for reducing bias and creating an atmosphere that supports open discourse and fairness in academic endeavours.

**Keywords:** unconscious / implicit bias, communication bias, academia, professional communication

### 1. Introduction

The way in which we move through life, through society, the way we relate to those around us, the way we learn, we understand, we teach, we research is filtered through our own cultural background. We talk a great deal in academia about interculturality, objectivity, and the dangers of stereotypes, but numerous studies have shown that, from the onset, even from the way in which we relate to all these concepts no interaction is ever really unbiased no matter how much we would like to pride ourselves on our open-mindedness (Anolli, Zurloni & Riva 2006; Ryan, 2015; Gudykunst & Nishida 1994; Reyna 2017; Gvozdanovic & Maes, 2018; Beukeboom & Burgers 2019).

To understand why and the extent to which this happens we must take a short look at what biases are, as well as how, and why they exist.

### 2. The “Biased” Nature of Things

In its advice aper, *Implicit Bias in Academia* (2018), the League of European Research Universities reiterates the classical definition of implicit bias: because human beings have to process a lot of information at all times, we have developed shortcuts to make our lives easier, shortcuts which take the form of patterns which we have formed from personal experiences or we have inherited from what Ryan (2016) dubs “received wisdom.”

Geography shapes social and ethnic groups which in turn generate culture. Because the mind is a constant association-making machine, what centuries of inherited culture have done is to concentrate complex interactions and contexts in these shortcuts, these patterns that function as a hidden autopilot allowing us to make decisions, fast. Like the word “implicit” says what started as culture has become a filter that operates

unconsciously guiding our thoughts and decision-making processes. According to Gvozdanovic and Bailey (2021:110), studies show that “children recognize stereotypes by the age of six and behave in accordance with them by the age of 9.”

Another scholar of cognitive psychology, Nobel-prize winner Daniel Kahneman (2011) calls this fast thinking: System 1. To it, he opposes System 2, which is responsible for slow thinking. System 1 works fast but is not always accurate, whereas System 2 is more thorough, but it is activated more slowly and consumes a great deal more energy. The problem arises from the fact that, especially in present times, humans are bombarded with an excess of stimuli forcing us to make split decisions. Shiraev and Levy (2013:69) explain it like this: “Because we are not capable of perceiving everything in our environment, our focus is automatically drawn to the most prominent or eye-catching – that is, perceptually salient – stimuli.” The result of this process is called implicit, or unconscious, cognitive bias.

Another direction of research in social psychology that comes to complement studies in the field of bias is schema theory, which is by now an old tenet proposed by F.C Bartlett in 1932, and further developed by Piaget, Rumelhart, Schank, Abelson, Nishida, and others. Schema theory is concerned with how the brain structures knowledge and how it grapples with culturally unfamiliar information. In an article in the *Cognition and Culture* journal, Altarriba and Forsythe (1993:146) examine the role of cultural schemata in reading comprehension where they attest that schemata are “the basic fundamental elements upon which human information processing depends.” They show how these elements are responsible for understanding and assimilating information that is culturally familiar but also for dealing with culturally unfamiliar input. The researchers explain how different subjects were given texts about familiar cultural contexts and unfamiliar ones, and how, without fail, when asked to remember information from the two texts, the readers did better at recalling culturally familiar information.

In the two authors’ opinion this proves that comprehension occurs when a collection of schemata is identified that seems to match the information supplied. The question that the researchers were keen to answer, however, was how the new inconsistent information is handled by existing schemata. Is it dismissed? Is it assimilated into existing schemata? How is it assimilated? Is it distorted? Their conclusions are that most likely information is distorted, at first, in an attempt to help it fit existing schemata. Their conclusions are contradictory, however. On the one hand, they posit that facilitating the activation of new information will likely lead to a better understanding of culturally unfamiliar information (Altarriba and Forsythe, 1993), on the other, they warn that that people don't always make the correct deductions in order to understand a text as the author intended, because their previously acquired schemata, which acts like a filter, can also act like an obstruction (*idem*).

Hiroko Nishida (1999), an intercultural communication theorist, proposed eight types of schemata that are helpful in understanding implicit bias and how they impact the academic professional space: fact-and-concept schema (general knowledge about various facts and concepts), person schema (knowledge about human personality and types of people), self schema (knowledge about how you see yourself and how others see you), role schema (knowledge about the behaviour that is expected of people in certain situations and the roles they are expected to play), context schema (knowledge about what settings are favorable for the best course of action), procedure schema

(knowledge about the best course of action and the steps required for the desired result), strategy schema (knowledge about problem-solving), and emotion schema (knowledge about appropriate and inappropriate emotions in social contexts and how they influence all the other schemata mentioned before).

As one can imagine, all these schemata are greatly influenced by the cultures that the interlocutors are steeped in. Ryan (2018) is concerned with the interactions and potential miscommunication between American and Japanese speakers who not only obviously belong to two vastly different cultures but are also radically different in how they involve their schemata.

Interactions between the two cultures present a high likelihood of miscommunication, especially in a business and/or professional setting, because these two are on the opposite sides of the scale when it comes to an ostensible classification of cultures around the world, namely American culture is a low-context whereas Japanese is recognized as a high-context culture. The difference between them has to do with the role context plays in how Americans and Japanese people communicate: low context cultures tend to be direct, content-based, tend to value honesty, and tend to assume that others are like them; high context cultures, on the other hand, place a great deal of importance on the nonverbal side of communication, on implicature as dictated by context rather than content. These two contrasting communication styles can generate a great deal of misunderstanding, misjudgement, and mistrust between the members of these two cultures.

Romania and the Politehnica University of Timisoara sit at the Eastern edge of the "Western" world. Even within the European space, which is admittedly more or less low-context, professional communication in the academic world is rife with a wide range of pitfalls that threaten two of its most important tenets, namely objectivity and meritocracy. Despite the way in which the rest of the world views Europe, especially after the establishment of the European Union, the entity is very much not a homogeneous space. The dynamics of geography, history, culture, religion, politics, and power over millennia have ensured that even within such a relatively small continent, there are stark differences between the Balkan countries and the Scandinavian countries, for instance.

At the same time, in the context of global migration shifts, the European Union and the European academic space have become attractive to non-Europeans, us Europeans need to become aware of our own biases and the way they can affect professional communication in the academic space.

### **3. Types of implicit bias**

To circle back, the term "communication bias" describes the systemic inaccuracies and distortions that occur when people or groups share information – in an academic institution, in this case.

A statement from the Royal Society defines implicit / unconscious bias as occurring "when we make judgements or decisions on the basis of our prior experience, or own *deep-seated* thought patterns, assumptions or interpretations, and we are *not aware* we are doing it." (2015, 2, my emphasis)

Academic environments are susceptible to a range of cognitive, social, and cultural biases that can affect how information is transmitted, received, and understood, just like any other workplace. Moreover, as these biases, these implicit shortcuts in thinking and

decision-making, can help maintain and propagate stereotypes and discrimination, it behoves us to pay attention.

These are a few typical examples of implicit bias that may affect professional academic communication.

*Confirmation bias* is the selective interpretation of data or the search for data that supports already-held notions or theories. This bias may make it more difficult to evaluate data and study conclusions objectively. Like everyone else, academics are not immune to confirmation bias which derives from the psychological need to not be wrong, or to not admit we are wrong. Thus, we set out to prove ourselves right instead of confronting and then presenting the truth.

*Anchoring bias* happens when people focus just on one piece of information. This is frequently the first information they are exposed to about a certain subject. Individuals may base every decision they make on any subject on this “anchor” information. One can very well see why this would be bad in an academic setting

The *Dunning-Kruger effect* is another bias that is very relevant for the academic environment. It occurs when people with limited information about a subject are unaware that the knowledge they possess is very limited, and they mistakenly believe it to be everything on a certain topic.

The *availability cascade* happens when people are more inclined to accept information that is repeated often, even if it is untrue. This may frequently happen simultaneously with an authority bias.

The *authority bias* occurs because individuals who hold positions of power tend to be more credible sources of information. and hierarchy is at the very core of academia.

*Ingroup bias* refers to how people value belonging to one group with which they share lifestyles, education, political views, and interests. The bias becomes salient when they come in contact with an outgroup that they do not have the above in common with.

In the “curse of knowledge” or the “curse of expertise” bias, we assume incorrectly that everyone is as knowledgeable about a subject as we are. It becomes very difficult to communicate with others who are not “in the know,” because we cannot conceptualize or articulate what it is like not to know that piece of information and knowledge.

Another relevant bias is the *halo effect*, namely forming a positive judgement of someone or something's character based on a positive first impression of them. The opposite is known as the *horn effect*, where a negative impression of someone's appearance leads to a negative opinion of that person's character.

A final bias I would like to mention is the *courtesy bias* which entails refraining from voicing rightful negative opinions or thoughts out because we are reluctant to come across as discourteous.

#### **4. Suggestions of Tackling the Communication Bias in Academia**

One significant way in which bias impacts academia relates to one of academia's most prized principles: meritocracy, the belief that academic success comes from a suite of effort, talent, and merit. However, the academic space is not one that is free of unconscious bias be it in relationships between the university staff but also in those between the teaching staff and the students., and it has substantial and far-reaching implications. Here are some of the main consequences:

When academics worry that their ideas will be disregarded or undervalued owing to bias, they may be less likely to conduct creative research or question existing paradigms, resulting in suppressed innovation.

Communication bias can prevent people from underrepresented backgrounds from fully engaging in academic discourse, resulting in a lack of diversity of ideas and viewpoints, affecting diversity and inclusion.

Communication biases can jeopardize research quality and objectivity, since academics may unintentionally alter their findings to fit their prior ideas.

Effective cooperation is critical in academia, but communication bias can hamper open and constructive exchanges among researchers, thereby restricting chances for interdisciplinary research.

And finally, bias in communication can have a negative impact on academics' mental health and wellbeing, increasing stress, burnout, and unfavorable work environments.

It is therefore important for us to consider mitigating biases that affect communication in the professional academic environment. Some possible means of tackling this issue are presented below.

Raising awareness is one important first step. Informing academic community members, staff members, and students about the many types of communication bias and how they affect and are affected by it.

A second step would be to provide diverse representation by encouraging inclusivity and diversity in academic leadership, committees, and decision-making groups to make sure that all viewpoints are taken into account.

Another measure would involve implicit bias training in order assist people in identifying and reducing their own prejudices in academic communication and decision-making, provide training on implicit bias.

Furthermore, we should also value inclusive pedagogy by motivate educators to implement inclusive teaching strategies that foster a friendly and fair learning environment for students from diverse backgrounds.

Mentorship programs are another measure we should consider, by creating mentoring programs that address issues of racism and diversity while matching junior scholars with seasoned mentors to offer advice and assistance.

And finally, we should set reporting mechanisms in place for reporting instances of bias, discrimination, or harassment in academia that are both clear and confidential.

## **5. Conclusions**

As shown, implicit bias is an indelible part of human thinking and communication. Challenging them looks like an insurmountable task but challenge them we must in the context of providing a truly meritocratic environment for the Romanian and the Politehnica academia.

Academic institutions like ours should strive toward lowering communication prejudice and encouraging a more equal and dynamic intellectual community by implementing practical measures to increase awareness, offer instruction and training, and encourage inclusion. They will be in a better position to carry out their goal of expanding knowledge and influencing the course of society.

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