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EDLE 878: Intercultural Competency

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**Reflective Activity #2**

**The Implicit Association Test**

*The Harvard Bias test*

A challenge of standardized behavioral tests, like the Implicit Association Test (IAT), is balancing the desire to pick the “right” answer – a form of gaming the process – with the ideals of honesty and authentic learning and engagement. This decision becomes more consequential when the test is assessing the generally unspoken, and often unseen, formal and non-formal learning (Almeida, 2017) that influences how we see others: specifically, our biases and prejudices. The IAT raises the visibility of our personal biases by calling forth our instincts through the accuracy and speed of our responses to stimuli. The psychology behind the test is simultaneously fascinating and uncomfortable, because the “decision” as alluded above – “right” answer or honest answer – is subtly removed; in a multiple choice test, I may be able to think through my responses to questions suggesting bias or prejudice, but a test calling on my quick physical reactions to words and pictures are not as well controlled. The result of this test’s methodology is increased accuracy and voice to the unspoken biases and prejudices we all hold to some degree. Once awareness is available, the unwinding of the bias can begin, beginning with an exploration of its beginnings.

One of the tests I completed was “gender-career,” which assesses a bias in associating males and females more closely with career or family. I assumed this test would not reveal any particular bias; I am a female professional, serve as a mentor for younger women carving out their careers, and whose mother worked as an X-ray technician in hospitals since I was in early elementary school. Further, I am responsible for housing, clothing, food, health insurance, and other necessities for my daughters. I have belonged to local and national Women Business Associations; focused intently on Gender and Development, particularly on expanding leadership opportunities for women and girls; and worked at the United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women. In other words, my conscious thinking and professional work has proactively promoted and supported the role of women in the workplace. Nevertheless, after completing the gender-career test, the concluding assessment indicated I have a “strong association” between males and career, and women and home. In other words, despite outward efforts, my instinctual bias still links women with home, and men with the office.

This conclusion was indeed disconcerting. As I reflected on this seeming incongruency, a few realizations arose. I first took a closer look at my childhood. I grew up in the 1970s and 1980s in a household with two working parents, both of whom were actively involved in my sister and I’s upbringing. However, my mom was the one who managed childcare duties and household responsibilities. I do not ever recall my dad scrubbing the oven or dusting the furniture; instead, he was outside mowing the lawn and taking out the garbage. Mom made dinner after a full work day, and dad turned on the evening news. When the title “Ms” rather than “Mrs” or “Miss” became an option, I distinctly recall my father disparaging the use of “Ms” as “ridiculous.” The notion that traditionally only men could retain a title without signifying their marital status did not occur to my father, just as the idea of a woman keeping her maiden name was not “normal.” My dad was (and is) a progressive and liberal-minded thinker who also revered institutions and honored norms of behavior; at the same time, the normalization of a more traditional role of women, despite dad encouraging me to “do whatever I wanted to” in life, inculcated within me a deep sense of expectation and assumption for my gender-based role. Years later in my relationships, this tension between career or family priorities continued. As a professional woman, I still have managed the household and family responsibilities regardless of the working status of my partner.

Recognizing this underlying bias in how I associate men and women with careers and home, respectively, means careful attention to how my unconscious behavior may be biased. For example, if I were to enter a classroom and observe a woman and a man having a conversation, would I assume the man is an administrator at the school and the women is the teacher? Or would I assume the woman is the parent talking with the male teacher? While my thoughtful actions may reject these biases, my immediate response remains conditioned to my early cultural upbringing, which invokes a strong association with the man in a career and the woman orientated toward home. The risk, according to

Santibanez-Gruber, Maiztegui-Onate, and Yarosh (2017) is that I would be “much more likely to focus on superficial aspects of other cultures" (p. 263) without confronting these embedded biases, because I cannot perceive others bias without first acknowledging and recognizing my own. If I am to counter my bias, defined as “the negative evaluation of one group relative to another” (p. 169), then I need to become conscious of my personal bias (Choi and Jakubec, 2017). Additionally, a bias is a reflection of an individual’s value system; as the bias or stereotype is realized, the possibility of revealing “deeper connections among underlying values” (p. 46) allows for intercultural analysis and reflection (Paracka and Pynn, 2017). The IAT facilitated this reflection, and pushes to examine values and how they show up unseen in our judgments and stereotypes.

Further, this bias plays out in our everyday descriptions of people; a comment similar to “Alice is the mother of two children and teaches at the high school; Henry is Vice-President at XYZ company and has a family” sounds natural to me. Beyond the stereotypical type of profession listed for each gender, the order of what characterizes the identity of Alice and Henry as described signifies a subtle bias. Why does it sound normal to describe Alice’s role as a mother first while Henry’s profession is his first descriptor? In schools, we reiterate these subtle messages we give our students when we ask Suzie to have her mother sign the school permission form, and talk with her dad about coaching the soccer team. In a brief request, the teacher emphasizes the role of mother as inside the home serving as homemaker, while father has a requested “job” outside. Underlying this bias is a power dynamic, but not necessarily explicit in whether an “Alice” or “Henry” hold the power. The American cultural history would point to men holding the power, meaning they define the “normal” roles; in other cultures, however, the women define the roles, which is noted in some aboriginal tribes such as the Navajo people (Kearl, 2006).

Upon reflection, I tacitly – unthinkingly – accept these biases despite the effort I seem to place on countering them. Ironically, if I am “countering” or “fighting” these biases, I am indicating these biases exist in my community, and by extension and a member of my community, exist within me as well. Therefore, it should not have been a surprise that my association with this bias was noted as “strong” – the issue is I didn’t recognize it.

Moving forward, there’s a lesson in humility embedded in this reflection. As someone who often prides myself in actively working to minimize and eventually remove biases and stereotypes, I realize my efforts are “an ongoing process rather than an outcome” (p. 170), according to Choi and Jakubec (2017) on intercultural competence. We all have blind spots. The challenge is not forgetting they exist, and responding thoughtfully and reflectively as they arise.

**References**

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Stephanie Mikulasek 11/9/20 10:57 PM

Please find my Reflective Activity attached. One note: I had originally intended to write on the "Our Universes" exhibit at the Museum of Native Americans, but sadly this exhibit is closed as I learned when I arrived there last Saturday.  (It appears the exhibit will not open for sometime.)  However, reading about the various treaties and different native peoples was fascinating; my brief mention of the Navajo people in this paper stems from a long interest in Native peoples and my visit to the Museum.

Feedback to Learner 11/10/20 12:45 PM

This is a superb paper, Stephanie -- I'm just so sorry you went to the museum to find the "Our Universes" exhibit closed!! I'll add this to my list of "crazy" list of 2020!!

Please see my notes and comments on the attached two documents.