Pride and Prejudice

Why a little self-awareness goes a long way on the road to an inclusive society.

*It is a truth, not necessarily universally acknowledged, that we are born into prejudice, and search too little to question the values we defend.*

OK, it’s not quite the famous original literary opening, but does it ring true?

Since 1813, Jane Austen’s novel *Pride and Prejudice* has been a reminder of our tendency to hold prejudices. And today this remains a hot topic. Why? Because despite even the best of intentions, prejudices exist in our subconscious and are embedded in our cultures, and can surface as unthinking and discriminatory behaviour. It’s not surprising, as we all have comfort zones – ways of life and thinking that we are used to, and feel safe with. Read on for more about why it’s worth spending 10 minutes checking out our personal prejudices now and again with some simple exercises....

We all grow up with values and norms around us that we attach ourselves to unconsciously and consciously. And when we make choices or value judgments, we mostly do so in favour of what we feel familiar and comfortable with. To some extent, this means we all have our prejudices. When we come up against differences – for example cultural, physical, behavioural, spiritual, mental, sexual – and the basis on which we understand them is poorly informed, our prejudice is reinforced. When we’re faced with something different or opposite to what we know well and value, we can react automatically, defending our own particular way of life and view of the world.

We can examine what drives our own attitudes and behaviours by mapping out where these come from. This is a typical exercise in equality and diversity training because being self-aware is key to avoiding discrimination. To do it involves looking at values and beliefs held by people around us who’ve been important or influential in our lives and education. You can find out about training providers by going to our Training Page.

It can also be useful to imagine what we look like from the perspective of those who are different to us, or to see that ‘normal’ for me isn’t ‘normal’ from someone else’s point of view. It’s not something we routinely do, unless, for example, we find ourselves immersed outside of our own culture when visiting or living overseas. At first, it’s the locals who seem so unusual. Then we realise that it’s us who are out of the ordinary, and if we talk to our new neighbours about this, we discover how our own ‘norms’ look from another perspective. Then comes homesickness (missing what we feel safe with), followed by a growing appreciation of different ways of living and the diversity that makes up
the world. Eventually, with reflection, comes the recognition that it’s OK to value what we feel comfortable with – from not only our own but also other’s cultures – at the same time as valuing with interest, and living respectfully, alongside differences. But you don’t have to sell up and head for the sun to become aware of your prejudices. Just being a little self-reflective from time to time helps....

A simple way to start is to honestly check out your likes and dislikes with some **10 minute exercises** (useful for even the very self-aware!). Doing this occasionally keeps us alert to whatever it is we naturally lean in favour of, and away from, and more conscious of whether we operate in ways that put others at disadvantage. From a social exclusion point of view, it’s important to do this because when vulnerable people are discriminated against – intentionally or unintentionally – they are much more at risk of becoming trapped in cycles of disadvantage.

Another way to reduce prejudice is to *increase* what you know about groups who are vulnerable to discrimination, and to think what it may feel like to live in another person’s shoes. If you’d like to read some introductory notes on different forms of vulnerability to discrimination and disadvantage, look at the Resources Page and download Section 8 ‘[Experiences of excluded people](#)’.

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