Script to accompany the lecture “Cognitive Bias, Peace Literacy, and Social Justice”
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Introduction

- I’m Professor Shari Clough and I’m here to talk with you about cognitive biases as they affect social justice
- My relationship to social justice is informed by my work at Phronesis Lab that I direct in the School of History, Philosophy, and Religion http://blogs.oregonstate.edu/phronesis
- Phronesis = Greek for Practical Wisdom
- Wisdom isn’t something you have, it’s something you do, something you practice
- There are better and worse ways to practice wisdom
- We can experiment to see which ways work well and which work less well
- The need for practice and experimenting motivates the lab metaphor in Phronesis Lab
- I’ve applied that need for practice and experimenting to my work in social justice research and teaching
- Many leaders in the social justice movements over the years, especially Gandhi and Rev. Dr. MLK Jr., have recognized the importance of practice, experimenting, and training for work in social justice
- Think about the rigorous training that the Nashville civil rights protesters engaged in for months before they actually sat at the segregated lunch counters
- Their training was led by civil rights leader James Lawson who worked with King and studied Gandhi’s practice and training in non-violence
- (You can check out the 30 min. documentary “Nashville - We Were Warriors,” from the series on nonviolent direct action called A Force More Powerful https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gs14dOW2lFw)
- Gandhi and MLK Jr. in turn inspired many others including my research partner Paul K. Chappell who studied with James Lawson and designed the framework that guides my work in Phronesis Lab and informs my presentation today

Peace Literacy

- Chappell talks about our need for Peace Literacy
- (You can see our work at http://www.peaceliteracy.org/)
- For Chappell, peace isn’t just the absence of war, or the absence of social injustice
- It’s a positive set of skills that we need to learn and practice, a literacy, just like we needed to learn and practice writing and reading
- Most of us did not learn peace skills in school or anywhere else, so we shouldn’t be surprised that we’re struggling
- Chappell asks us to imagine a basketball game where none of the players know how to play basketball
- It would be a mess - we don’t expect people to just know how to play basketball
- If we saw the players floundering on the court, we wouldn’t weep for humanity
- We’d teach them basketball!
Importantly, we wouldn't expect them to be able to play basketball just by reading about it, or watching how-to videos.

They’d need to get out on the court and play.

They’d need to be able to make mistakes and get back up again and keep trying.

Similarly when we look around us at the suffering and injustice we see, we shouldn’t feel hopeless.

It takes training and lots and lots of practice to play basketball well.

Similarly with peace and social justice.

These are each a kind of phronesis or practical wisdom.

They involve skills that you need to learn and you need to practice.

And you need to be prepared to make mistakes.

Of course the mistakes that we make with respect to social injustice and peace have more significant consequences than mistakes in a game of basketball.

And those consequences aren’t evenly distributed.

The consequences are distributed based on difference, power, and discrimination.

But the point remains.

If we don’t learn the skills, train, and practice, make mistakes and get back up and keep working, we’ll never get any better.

One way to think about your work in the DPD Summer Seminar in fact is to introduce you to some skills and give you a chance to practice and a space to make mistakes and have compassion for yourself and practice empathy for others.

This is my 5th summer contributing to the DPD Summer Seminar and I can guarantee you that I need as much practice as anyone else.

All of us especially need practice around the topic of cognitive biases that get activated or exaggerated in contexts of social injustice and inequity (which in turn reinforce social injustice and inequity!)

Anxiety and compassion

One of the main ideas that I want you to take away from my presentation is the importance of compassion for yourself and others as you do this work.

Cognitive biases arise when we have to make decisions under conditions of uncertainty (i.e. most of the time) and these biases are exacerbated by stress and anxiety.

Doing work on Difference, Power, and Discrimination is stressful and anxiety-making!

You will find yourself having any number of biases activated while you study this stressful material (as will your students when you teach this material).

In your classes when you address this material, you and your students might start with some breathing and I have a helpful breathing prompt linked in my script.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5f5N6YFjvVc

You won’t get rid of all your stress with 30 seconds of breathing, but you might at least identify where your stressors and anxieties are hiding out.

And you can welcome them as features of yourself that deserve compassion and understanding.
Cognitive Biases: 3 main points for this presentation
1. What cognitive biases are and why they arise
2. Examples of cognitive biases related to structural and institutional injustice
   - stereotype biases
   - confirmation biases
   - attribution biases (especially the Fundamental Attribution Error or FAE)
3. How to combat cognitive biases and why it’s so challenging (which brings us back to the compassion part again)

1. What cognitive biases are and why they arise
   - Recall that biases are cognitive habits that humans use to make decisions under conditions of uncertainty
   - It is best to think of cognitive biases as habits of mind that arise naturally based on social learning
   - We have an enormous amount of data available to us at any one time, and in order to make sense of any of it, we must first ignore much of it
   - And that data that we do attend to, we learn very early on to chunk into categories or patterns for easier and quicker processing
   - If we don’t chunk up the world into patterns, everything is a wild mess of data
   - Language learning is essentially chunking data into patterns of linguistic categories
   - Identifying which “One of these things is not like the other” is an important habit of mind that kids learn from Sesame Street
   - These habits can lead to errors
   - Some of the errors are harmless and some are harmful
   - We need to practice recognizing when we are deploying a habit of mind so we can check to see whether any errors that result from the habit are likely to lead to a harmless or a harmful effect
   - For example, we develop habits of mind about the causal properties of mass and acceleration that keep us from running in front of moving vehicles, any moving vehicle
   - We seldom have a chance to calculate the mass of the vehicle, we just quickly learn to jump out of the way of anything that moves on the road
   - This habit of mind keeps us safe, even when we over-react or over-generalize the habit
   - The mistakes it leads to are relatively harmless
   - Other habits of mind lead to mistakes that are more harmful
   - For example, we see patterns where there aren’t any
   - We buy lottery tickets because the advertising highlights the single winner rather than the millions of losers, so we form a habit of mind that buying a ticket leads to winning rather than losing
   - We develop habits of mind biased towards confirming instances, towards instances that serve our interests
   - We resist information that is true if it conflicts with centrally-held beliefs
   - In most cases, even though we have a lot of mistaken habits of mind we get by
   - We collect JUST enough data to learn patterns that keep us from being hit by cars
but we are otherwise less than ideal data collectors
I am fond of the work of Tamar Gendler, a Jewish American philosopher who offers a clear exposition of cognitive biases and the energy required to circumvent them – note the empathy and understanding of her presentation:

[Cognitive biases] are tools used by finite minds to operate effectively in an overwhelmingly complex environment. Cognizing entities in ways that involve classifying them as members of larger collections solves two problems simultaneously. On the one hand, it allows us to navigate a world whose complexity exceeds our cognitive capacities: the world is complicated, our cognitive resources are limited, and classifying objects into groups allows us to proceed effectively in an environment teeming with overwhelming detail. On the other hand, it allows us to navigate a world where in any given encounter, an object presents us with only a few of its potentially relevant features (Gendler, 2011, “On the epistemic cost of implicit bias.” Philosophical Studies 156: 38-39).

Being human is hard; navigating the world is hard
Have some compassion as you research and recognize cognitive biases in yourself

2. Examples of cognitive biases related to structural and institutional injustice
Our capacity for biased thinking is enormous, and the literature on cognitive biases is similarly vast
I find Benson’s cognitive bias “cheat sheet” to be a helpful guide and I’ve included it at the end of this script
He organizes over 100 cognitive biases into four main contexts, according to the conditions under which those biased habits of mind are primed:
- When we have too much information
- When we do not have access to enough meaning or context
- When we need to make decisions quickly
- When we need to remember data easily
Many biases fall into more than one of these categories
And not all of them contribute to social injustice
But many of them do
We’ll focus first on stereotype biases which are examples of biased habits of mind that form in settings where we don’t have enough meaning or context, so we fill in gaps
We develop stereotypes based on the feature that all the things in the category or type must share to qualify for membership in the category
Having in mind a stereotype helps us quickly sort new items into the right group, even or especially when we have incomplete information about the new items
Stereotyping has the effect of minimizing between group similarities and maximizing within group similarities
When our stereotypes are about people, formed in the contexts of systematic and structural injustice, based on arbitrary embodied markers such as sex, race, or economic status, then things go badly quickly
In the contemporary US, if we think someone’s a woman, we (all of us) deploy habits of mind about how she will act, based solely on stereotypical features of the group within which we have sorted her.

A reminder here that “us” is everyone.

Because we have all internalized these biases, everyone has them, even folks who are subjects of that bias.

I share with students a story about the first time I heard a woman’s voice come over the PA of a commercial airliner introducing herself not as the flight attendant who would be bringing beverages around once we reached cruising altitude, but as the captain announcing that we had reached cruising altitude.

My gut reaction was terror.

Because obviously women can’t be pilots and we were all going to die.

Did I say I was on my way to a feminist philosophy conference when this happened? Gah!

I just like everyone else have internalized a bias against the technical competence of women.

In the contemporary US, we have stereotyped habits of mind around race, gender, and economic status, for example, that we draw in to our causal explanations, when those stereotypes are not in fact doing the causal work.

Or weirdly, the stereotypes can become causal but not in the way we think.

We have no good research that shows that someone’s being a woman causes them to be good at being a primary caregiver of children.

But because we live in a society organized around certain sexist stereotypes, we discourage men from being primary caregivers, and over-reward women for being primary caregivers.

And then a gendered pattern of parenting starts to form.

But only because we’ve created it and reinforced it structurally in our institutions of education, and employment.

Which feeds back into the stereotype! When you get a chance, have a look at the rejection letter that a woman applicant received from the Oregon State School of Forestry in 1957 that makes some of these reinforcing structures clear.

(And thank you to Anne Gillies from the OSU Search Advocate Program for sharing the letter with me! I’ve attached the letter to the end of my script.)

Once you have a look at the letter it becomes clear that just because someone is a woman doesn’t cause them to be inappropriate as candidates for acceptance in the School of Forestry at Oregon State.

But the School of Forestry at Oregon State and all of us created structural conditions that linked her gender to her abilities to succeed in Forestry.

I have a powerful example in a short video clip concerning gender stereotypes about employment that are activated even in very young children that I hope you can watch.

It’s from the UK in 2016 and I’ve got the link in the script:

http://www.campaignlive.co.uk/article/gender-stereotyping-laid-bare-childrens-drawings-charity-campaign/1387345

Stereotype biases are encouraged by confirmation biases.
Confirmation biases arise when we have too much information and can attend to some of it but not all of it

So we attend to the data that fits a pattern that we already expect to see

These conditions also produce attribution biases which can also can lead to, and be reinforced by, structural injustice

The Fundamental Attribution Error for example, involves the tendency when offering causal explanations for other people’s behaviors, to over-attribute the causal role of personality traits and dispositions, over which individuals are thought to exert some control, while downplaying situational, contextual, and sometimes structural explanations understood to be beyond individual control

The flip-side of the Fundamental Attribution Error is the Self-Serving bias.

Especially when explaining the causes of negative outcomes in our own lives, we over attribute external forces beyond our control; when explaining our successes we over-attribute internal forces within our control

For example, if we’re explaining why someone else did poorly on a test, we are likely to think first that maybe they didn’t study hard enough, we attribute their failure to something they can control

When WE do poorly on a test, we typically appeal to things beyond our control

We attribute our failure to the poor preparation we were given by the teacher

Attribution errors reinforce and are reinforced by “Just World” biases, revealing of our need to believe that the world is a rational place where people get what they deserve

These biases can lead to victim-blaming

In his speech from 1968 “The Other America” King mentions an example of the FAE when he notes the difference in language we use in describing Black and white communities in poverty

When it’s Black communities, it’s a social problem related to something about the work ethic of Black people

When it’s white communities in poverty it’s an economic depression over which white people are presumed to have no control

(The speech is available here: http://www.gphistorical.org/mlk/mlkspeech/mlk-gp-speech.pdf)

To assume that Black folks could just pull themselves out of poverty if only they worked hard enough, is an example of the FAE because there are broader structural patterns at work over which Black people often have little or no control

If you have time I have a video available, reminding us how children of color from poor neighborhoods and white children from wealthy suburbs have very different access to quality K-12 education (here’s a short clip: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1kFwE89hR-4&list=PLU0IIaUNbsgKAGzzADFgGR9RjarDE1zz&index=10&t=0s)

As you probably know, in the US, schools are still funded primarily through property taxes

So kids who live in poor neighborhoods where there is no wealth to tax, are forced to attend schools that are underfunded
If you have students performing at different levels in your university classes, and you are looking for an explanation, take care not to follow the habit of mind that leads you to make the fundamental attribution error.

You don’t know what kind of external forces were at work keeping your students from being equally prepared for university-level work.

I never tire of watching a Comedy Central special from 2000 by Latino comedian Greg Giraldo who does a bit on homelessness and the fundamental attribution error that I hope you can watch (NSFW) [http://www.cc.com/video-clips/a68x3t/comedy-central](http://www.cc.com/video-clips/a68x3t/comedy-central).

He begins by explaining the homeless man’s plight in terms of laziness (an internal disposition), but then draws our attention to the fact that the homeless man might be mentally ill (something beyond the man’s control).

Remember that these individual cognitive biases such as the Fundamental Attribution Error scale up, contribute to, and are reinforced by massive structural injustices based on racism and sexism, and the intersection of these, as well as others systems of oppression based on economic class, disability, and sexual orientation.

These systems of injustice are based on identity abstractions – no one is ever just a woman, or just a white person, or just a homeless person.

We need these abstractions to analyze the unjust social forces at work, but we also need to remember that we have artificially abstracted these identities out from a myriad of details about the individuals involved – more cognitive shortcuts – and we have to be careful not to reify the abstractions.

So when these individual cognitive biases, these habits of mind, are about people, formed in the contexts of systematic and structural injustice, the biases can scale up and reinforce the structural and institutional inequities, which in turn reinforce the biases!

3. **How to combat cognitive biases and why it’s so challenging (which brings us back to the compassion part again)**

Our habits of mind often function implicitly.

Sometimes our cognitive biases lead to explicit and negative attributions.

But some of the most pernicious biases are those we are so habituated to that we are often not even aware that we are using them.

There are a number of online “Implicit Bias” tests you can take to test whether you have some of these more pernicious habits of mind.

The last time I took one of these tests, I got a typical result: “Your data suggest a strong automatic association between Weapons and African American faces compared to European American faces”.

It is worth noting and not surprising that in the US, Black folks are just as likely to get this result on tests of implicit bias as are white folks.

Of course, while the results are often equivalent for Black and white folks, the societal implications are not.

We must also be careful not to take the unconscious element of these biases to mean we are not responsible for working against them, especially those of us who benefit from the structural injustices that these biases both produce and perpetuate.
Too often, discussions of implicit or unconscious biases end with their detection, as if having detected the biases in ourselves, we feel our work is done.

In fact it has just begun

So what is the work?

Just as wisdom and peace are not things you have but things you practice

So too, racism, sexism and other cognitive biases are learned habits that we practice.

They are not features of our identity but a set of habits we can unlearn.

But the unlearning is challenging.

In the words of Black American poet Scott Woods:

While I agree with people who say no one is born racist, it remains a powerful system that we’re immediately born into. It’s like being born into air: you take it in as soon as you breathe. It’s not a cold that you can get over. There is no anti-racist certification class. It’s a set of socioeconomic traps and cultural values that are fired up every time we interact with the world. It is a thing you have to keep scooping out of the boat of your life to keep from drowning in it. (Excerpted from a 2020 essay published here https://www.columbusalive.com/news/20200603/other-columbus-anti-racism-work-is-supposed-to-be-hard)

Returning to Tamar Gendler’s work, while I don’t endorse all of her conclusions, her main lesson is well-taken and worth emphasizing:

• If we are trying to learn about and work around our biases, then this is going to cost us in terms of cognitive energy.

Because for those of us who want to work against our learned stereotypes, we still know what those stereotypes are and they get primed and reinforced every time we try to work against them.

Remember that stereotypes function (at least partially) as cognitive shortcuts.

Avoiding those cognitive shortcuts means taking longer cognitive routes.

Which takes brain energy or computational power.

Literally it takes glucose.

So the good news is that unlearning cognitive biases is helped by good chocolate.

But also sleep, a good team, trust, lots of practice with folks who work from different biases than yours, and compassion.

And of course unlearning our deeply habituated biases is only part of the work of social justice.

We must also work to dismantle structural and institutional injustice in whatever ways we can, whether that involves marching in support of the Movement for Black Lives, joining our local Corvallis/Albany NAACP, or donating to our local homeless shelters that are particularly imperiled during the pandemic.

And most importantly, teaching students at Oregon State University about the forces of Difference, Power, and Discrimination that order our cognitive, emotional, and material worlds.

You are all teachers.

I am confident you are up for the challenge and grateful that you are here.

Thank you! 

Shari Clough, July 2020
OREGON STATE COLLEGE
SCHOOL OF FORESTRY
CORVALLIS, OREGON

March 21, 1957

Dear Miss ________,

This will acknowledge receipt of your letter of March 11. We have never in the past had a girl enrolled in the School of Forestry and for specific reasons.

First of all, the number of jobs that are available for a woman in forestry are limited entirely to clerical type of jobs for which a background in forestry would not be necessary. Secondary, the requirements in specific courses in the School of Forestry curriculum are such that it would pose a definite problem as far as a girl is concerned. In many instances the students are required to go out on day-long and weekend field trips where they share the same eating and sleeping facilities. You can readily see the problem involved here. Last, we require that a student complete six months of satisfactory experience in the field of forestry and we do not accept two years as a forest lookout which is the only temporary job currently available to women in the type of employment that we would accept as fulfilling the requirement.

I hope that the above information will help answer your questions. I am sorry that the enclosed information may not probably be completely to your liking but you can readily see some of the difficulties involved.

Very truly yours,

__________________________
Personnel Director