

TwiceAround Podcast
Episode 7: What Are Our Biases Costing Us?
Transcript

Speaker 1: When I hear the word "bias," it's sort of somebody who has maybe their own agenda.

Speaker 2: I guess I would say a bias is your personal views of the world, like looking at things through your own lens.

Speaker 3: People bringing in their own personal experience, personal, all the struggles, into like their opinion and how they view the world.

Speaker 4: It's when you treat people differently based on any number of factors.

[00:00:30]

Speaker 5: Treating them in a different way than you treat in a good way.

Speaker 6: It's almost like there's this biased assumption that I must be other.

Speaker 7: You're listening to Twice Around.

Speaker 8: Twice Around.

[00:00:46]

Speaker 9: Where we take a second look ...

Speaker 10: At the beliefs that shape us.

Speaker 8: Brought to you by the Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco.

[00:01:05]

Speaker 10:

[00:01:00]

Mary: Hi there and welcome back to Twice Around. This is Mary.

Jody: And this is Jody. Now in today's episode we want to take a look at a quality that we all have, but we mostly don't want to admit or even talk about, and that's biases.

Jody: We've kind of gone round and round about this and we decided that maybe we'd take some baby steps.

Mary: We need some baby steps, also because it's important to recognize that biases come in all different types, so we're going to start with a bias that's relatively innocuous, and we all have them. My bias on beets. I do not like beets.

Jody: You mean, the red ones?

Mary: The red ones, and the reason I don't like beets is because when I was five I had a red sliced beet out of a can. It was all vinegary, it turned my mouth red, it was slimy, and I decided I would never eat another beet.

Jody: Good call. [laughter]

Mary: And now, I won't eat roasted beets, heirloom beets, beets delivered on gold platters. I will not eat a beet.

Jody: [laughter] Even a gold platter.

[00:02:00]

Mary: Even a gold platter of beets. But there are other biases that can be a little bit more constraining. A little less innocuous, so Jody what do you have that's a little less innocuous?

Jody: Well, one that comes to mind has to do with the kind of bias I have about Boise State University.

Mary: Is that the one with the blue field?

Jody: That is the one with the blue field, and that you know, it's interesting how something that starts out innocuous can kind of move into that more constraining kind of piece of it.

Mary: Huh. That's interesting.

Jody: Yeah, I'm a U of I grad, University of Idaho. I graduated from there. And the whole time we were there as undergraduates everybody just made fun of and demeaned Boise State University. Now these two schools had like an athletic rivalry, but it also spilled into the academic side of it. So, I really thought Boise State was basically a junior college that they called a university. So...
[00:02:30]

Mary: A little snooty there up in U of I.

Jody: Exactly. A little snooty. So, I graduate and a couple years later I'm down living in the Boise area, and I decide I'm going to get a teaching credential. Well, guess where the only place is that I can go to get a teaching credential?
[00:03:00]

Mary: Go Broncos. Boise State.

Jody: Go Boise State. Yeah, so I've got to go to Boise State. And I'm like, I can't go there! I mean, are you kidding? It was so funny because my ex-husband at the time was like, what are you talking about? And I'm like, I can't go there. He's like, get over yourself. Get yourself onto campus and get signed up. And honestly I did.

Mary: And then what did you find?

Jody: Well, it was really fascinating of course. I was shocked. Because like the instructors
[00:03:30] were good. My fellow colleagues, my fellow students were all sharp. You know, many smart people there, and actually a constraint on that was that I didn't want to go, but thanks to my former husband I did get signed up for Boise State.

Mary: And you uncovered a bias, or you overturned I guess would be the right way. You overturned a bias you had, because then you went on I think to get an MBA, and eventually work there.

Jody: Yeah, actually, can you believe all that?

Mary: Well, that's a great story.

[00:04:00]

Jody: So, Mary, let's talk-- so now that was the easy, but let's get into something a little more serious.

Mary: So, we're going to talk about something next that moves from just the simply constraining to the harmful. And the decision point, or the way we've been deciding what's harmful verses what's constraining is when you do it to other's then it becomes harmful. So, when your bias hits that home.

[00:04:30] So, the story I kind of came up with happened you know, thirty years ago. You can tell it's still with me because I'm talking about it. I was teaching a review session at University Missouri Kansas City. I was an undergraduate, and it was a peer review session. I had about a hundred students for the History of Science.

Jody: The History of Science? There is such a thing?

Mary: Gosh, it was my favorite class. So, teaching the History of Science review sessions- loved it. And I get to the end of the semester. It's the first time I've ever done such a thing and I get evaluations, and they give me my evaluations, I'm reading over them. You know they're all anonymous. And I get to one, and all of them were really good,
[00:05:00] and I get one and it says, I'm worried or I wonder if Mary is a racist.

Jody: What?

Mary: I know. I just kept reading it, seeing if I read it wrong. My stomach dropped down because I--

Jody: I was going to say, what did that, how did you feel?

Mary: Oh, it felt awful, because I knew that wasn't my heart, but somehow I'd had this impact on this person, so I'm looking through the evaluation, and I see she signed her name. Now, this is super brave, but it just told me how important it was to her that
[00:05:30]

she was willing to sign her name. So, I sought her out. I went to the final exam, which I was you know taking myself, and I looked her up, and I said, can we have a coffee?

Jody: Oh, wow. And she agreed?

Mary: She did. So we went for a coffee, and I said, I have no idea how I could've given you this impression, but I want to learn, and I did feel sick the whole time. But she told me, and here's what she told me, and this is really where I learned I think that biases can be, you don't even know them, they're unconscious, and even when your intentions are good your impact when those biases creep in can be bad.

[00:06:00]

Jody: Yeah, so can you tell us what did you learn?

Mary: So, here's what I learned. That I had two African American students in my review class, and both of them had told me that they had come from very low quality public schools, high schools, before they got into college. And in those low quality public high schools they hadn't been well prepared to take History of Science in their first semester, and so they were struggling.

[00:06:30] And I then used that to, I wanted to make up basically, I'd heard that story, and I wanted to make up for that gap by not pushing them as much, because I was wanting to build their confidence, not have them be overwhelmed, so I didn't hold them to the same standards that I was holding everybody else in the review sessions.

Jody: You know we hear about this a lot in public education that there's this modifying expectations, or having lower expectations. Is that basically what you're saying?

Mary: I did. I did exactly that, and so what she said was, you don't know what I'm capable of. And I thought, oh my gosh, you can tell by the tone of my voice. I did not know what she was capable of, but what she taught me was--

[00:07:00]

Jody: Yeah, I was going to say, what is your take away from that?

Mary: Oh, it was really one of these great take aways that in my effort to fix the problem before I understood the problem I had actually harmed someone, and hopefully not forever. And she'd just been brave enough to call me out on it, and so it would have been better for me to say what can I do to help you do the best you can in this course? As opposed to lowering the standards so she could be successful.

[00:07:30]

Jody: Yeah, it's actually kind of interesting to see how it goes from just being constraining in terms of the behavior that you were exhibiting to being actually sort of, very much limiting, and potentially harmful to another person.

Mary: Exactly, and it's that harm to another person I think that really is the rub on bias.

[00:08:00]

Jody:

When you think about it, you know biases really aren't good or bad just in and of themselves, it's more around the action we take with those biases, but the thing is how do we even evaluate them?

Mary: Well, that's a good question. It's one I've given a lot of thought to myself, but I always come, you know I'm going to put on my geeky economics hat, and I'm going to be a researcher for a moment, but I think it's where research can really help us.

[00:08:30] In research we call these biases, we call them priors, or hypotheses even. They're our first glance at what we think the worlds going to look like, but then we want to test it with looking for information that either confirms our views, our priors, or dis-confirms them.

Let's take your example of Boise State. You thought Boise State was terrible because you'd heard it was terrible, and--

Jody: I had never been on the campus.

Mary: Exactly, so you have a prior, but then you know fortunately your ex-husband tells you, get yourself over there because that's a little bit biased, and you did it. I mean, that's the nice thing, you went there, and then you tested it, and you looked for confirming and dis-confirming information I bet.

[00:09:00]

Jody: Well, I didn't have to look for any confirming, because I knew. I thought I knew.

Mary: Oh, yeah. You thought you knew, so you were all good on the Boise State's no good.

Jody: Right? And I'm quite certain that I had no expectation that I was going to have an open mind about it, but somehow it got through.

Mary: One of the things about being a researcher is even when you don't think you really have an open mind, if you just get encased in the data or you go do the experiment the empirical work tells you. The data's speak, unless you're just blind to them you have to change your mind.

[00:09:30]

Jody: So, dis-confirming evidence, if we go back to my Boise State example, how does that work exactly?

Mary: So you went to Boise State, and you had your hypotheses or your prior, or your bias, is Boise State's no good, I'm going to get a lesser quality education. But then you show up for the classes, so you kept showing up, and then you went, and you listened to the lecturer, or the professor, and you said, wow I'm getting something out of this. So, a check mark against the idea that Boise State's no good.

[00:10:00]

Jody: I see. And so that's dis-confirming.

Mary: And that's dis-confirming your prior, or your bias, that it's no good. And over time if you get enough of this dis-confirming information you actually can change your mind, and so it's really back to this issue I think we mentioned in the beginning that bias doesn't form into sort of a strongly held belief, because you behaved in a way that checks the information.

[00:10:30]

Jody: Right. But the key here would be for me, and perhaps the key to all of it, is you do have to go in there like that researcher a little bit. Where you have this open mind, and you're willing to kind of be wrong about your bias.

Mary: Yeah, and it takes some effort. I mean I think, you know you have to pay the cost of checking. And we don't want to--

Jody: Yeah. It seems like actually a lot of work.

Mary: It is a lot of work to check our priors, because it's actually super comfortable to stay with your priors. But then we don't learn much.

Jody: Yes, unfortunately.

Mary: And with biases I don't know. Reflecting for myself I think it's even easier to stay with - it's one thing for me to put on my researcher hat and say I will go out and do my research. That is pretty easy, it's what I do for a living, but when you go back to biases that's harder. I mean, I think about the story I told just a moment ago when I had to go really check. I had no idea what I was going to learn from that young woman I spoke to.

[00:11:00]

Jody: I think that was really a, really amazing that you followed up with her, and that you were willing to-- I've seen this in you. You want to know. Even if it's going to be painful.

Mary: Well, you know I do want to know, and because we're doing this episode I tried to think why do I want to know? Because I can see the cost of not knowing.

[00:11:30]

Jody: Yeah, so, which is interesting to me because I mean, this is a thread through our whole podcast is that I try to avoid even thinking about the cost, but what do you think it is about that?

Mary: Well, I just thought you know with the woman I was speaking about, I can see the cost if I really am behaving in a way that's having that impact on someone. I don't want to keep behaving that way. But I also don't want her to feel bad. I don't want her to feel like whoever was trying to help her in her education was actually somehow constraining her, because she was African American. That just seemed completely, I didn't want to live with that.

[00:12:00]

So, it's the ability to see the cost, because it is costly to check. There's no doubt about it. You have to lean against your beliefs, and your biases, and your priors. You have to lean against all that, so you have to make that cost against the cost of not checking.

Jody: Right.

[00:12:30]

Mary: But of course, against every cost are the benefits. So, what are the benefits to checking your priors, or checking your biases?

Jody: You know, if I think about the Boise State example they're so obvious. You never know in the moment I think, how many benefits might be there, but when I think about you know I got the teaching credential. Which, you know got me into classrooms--

Mary: Which is great for all of America by the way.

Jody: Yeah, well, thank you Mary. Teaching is what, I mean that's my calling. So, I got that piece, but then I went to Boise State and got an MBA, so that also made it a definite change in my career trajectory. That certainly changed my career path.

[00:13:00]

And then you know I actually ended up working at Boise State.

Mary: And that's where we got you to the Fed is from Boise State, so--

Jody: So it's really amazing when you think about all the benefits that accrued from that decision to go ahead and enroll for my teaching credential at Boise State.

Mary: And it kind of has that-- it amplifies, or it highlights this time discontinuity problem that people often have, because we pay the cost of checking our priors right away, but we don't reap the benefits of having checked our priors for sometimes many years. Sometimes you can reap them immediately. I certainly did when I saw the look on the woman's face when we had the conversation at coffee, and she learned I really wasn't a racist. I was just making a mistake, and then she could feel better, but I probably didn't-- I can't even begin to recognize all of the benefits of having done that until many years later when I didn't keep making the mistake.

[00:13:30]

Jody: And that's called time discontinuity?

[00:14:00]

Mary: Yeah, because we basically have to add up the benefits over a long period of time, but we're weighing them against a cost today. We tend to discount things that are far away and not pay as much attention to them, and we tend to amplify things that are right in front of us, and so the costs always look bigger than the benefits.

I mean, we talked about this on gratitude. Right? The cost of doing something always looks better than the impact, bigger than the impact rather, and you know it's hard for us as humans to solve that problem.

[00:14:30]

Jody: It is. And biases or priors, however you want to sort of talk about them, you know one of the most important things is just start being aware of them.

Mary: Well, it's not just about awareness, it's also about checking. So, if you're a good researcher looking at your biases you have to be aware of your priors, and even write them down. That's what we do as researchers. But then you have to go out and find the evidence that either confirms or importantly, dis-confirms what you believe.

[00:15:00]

Jody: So Mary, we've just been talking about the sort of individual level of biases and the consequences that we see of some of that kind of behavior. But what I'm wondering is, you know we have these consequences at the individual level, but does that ever roll up to something bigger?

Mary: It definitely does, and in fact there's a construal amount of research in economics and other places, but I'll talk about the economics literature, that shows that these types biases, they actually have impacts on things we care a lot about. Like, hiring decisions, housing decisions, and educational decisions about who gets in, and who gets included once they're in.

[00:15:30]

Jody: So Mary, I wanted to mention a really fascinating study, and I think actually sort of set the stage for a lot of this research on understanding more about people's biases. And it has to do with orchestras here in the United States.

[00:16:00]

A number of years ago if you looked at the composition of an orchestra you would see that it was mostly white, and mostly male. And it sort of begged the question. Are there no female musicians of high quality? Which, you know clearly that couldn't be right. So what they did, some of these orchestras in some of the major cities decided we need to do something different when musicians are auditioning.

[00:16:30]

And so what they did is they put the evaluator in front of a curtain, but on the other side of the curtain would actually be the musician, and they'd have them audition where you couldn't see the person on the other side. And guess what? There are actually a lot of very talented female musicians out there. And you read this research and the shock on the evaluators sort of face when they realized you know, it wasn't what they were expecting.

So what you've got now are orchestras that are much more diverse around the country.

Mary: And the shock, if I remember the studies correctly and all the post interviews of these people, the shock was really that these individuals thought they were doing a great

job. They didn't think they had a bias. They were actually watching the female players play, and listening, and watching the male players play, and listening, and thinking they were making a unbiased judgment.

[00:17:00] So when the curtain comes down it's an awakening, or a reckoning. Oh my gosh, I had these biases. So, that's an excellent story, and as you said, it set the foundation for lots of research that has subsequently been done, to try to fair it out, how much bias matters in terms of hiring decisions more generally?

[00:17:30] And there's this research that basically looks at resumes coming in, and it takes the names away, and gives the hiring managers the resumes with no names, and they find that there's an increase in diversity among candidates when you don't have names on the resumes, relative to the times when you actually see the names. So, these women or men who are the hiring managers are unconsciously sorting through names that probably are familiar to them, and sorting against names that are unfamiliar.

Jody: Really? Wow, that's striking. And you know Mary, it actually kind of reminds me of some new research that's coming out of your shop on age discrimination in the hiring process.

Mary: By David Newmark and his colleagues I think.

[00:18:00]

Jody: Yes. And you know what's so interesting, and I think I've got this-- If I've got this right what they did is they set up these fake resumes that were identical across the whole group of dimensions such as background and training, and education, skillset, but they changed one thing on these resumes, and that one thing they changed. Can you guess what that might have been?

Mary: The experience of the candidate, or I guess the age?

Jody: The age of the candidate, since we're talking about age discrimination. So, what they did is they took these resumes, and again the major difference really was only about age, and they sent them out to companies all over the country, and then they waited to see who was going to get a call back. Can you imagine what probably happened next?

[00:18:30]

Mary: Well, the research showed that the older workers didn't get the call back.

Jody: The older workers did not get the call back, and in fact not only was this true for the older applicant, but it was also especially apparent for older women.

Mary: It really underscores the cost of biases. Especially when they're used in the work place.

Jody: Yes, and what it really sort of resonates with me around this Mary, is it's not just
[00:19:00] costly on an individual level for that individual person, but in some cases it can impact a whole group of people.

Mary: Okay, so we're at the point in the episode where we once again have to wrap up. And we always ask ourselves, what did you learn? So, Jody what did you learn this time?

Jody: Well, I learned that it's really hard to talk about my biases in a--

Mary: Hear, hear.

Jody: Yeah, so difficult, just because you know it's a revealing kind of thing, but I think for
[00:19:30] me the-- you know I was in an airport today, and just walking through the airport I just noticed how my mind is categorizing, it's looking, it's categorizing, it's constantly busy doing that. And I just kind of notice where my mind was going with that, and I'm seeing these little biases all the time now. Some of which are very innocuous, but some I can see you know be good to keep an eye on them.

[00:20:00] And so I think my big take away is I really love this idea of priors, and that I need to be aware of what they are, and then be willing to do the little extra work to dig in there and find out if they're actually is some evidence that my bias is wrong.

Mary: That's really great. I think that if we do that we'll all be better off.

What I learned is that I'm human, and so no matter how much I try to check my own biases, or make myself aware, I'm really going to have to rely on others to help, and that means I'm really going to have to have institutions, and practices in place for hiring, like taking the names off resumes when they come, maybe putting people behind a curtain when we play orchestras.

[00:20:30] But in a serious way I really learned that you know we can be aware, we can check the data, but we also have to really have others on interview panels, and in decisions of any magnitude to help us out, because we all come in with those biases. Fortunately they're probably going to be different, and we can give each other the assistance we need to make sure that we make a decision that's the right decision, as opposed to one that's really influenced by how we came in thinking.

[00:21:00]

Jody: Thanks so much for joining us today on Twice Around.

Mary: Now if you liked to learn more about the research behind today's episode.

Jody: Be sure to check out our show notes on twicearound.org

Mary: And of course be sure to subscribe to the show on iTunes, Stitcher, or TuneIn.

Jody: And we'll be back next week, taking another look at the beliefs that shape us.

Mary: See you next time.

How did we do?



If you rate this transcript 3 or below, this agent will not work on your future orders