Uncovering the Bias Within: Explicit and Implicit Bias in Spiritual Direction
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Four years ago, I participated in a diversity training workshop for higher-education professionals that focused on the topics of stereotypes and biases through the Center for Diversity and Inclusion at Xavier University in Cincinnati, Ohio, USA. It is important to distinguish between the terms stereotype and bias, which are closely related yet different. A stereotype is “an over-generalized belief about a particular category of people” (Cardwell), whereas a bias refers to “a tendency, inclination, or prejudice toward or against something or someone” (“Bias”). For instance, a person can hold a stereotype that all men are stoic and unemotional. This overgeneralized belief or idea can result in a bias and can affect how a person perceives men in daily interactions.

During the first part of the workshop, I was invited to consider how I have directly been affected by stereotypes and biases. As a white, cisgender, heterosexual, middle-class, Catholic, able-bodied male in his early thirties living in the United States, I was able to come up with multiple examples of times when I believe I was directly affected by stereotypes and biases. As you might guess from my demographics and social identities, the majority of these situations involved stereotypes and biases that can be labeled positive and favorable. For example, I am regularly asked to help carry a heavy object while a woman who is available and fully capable of carrying the same object stands in close proximity. Moreover, as a campus minister working at a Jesuit, Catholic university, Catholic students often instill trust in me because they assume that I hold certain religious, social, and political beliefs since I am a member of the Catholic Church. Although these examples may appear to be simple and inconsequential, there often exist unearned benefits in such favorable stereotypes and biases that favor me over another person due to one or more parts of my identity.

Along with positive stereotypes and biases, I also came up with a small handful of situations when I encountered a negative and unfavorable stereotype or bias. The stereotype or bias in these situations was usually associated with my male or Catholic identity. One lighthearted example is that people have expressed surprise and disbelief when they learn that I as a man baked the pumpkin bread they just consumed at a potluck gathering. An example that is far more upsetting to me is that I have been asked whether I as a Catholic have an aversion to persons who identify on the LGBTQUI+ spectrum. Although I sporadically encounter unfavorable stereotypes and biases, these situations are so few and far between that the lasting impact is limited at most.

Aware of how the use of stereotypes and biases by others has affected me, I was next invited by the workshop facilitator to honestly consider stereotypes and biases that I hold. The few minutes that I sat in reflection were humbling. Various negative stereotypes surfaced in my mind that I firmly believe are not true, and yet they continue to exist in my mind. Several of these stereotypes and biases concern women and persons of color. I feel shame when I state this even though I know that these stereotypes and biases developed over many years and that they were formed as a result of my socialization process. I also know that it is commonly held by social psychologists that stereo-
types and biases are never fully removed from the psyche (Kanter and Rosen). Therefore, I need to honestly and vulnerably acknowledge and bring to awareness these stereotypes in order to ensure that I do not consciously act on them. This is especially critical in my professional and ministerial role as a university campus minister. Working with undergraduate students as a campus minister places me in a mentorship position. Therefore, my words and actions affect the minds and hearts of young adults during a period of time when significant intellectual and spiritual growth occurs.

While the workshop was intended to address the dangers of stereotypes and biases in a higher-education professional setting, the reflection process of identifying stereotypes and biases in my life provoked me to ponder the effects of stereotypes and biases in my role as a spiritual director. The formal spiritual direction training program that I completed ten years ago did include sessions on the importance of understanding the frame of reference that one brings to spiritual direction as a spiritual director. Through reading articles and class conversation, I became more aware of how my frame of reference, which includes my stereotypes and biases, can hinder my ability to be present to a person and to the Divine during spiritual direction. In addition, I learned that my frame of reference is complex and has been formed from a multitude of experiences over the course of my lifetime.

The significance of identifying and understanding frames of reference in spiritual direction is depicted by Anne Luther, who writes, “It is important to begin to name the discrepancies, to sort through, name, and clarify our own frames of reference, our underlying assumptions. In this process, we are often able to see for ourselves our own inner contradictions, and with time and God’s grace to let go of those which stand in the way of our inner freedom” (Luther, 11). Here, Luther explains that along with naming the limitations of one’s frame of reference, a spiritual director must also open oneself and trust that the Divine also plays an active role in the reshaping of a person’s frame of reference. Margaret Guenther’s analogy of cleaning one’s house in order to be present and prepared to welcome another in spiritual direction adds further insight to this reshaping. She writes, “The first task is one of housecleaning, of creating our own inner order. We must know ourselves well, both our dark corners and our airless places—the spots where dust collects and mold begins to grow. It is not enough to push the rubbish into the closet and shut the door, nor to lower blinds and dim the lights so that the dirt doesn’t show, although these are tempting tricks for harried caretakers of houses and souls. No, we must clean our house, and then keep cleaning it so that we have a worthy place when we invite others to rest and refreshment” (Guenther, 11). Guenther suggests that reshaping a frame of reference is an active and ongoing process. She also emphasizes the risk of ignoring and avoiding the work this process involves.

A time when a stereotype that is a part of my frame of reference influenced my ability to sit with a spiritual directee is when I met with a Catholic religious sister named Diane six years ago. When listening to Diane share that she experienced difficulty with her prayer life, a bias kicked in and I quickly jumped to a stereotype based on a small number of previous experiences of praying with Catholic religious sisters. The stereotype is that since Diane is a member of a Catholic religious order, her prayer experience is limited to traditional Catholic rote prayers. With this stereotype, a bias that I hold kicked in that such forms of prayer are inadequate and can limit one’s ability to encounter
the Divine. Therefore, before even allowing Diane to speak to the ways that she prays and to speak more to her challenges, I had already made a conclusion as to why she was having difficulty praying. In this situation, the key was for me to notice this train of thought, set it aside, and return to being present to Diane so that I could again attentively listen. Moreover, after meeting with Diane, I spent time in reflection in order to consider how I might challenge this bias so that it would not interfere with our future meetings. During this reflection, I recalled the many Catholic religious sisters who have taught me various ways to pray that I find valuable. Some of the prayer practices that I learned from Catholic religious sisters originate in the Catholic tradition, and some originate in non-Catholic Christian traditions as well as non-Christian faith traditions. This recollection helped me to counter the stereotype and set aside the bias so that I could be more present to Diane the next time we met.

Luther and Guenther speak well to the interior work necessary for a spiritual director’s continued development and ability to be present in spiritual direction. Likewise, my formal spiritual direction training instilled in me the significance of noticing how my frame of reference can interfere with how I sit with a person. Specifically, my training focused on examining my frame of reference in regard to spiritual and religious matters such as the situation I encountered when meeting with Diane. Therefore, it has been my responsibility as a spiritual director to examine numerous other factors that contribute to my frame of reference. Included in these factors are the assortment of stereotypes and biases that I hold, and these stereotypes and biases extend beyond those associated with one’s spiritual and religious frame of reference. They involve but are not limited to gender, sexual orientation, age, social class, ethnicity, disabilities, gender identity, and race. While this examination process is difficult, Guenther reminds me that as a spiritual director I must continue cleaning on a regular basis so that I might help create an adequate inner space to welcome a spiritual directee.

The housecleaning that Guenther alludes to becomes even more difficult and complicated when we do not see the collecting of dust and the growing of mold in the dark corners of our inner rooms. Thus far, the biases discussed refer to those that a person can consciously identify and is therefore aware of. These biases are called explicit biases. An explicit bias “refers to the attitudes and beliefs we have about a person or group on a conscious level” (“Explicit Bias”). In dealing with an explicit bias, since the bias exists at a conscious level, a person can recognize the bias through introspection and make a conscious choice as to whether the bias will affect his attitude and action. As a result, when sitting with a person in spiritual direction, a spiritual director is able to notice when an explicit bias surfaces. A spiritual director recognizes that the bias threatens to interfere with her ability to be present to the person before them and to the Divine. In such a situation, the spiritual director can consciously suspend any judgment attached to the bias in order to offer her full presence.

But what happens when there exists a bias in one of our inner rooms that we are not aware of and do not have immediate access to? This type of bias is called an implicit bias, which according to the Kirwan Institute at Ohio State University, “refers to the attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner” (“Understanding Implicit Bias”). Further, implicit biases “are activated
involuntarily and without an individual’s awareness or intentional control” (“Understanding Implicit Bias”). In contrast to explicit biases, since an implicit bias is unconscious, one cannot simply access implicit biases through introspection. In order to better understand implicit bias, the following key characteristics of implicit bias listed by the Kirwan Institute are helpful:

- Implicit biases are pervasive. Everyone possesses them, even people with avowed commitments to impartiality such as judges.
- Implicit and explicit biases are related but distinct mental constructs. They are not mutually exclusive and may even reinforce each other.
- The implicit associations we hold do not
necessarily align with our declared beliefs or even reflect stances we would explicitly endorse.

- We generally tend to hold implicit biases that favor our own in-group, though research has shown that we can still hold implicit biases against our in-group.
- Implicit biases are malleable. Our brains are incredibly complex, and the implicit associations that we have formed can be gradually unlearned through a variety of debiasing techniques. ("Understanding Implicit Bias")

While implicit bias can be challenging in spiritual direction due to its unconscious nature, the last point above explains that there are ways to proactively address one's implicit biases and decrease their effect. The work of diversity educators such as Sondra Thiederman highlights concrete ways to address implicit bias. In her short and easy-to-read book *Three Keys to Defeating Unconscious Bias*, Thiederman suggests that the three keys include watching, thinking, and acting. She advises: "Watch your thoughts, your past experiences, and your actions for signs of unconscious bias. Think about the people you know, about how you would feel were a bias directed at you, about your values, and about pausing long enough to get your bias out of the way. Act as if the bias doesn't exist, and to identify common ground" (Thiederman, 1). For spiritual directors, aspects of these three keys probably sound familiar and similar to practices learned in spiritual direction formation. For me, the practices of watching my thoughts and pausing before speaking stand out as fundamental teachings in spiritual direction. However, other aspects require more initiative and intention, and some aspects are not appropriate to practice in a spiritual direction relationship. For instance, acting to identify common ground requires that one intentionally interact and engage in conversation with a person whose identity coincides with the possible bias. This person clearly should not be the spiritual directee as such congenial conversation for the purpose of addressing one's implicit bias, even if outside of the direction relationship, would almost certainly violate the agreement between the spiritual director and spiritual directee and the ethical nature of a spiritual direction relationship. Consequently, spiritual directors must seek ways to uncover and address their implicit biases outside their role as spiritual director.

As a spiritual director, I believe there are general practices that are especially valuable if not necessary to honor and uphold the sacred ministry of spiritual direction. These practices include personal and communal prayer, meditation, and reflection; attending spiritual direction on a regular basis; and meeting with a peer supervision group or individual supervisor. Further, one can develop one's ability to serve as a spiritual director through a long list of continuing education opportunities like workshops, trainings, seminars, and conferences. These practices and ongoing education help a spiritual director tend to the inner rooms where the stuff of life builds up over time. Educating oneself on stereotypes, explicit bias, and implicit bias should be added to this list. Further, the work of intentionally integrating techniques to lessen the effects of explicit and implicit bias should also be added. Along with the references included in this article, the following questions and social identity wheel exercise may be useful for individual and group reflection on implicit bias and its affects in spiritual direction. Further, I recommend visiting Harvard University's Project
Implicit website and taking one or more Implicit Association Tests (https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html).

Social Identity Wheel

- After filling in the outer ring of the social identity wheel, write down responses to the four questions inside the ring.

Additional Questions for Reflection:

- What are the stereotypes and explicit biases that have affected you in your life? Which ones have people imposed on you? Which ones have you imposed on others?
- What is one stereotype that you hold that you most want to get rid of? Are there ways that this stereotype affects your thinking and actions? Explain.
- Identify a person who is or was especially difficult for you to meet with in spiritual direction. What do you find difficult about meeting with this person? Are there characteristics, traits, or social identities that stand out to you about this person? Do you believe there are negative explicit and implicit biases present in this relationship?
- Identify a person who you really enjoy or enjoyed meeting with in spiritual direction. What do you appreciate most about this person? Are there characteristics, traits, or social identities that stand out to you about this person? Are there positive implicit and explicit biases present in this relationship?
- What favorable and unfavorable stereotypes and biases do you hold about the Divine?
- Are there terms for the Divine that you have a positive or negative bias toward?
- What stereotypes and biases do you hold about your faith tradition? About other faith traditions?

References


