



Prejudice: a preconceived opinion that is not based on reason or actual experience.

We all have prejudices, whether we want to or not, we make assumptions about the people we meet based on our own experiences of the world. If I were with you in person right now, I would have some preconceived ideas about all of you, just from the way you look. Equally, you would probably have some ideas about me. You might notice my tattoos and think I must be really cool, or you might think 'well it's not very professional is it, I'm not going to listen to what she has to say.' You might notice that I'm wearing a lanyard, and perhaps that gives more credibility to what I have to say, or perhaps you'd think I'm hiding behind my badge, and it makes me unapproachable. Or you might just think 'gosh I cannot concentrate on a word she's saying because all I can focus on is how bright that hair is' – you might have a point there, it's a brighter shade of ginger than I intended.

I don't want you to feel ashamed of those prejudices, because shame doesn't get us anywhere, but I don't want you to ignore them. Just keep hold of them for a moment, pop them to the side but be aware that they're there. Because I'm in a really privileged situation right now where I get to paint you the picture of me, that I want you to see.

So, hello, I'm Rona, it's lovely to meet you. I'm a Voice and Influence worker at Barnardo's. That means I get to work with young people from all over the UK, supporting them to do some really cool things like meeting with Ministers and MPs, and even once going to Downing Street. I'm doing a Masters in Youth work practice, research, and leadership and I have an essay due today that I have not finished. I'm currently in Chesterfield where my partner and stepdaughters live, working in her spare room, and I'm probably going to be working on that essay when she gets home later. Now you might be assuming I'm pretty busy, I probably stretch myself too thin, and I'm definitely a bit unorganised, but also that I really enjoy my job and I'm driven to be the best practitioner I can be.

Unfortunately, the young people we all work with often don't get the chance to be the first person to paint us a picture of who they are. As professionals, we often learn about them from someone else's perception of them – whether that's from a conversation with another professional, a referral form, case files, or a risk assessment. You might read words like 'avoidant,' 'hard to engage,' 'out of control' or 'manipulative.' These words paint us all a picture of them that puts them in a pretty bad light before they've even said hello.

I grew up in the care system, and all of those words are direct quotes from documents that professionals wrote about me when I was a young person. Now, I know we were all probably a bit on the wild side as teenagers, but I can honestly say I don't think I've ever met a young person who warranted being stuck with such powerfully negative labels at a time in their life when they're probably only just working out who they are and who they're going to be.

So, you know earlier when I said I love my job? I think one of the many reasons for that is the way we get to work with young people. When a new young person signs up to work with us, it's because they have chosen to, and all we know about them in the beginning is as much as they want to share with us. Sometimes, that's just a name. There's not all that much you can assume from a name so the young people we work with hold the power to be whoever they want to be in our eyes, and I think that's more important than we realise.

If we consider power, young people already come to us from a point of disadvantage, and there are several academics who believe this power imbalance is the reason for inequality. So, if we can empower the young people we work with, give them the chance that I've had here, to paint us a picture of them without anything else colouring that view, they are already at a better starting point. And I know it's not always possible - those referral forms and risk assessments are there for a reason - but perhaps next time you read one, you could take it with a pinch of salt. Take those assumptions, and just put them to the side until the young person themselves has had a chance to show you who they really are, just like I was fortunate enough to be able to do here.