

Cyberwork

Unconscious bias

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How does unconscious bias impact on online therapy? How aware am I of unconscious bias when working online?

Does the anonymity and disinhibition of working via non-visual media, in particular, hinder my openness to recognising and challenging my own unconscious biases? As I prepare for a new cohort of clients accessing the counselling service, these are questions that I have been asking myself.

I work with students from varied backgrounds and countries; some with more explicit differences from me in terms of gender, age, race, religion and language. With other students, our diversities may be more subtle and unrecognised by either one or both of us, such as our sexuality, beliefs and values.

By its very definition, unconscious bias is unknown to us. Unconscious bias may be unknown to us and others, or unknown to us while observed and known by others. So, how do we mitigate against our unconscious bias impacting detrimentally on our online client relationships, and how do we strive to turn our unknowns into knowns?

Working online can be a positive environment for clients who are familiar with discrimination, but this does not mean that the therapist leaves behind their prejudices and biases in the real world when logging on. Not 'seeing' the client can indeed lead to an element of stepping back from some of those initial impressions and prejudices that we all make when

encountering someone in person for the first time. However, it also means that we need to pay more attention to the more subtle ways that our prejudices may be triggered and how unconscious bias can influence how we relate to our clients.

What image do I begin to create as I 'talk' to my client via Instant Messaging? How am I picturing my client's life as I read their email? How much am I simplifying my client's life into neatly labelled boxes? How are these labels and boxes influencing my responses? And, how far or close to their reality are my concepts of them? For they *are* mine and may bear little resemblance to my client's perceived existence.

Part of being human is to want to make sense of the world around us through understanding what label, box or category someone fits into. Seeing everyone as entirely unique, different and individual will quickly exhaust and overwhelm us. So, classifying someone can be helpful;

to a degree. When considering how I catalogue and distinguish individuals who come into my world, I must comprehend that I am doing so from the perspective of being a white, middle-class, middle-aged, Western woman; with all the privilege, cultural experiences, prejudices and bias that are connected and which shape my position in the world. When trying to understand the impact of discrimination on our therapeutic relationships, we have to be open to hearing how the uniqueness of that individual's life interconnects within them, and with the people they encounter every day, including us.

How do I strive to meet, understand and accept my client online, when my own biases are partly unconscious? I need to be open to identifying, reflecting upon and challenging my assumptions and responses. Why am I treading so carefully around this client, when with another I am more forthright and focused? I have no visual information, yet a part of me is reacting to what I am perceiving and judging to be my client's experience and feelings.

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It can be easy to naively view working online as evening out the playing field between therapist and client; reducing the power imbalance and increasing the ability to connect. However, held guilelessly, this view can lead the therapist to turn down the sensitivity level of their diversity radar and miss the clues that may bring their unconscious

bias into the known. Keeping attuned to your responses to the phrasing, terminology and grammar a client uses, is vital to be able to bring to the conscious our biases and to confront how they may be hindering or sustaining the growth of the therapeutic relationship. ●

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