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| Speak Up- KōrerotiaUnconscious bias18 September 2019 |
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| Female | Coming up next conversations on human rights with “Speak Up” – “Kōrerotia”, here on Plains FM. |
| Sally | E ngā mana, E ngā reo, E ngā hau e whāTēnā koutou katoaNau mai ki tēnei hōtaka: “Speak Up” – “Kōrerotia”. Tune in as our guests “Speak Up”, sharing their unique and powerful experiences and opinions and may you also be inspired to “Speak Up” when the moment is right.Nau mai ki te hōtaka, ki te hōtaka tika tangata “Speak Up” - “Kōrerotia”. I’m your host, Sally Carlton. We’re going to be talking about unconscious - sometimes called implicit - bias today, particularly as it relates to race. And this show is the first of two shows that will complement each other: Today we are going to be setting the groundwork, discussing questions like, “What is unconscious bias?” “How does it play out?” “How might it be recognised and eventually managed?”, and then our second show will focus specifically on examining unconscious bias here in Aotearoa. Here to talk us through the concept of unconscious bias is Dr. Benjamin Reese Jr. It’s amazing that you’ve taken the time to come and talk to us; you have a hugely impressive biography. Just some roles I’ve selected from your very long list: You were the Vice President of Institutional Equity at Duke University and the Head of the Duke University Hospital System. You’ve just informed me you have recently stepped down from those positions because you are asked to speak too much around the world and across the US on this topic of unconscious bias. You’ve had almost 50 years in this space so thank you so much for coming in and taking the time, on your visit to Christchurch, to come and talk.   |
| Ben | Sure, it’s wonderful to be here.  |
| Sally  | I thought to start us off - I imagine it’s not something that is an easy question - but what is unconscious bias? |
| Ben | Yes and that’s kind of a basic question I get asked all the time. At the highest level, it’s a kind of tendency that we have as humans in the way we respond. So we all have a tendency to respond one way or another, so at the highest level it’s a tendency or inclination. It’s different from prejudice, prejudice is more an opinion that one has about a person or a group and so when I think about bias and prejudice, they’re really overlapping concepts but bias is really this tendency we have as humans.  |
| Sally | What we’re talking about today is this idea of unconscious or implicit bias, how does that differ from a bias that is conscious or recognised or explicit? |
| Ben | So if you think about bias being a kind of tendency - explicit bias is a tendency, a set of attitudes that we have that we are aware of - you might be aware of the way you feel about men, or women, or Chinese people, or Americans, you might have a sense of where it comes from, you might talk about it or be aware of what you are saying because you believe it. As opposed to unconscious bias where well-meaning, sensitive, caring, loving people might feel that they are saying things that are equitable and fair but they may be conveying beliefs and attitudes that are more negative but they are unaware of them, they’re unconscious. It’s challenging because well-meaning people like you and I might be having a conversation with someone and the way we’re having the conversation, how close we stand to someone, the kind of beliefs that we convey maybe out of our awareness but they may be more negative than what we believe. Unconscious bias has greater importance, I think, in the world where we live in because a lot of people would like to think that we’re further along in fairness and equity around gender and race - and in a sense we are - but implicit unconscious bias is powerful because it really contributes and shapes the way we communicate with people, the way we value them or not.  |
| Sally | Is this to do with education? I’m just thinking, when you’re talking about standing too close to someone, and I’m thinking specifically around people who mean well and go to shake the hand of a Muslim woman for example, and for a Muslim woman that might not be appropriate. But if someone doesn’t know that they assume they are doing the right thing.  |
| Ben | That sort of bridges the gap between lack of knowledge of the norms in that culture and it could be some unconscious bias.  |
| Sally | Do we all have unconscious bias? |
| Ben | Oh we do, we do. It’s the way we are constructed as people. In cavepeople days you had to respond immediately to something you thought was dangerous or not, an animal or somebody else. You couldn’t think about it, you couldn’t reflect or analyse it, you just… you saw it, you heard it, you responded. So we believe that kind of human tendency goes back to cavepeople days so that all humans around the world have this tendency to be unconsciously biased; it’s sort of built into people.  |
| Sally | One thing that I found very interesting, doing some research to prepare some questions for you, is there’s a whole heap of types of unconscious bias. If you could maybe explain some of them and explain the differences.  |
| Ben | Now they overlap. One of the ones I find most powerful because I can recognise it myself is what we call confirmation bias. So we gravitate towards things that confirm the beliefs that we have, and the way it shows up is we read things that just confirm what we believe. We only look at websites that confirm things that we believe, we read books that confirm things we believe and this confirmation bias makes it hard for us as humans to understand different viewpoints and so as hard as I try personally to look at websites, to read articles about very different opinion, a viewpoint - it’s hard and so I just keep on confirming the belief that I have.  |
| Sally | I can think of a really good example of that: Brexit. I was absolutely convinced it wouldn’t happen. But I think that’s because the types of people I am friends with on Facebook, the types of articles I read…  |
| Ben | That’s it. The halo effect is another kind of bias and this is where someone might say something or do something, once you give them the positive halo then anything they say… you don’t judge it, you don’t analyse it and so that’s a kind of bias. You can think of having a positive feeling about a politician - once you have that, anything they say, you think positively about it. So those are some of the different kinds of biases but even those categories often overlap because we’re complex people.  |
| Sally | Those two types of bias that you’ve mentioned, the halo effect and confirmation bias, I guess could be perceived as quite positive, you’re inclined to think positively about something. Are there some types of unconscious bias that have a more negative feel to them?  |
| Ben | A lot of the focus is on the negative biases but you’re right, there are some quick instantaneous responses that can be positive. If you think of an ambulance driver - you get a call, you drive your ambulance, it’s an emergency, you run into a house, you see someone bleeding or whatever, you respond immediately, you don’t think about it etc. then that’s a positive way of thinking about bias. But if you think of interviewing someone - as soon as they walk in the room you have an immediate response, immediate assessment depending on their height, weight, complexion etc. and that’s very negative. So a lot of the attention given to unconscious or implicit bias is really on the negative implications of it. I think that’s appropriate because unconscious bias can and does impact the way we make judgements, the way we think about people, who we hire, who we become friends with, who we think is valuable, who we think is not valuable. Researchers suggest that a very small part of our response to people is rational, is the result of careful analysis. The larger portion of our response is this mushy stuff that is unconscious bias, the stuff that goes on in our head that we are not aware of. That’s the great portion that contributes to our response.  |
| Sally | So this unconscious bias is affecting our decision making.  |
| Ben | Oh yes.  |
| Sally | Interesting and very powerful.  |
| Ben | Oh very powerful and I often describe it that way. It’s subtle but very powerful.  |
| Sally | One of the types of unconscious bias that I found really interesting was one called ‘group think,’ which is basically this idea that you might subdue various elements of your own personality or how you would be inclined to act because you want to try and fit in with a group.  |
| Ben | The human tendency is to want to connect with other human beings so group think can be a real powerful form of bias because we all want to feel like we’re part of some group, that we’re not alone because the human tendency is to move away from being alone, being isolated. So the real power of group think is we cannot reflect and rationally analyse the situation and just be part of the group. If you have a search committee, you’re trying to fill an important job, you might have ten people on this committee - if you go around the room or if you just ask people for their opinion, the person who is most outgoing tends to speak first, she or he will make some assessment. The tendency is for the next person to respond in a similar way and those people in a group who might be more introverted have a tendency to speak last and will end up speaking after a number of people have presented one viewpoint and they can slip into group think. So one of the strategies often is a candidate for a job presents themselves, and then everybody writes down some notes individually before anyone says anything. So even if you do have a discussion, you also have this individual… |
| Sally | What was crossing my mind when you were speaking then was a jury and trying to come to a decision and if those most…. |
| Ben | You got it! |
| Sally | …extroverted people are going to be having an opinion, guilty or not. |
| Ben | There is a lot of work done around juries and implicit bias, both jury selection as well as the way jury operates. So some of the consulting work I’ve done, a bit of it has been with attorneys because much of what they do is not only applying the law but making judgements about people and particularly juries, they’re making judgements based upon not only what’s presented in the case but height, weight, complexion, accent etc. all of those things. When I think about juries it’s fertile ground for unconscious bias.  |
| Sally | Fascinating. And yet it’s supposed to be the best we’ve got.  |
| Ben | It’s supposed to be! But we know there’s clear data that juries will respond to all of these qualities in people. So attorneys know that well so when they select juries - they will select people carefully in terms of their background, their work, their political affiliation - because they know that that’s a powerful determinant of their judgement, their assessment.  |
| Sally | Just to shift tack slightly before we have our first pause: There’s a project that’s been done by Harvard called Project Implicit. It encourages people to take a test to gauge their implicit, unconscious bias - which has to be positive in that it’s getting people thinking about it - I presume there must also be some negatives as well but I’d like to hear your view on that.  |
| Ben | So it’s a powerful test developed by some colleagues of mine in the late 1990s and the theory is two things that are closely connected you respond to quicker than two things that are not as closely connected. So if someone says ‘flower’ and ‘soil,’ you have a quicker connection to that than if they say ‘flower’ and ‘pencil.’ So when you take the Implicit Association Test - which is an online test, you go to the website - they’ll show you pictures and words and they will instruct you to press keys on your keyboard as quickly as you can and when you see things that are connected or not. What the test seems to show is… For example, when they show you pictures of black faces and words that are positive or good, you have a slower connection, a slower response than when they show you white faces and things that are positive. So when you go to the website there’s a race test, there’s gender and career test, there’s a political test, sexual orientation test. Anyone can go to the website - you don’t put in your name but you put in demographic information - and you can take one or more of the tests which takes about 15 minutes. Then you get feedback, a kind of score about you tend to have a positive association between women and science. So the criticism is that the test doesn’t accurately describe implicit bias, it really describes someone’s knowledge of things that are going on socially in the environment. It’s not about bias. The other criticism is if you take the test a week later, two weeks later, three weeks later, you are likely to get a different response.  |
| Sally | Is that because you are aware of what you have been doing?  |
| Ben | Yes, partially yes. But the two powers I think of the test: One is, as you have indicated, when you get feedback it can stimulate you to think about, “Well, what might this association mean?” Here, for me, here I’m a black person and I get the test results back and I have a moderate preference for white people and things good, what might that mean? So I think it’s useful as a conversation starter. The other really interesting thing about it is when you do look at large groups of data for a whole school or whole community, a whole country, then you see some interesting trends and correlations and let me give you a couple. We know that when we give you the implicit association data for a country, those countries where there is a strong connection between men and science, those are the same countries where there’s a large gender gap in STEM [Science Technology Engineering Mathematics]. Those communities that show a strong racial bias against people who are black, they also are countries with communities where there’s a large disparity in health services in terms of white or black. So although the results of the Implicit Association Test for individuals has lots of criticism, when you look at large populations there’s some powerful results that correlate with other things in society. So that I think is an area of interesting power and usefulness of the Implicit Association Test.  |
| Sally | Thank you for giving us a really good rundown about it. We’re going to have our first break now and we’re going to listen to John Lennon’s ‘Imagine,’ which I thought tied in quite nicely with this idea of trying to recognise the world might be a bit different.  |
| Ben | Oh yes! |
|  | **MUSIC BY JOHN LENNON – IMAGINE** |
| Sally  | This is “Speak Up – Kōrerotia” and we’re talking today with Dr. Benjamin Reese Jr. about unconscious bias. What is it that fuels our unconscious bias? There will no doubt be limitless numbers of influences in our lives but if we could have a think about what some of those might be.  |
| Ben | First let me say a couple of things about how we think implicit bias first developed. So we know that infants have a tendency to respond in a certain way and I’ll give you an example. At about five or six months of age, we notice that infants will stare at female faces if a woman has been the primary caregiver. It’s not about any kind of bias but it’s the beginning of a kind of tendency/frequency/difference. And then a few months later, we note that infants will stare longer at faces that have the same or similar complexion as the primary caregiver. It’s not about race. Then later on, at about 11 or 12 months of age, infants will stare longer at faces that are speaking in the same or similar language as the primary caregiver. So we think that that’s a kind of foundation tendency. And then shortly thereafter when kids become four, five, six years old, unfortunately we see the beginning of kind of unconscious bias related to all of this stuff in the environment that kids are exposed to, certainly their parents and peers but things they see online, things they see in school, the books that they read etc. And they at a very early age begin to take in, almost like osmosis, this stuff in the environment about gender, race, sexual orientation, weight, height etc. So the process happens really very early. You will see young children who will have friends of all backgrounds and develop implicit biases, it’s almost a parallel process. It’s powerful how early we see the implicit biases develop.  |
| Sally | Does that mean there is no way of trying to change it?  |
| Ben | On a positive, optimistic side, certainly there’s value in children seeing parents that are having colleagues, friends, people over to the house, with different backgrounds. When they get older reading things online, being exposed to different things because children model after parents and other significant adults. Certainly being exposed to books etc. that show a wide range of diversity. So it’s certainly helpful for parents to be deliberate in their behaviours, recognising that kids will model after them, but it’s often challenging when you think that young kids, particularly once they start school, are spending a significant amount of time out of the home being exposed to all of this other stuff which really makes it important for us to think about schools and what children are exposed to within schools.   |
| Sally | And I guess that comes down to the teachers and what’s covered in the curriculum.  |
| Ben | Exactly.  |
| Sally | So we’ve spoken a bit about the fact that upbringing, school, parents are obviously major influences. What are some of the other influences of unconscious bias?  |
| Ben | So certainly as we think of adults, the largest influence is the society at large. From my perspective, the fact that there is different cultures in different countries, to a greater or lesser degree structural and institutionalised sexism, racism, homophobia. Certainly in recent years, anti-Muslim viewpoints. The very context of a country or culture is an influence on implicit bias. And so when I think of strategies to reduce implicit bias, there are those that try to impact the individual and then those that try to impact the culture, country, society etc. You can’t only work on stuff that’s in your head while you have a society or country or community that has rampant sexism/homophobia.  |
| Sally | We recently recorded a show on gender identity and there was a lot of discussion in that about how difficult it is if you don’t fit the idea of ‘male’ or ‘female’ when everything in society is geared towards that.  |
| Ben | So I think thinking about gender identity in a kind of fluid way is one of the ways of reducing and impacting bias around sexual identity and gender identity.  |
| Sally | Easy to say, difficult to change.  |
| Ben | Oh boy, that’s challenging.  |
| Sally | I would think one of the biggest influences is probably the media.  |
| Ben | Social media - so positive in so many ways but it conveys directly and indirectly a whole set of values about people, religions, races etc. As does TV. Some TV research that I find particularly powerful and disturbing - and let me see if I can describe it... So this researcher took two or three TV series, one was CSI I think, and created ten-second clips of a white person who is speaking either to a black actor or white actor on the show. Then the researcher edited out the person they were speaking to and they showed a large number of people, the white person speaking and they asked them whether they thought this person was speaking to someone they had high regard for or not. I think you know the results.  |
| Sally | Yikes.  |
| Ben | They were pretty accurate in those who said they were speaking to someone who they felt positively about was speaking to a white actor and those who had less regard for someone, speaking to a black actor. It just goes to subtle things like facial expression, the movement of the eyes, smiling etc. I mean that’s how insidious the process is.  |
| Sally | That’s quite horrifying, isn’t it. The world is in a particular context at the moment, we’re seeing the rise of the right, a lot of populist movements, anti-other movements and particularly anti-Muslim as you’ve already mentioned. Are we seeing that as the villain in the media and society is starting to change, is that also effecting how unconscious bias changes?  |
| Ben | Yes. As the environment changes, the kind of messages that we have in our head shift. I think back 20 or 30 years ago and the biases towards people we perceived to be Middle Eastern or we perceived to be Muslim wasn’t at the level that it is today. Clearly there is a connection between these societal events and the kind of stuff that we have carrying on in our heads.  |
| Sally | Something else that ties into this idea of what’s going on in our heads is that unconscious bias seems to surface more at times of stress.  |
| Ben | We know that when someone is stressed, is exhausted, tired, that the kind of executive functions that help us to monitor what we say, the kind of judgements that we make aren’t working as well and we’re prone to say things, perceive things differently. So again, thinking about hiring research committees, you don’t want to make critical decisions when you are exhausted.  |
| Sally | Or under time pressure.  |
| Ben | Under time pressure, yeah! This has particular relevance for physicians, particularly interns and residents who are in training and work incredibly long hours and we ask them to make major decisions. So there’s been a lot of work done in health care around implicit bias and physicians who work lots and lots of hours so that’s potentially very dangerous.  |
| Sally | And not just in terms of implicit bias though, I also think it’s worrying just the holding a scalpel or something!  |
| Ben | Yeah and in some places they’re trying to reduce the number of hours because it is absolutely ridiculous but often there’s pushback from the more traditional physicians who feel that part of the rights of passage I guess or whatever. But if you think of the link between being exhausted and tired and bias or errors, it’s scary.  |
| Sally | Well, we might have our second break.  |
|  | **MUSIC BY FRANK SINATRA – THE IMPOSSIBLE DREAM** |
| Sally  | Nau mai, nau mai, nau mai ki te hōtaka, ki te tangata, Speak Up - Kōrerotia. We’re talking about unconscious bias with Dr. Benjamin Reese Jr. We’ve been talking about what is unconscious bias, what fuels it, what makes it stronger. I guess now I’d like to think about some of the impacts. We’ve touched on this a little bit already, we’ve touched on the fact that bias can be both positive and negative depending on who you are talking with, who you are confronted with, the various experiences you’ve had as an individual. But if we can think about some of the positive impacts of unconscious racial bias. Is this always for example, going to be towards someone of your own race, your own ethnicity? |
| Ben | The tendency is to be biased towards someone who you perceive to be different from you. So in some cultures and countries like in the United States, given the particular history of race, the differences often show up as racial differences. You think of places in Africa, the difference there might be tribal affiliation which might be signalled by dress, language, facial features etc. Other parts of the world the differences might be related to how large your beard is. Implicit bias is every place but the way it shows us differs on depending on what kinds of things signal you being in group or out group, being affiliated with you or not.  |
| Sally | So the tendency is to be favourable to someone who is the same as you?  |
| Ben | Or similar on some dimension that is important to you.  |
| Sally | Is it possible that people are unconsciously bias positively towards people who are different to them deliberately, or does that make it then conscious bias?  |
| Ben | I’d say it’s not rare but it’s less frequently that someone feels more positive towards someone who is different than them on significant variables. That’s kind of structurally the way we are put together. We tend to gravitate towards people and think more positively towards people who are similar to us on important dimensions; those dimensions may vary. When I think back to the people I’ve hired over the past 10/15/20/30 years, deliberately I’ve worked on having a lot of diversity in terms of race, gender, sexual orientation, religion etc. but in terms of problem solving style, they’re little Ben Reeses.  |
| Sally | Interesting.  |
| Ben | Because I gravitate towards people who have this big picture of thinking analysis etc. They are all like that except one person who has been in my office longer than me. She’s into details in a way that is so valuable to me in my office but almost every time she speaks I feel this kind of grinding in my stomach. To me she brings another perspective that is so important to our innovative and creative work because that’s part of what fuels innovation, is that kind of diversity - but boy I probably wouldn’t have hired her! |
| Sally | It’s so interesting to hear you say that because when people are hiring, they might try and make sure they are looking for difference but I suspect at the end of the day when you are hiring someone, they are going to share the same values, the same beliefs that you want your organisation to uphold.  |
| Ben | I remember working with a library on the diversity of their culture and we had a diversity committee that had diversity gender, race, sexual orientation etc. It was working really well, people served about a year, a year and a half and they cycled off. We looked around the room and there were no white men and we said in this affirmation action kind of way, we need to go out and find white men. So people on the committee said oh, I know this person in the library, that person in the library, they were people who were committed to diversity and so I pushed back and said the importance is to have people on the committee who are committed to the library, improving the library culture and not necessarily people who are down with diversity, committed to diversity. So after a lot of discussion we asked two white men who love the library but they weren’t interested in diversity the way the rest of us were. They made things more difficult but they pushed us to think more deeply. Every time we would give these kind of generalisations and platitudes about diversity, they would come back and criticise us and I think they made the group better.  |
| Sally | I guess it’s good for them too isn’t it, stretching them as well.  |
| Ben | It’s stretching them and stretching the group and that’s part of diversity.  |
| Sally | Possibility a generalisation but do we think that unconscious bias favours majority in-groups?  |
| Ben | I think the group that is ‘in power’ tends to be the group that has the resources to shape the direction of an organisation, a state or a country. They tend to have one form of bias. The people who are the ‘minority group,’ they have their own set of biases which are often different but nobody is bias free; everyone - whether they are in the ‘majority’ or ‘minority’ - has biases, they just differ. The implications are different. You can have a set of biases but if you have no power, that’s one thing. If you have a set of biases and you have power to make decisions, that’s different.  |
| Sally | I suppose it also comes back to this idea of influence and those who have power, have greater influence over media, over politics.  |
| Ben | Yes.  |
| Sally | Some of the systems which unconscious bias, I suppose, has the most negative impacts would have to be for example health care which you have touched on, employment which you’ve also touched on, but I imagine there are probably also other arenas in which it really comes into play.  |
| Ben | Two areas that are really prominent. One is schools, I think of some of the biases around gender and STEM areas.  |
| Sally | STEM being Science Technology… |
| Ben | Science Technology Engineering and Math. But you know some people talk about ‘STEAM’ now. |
| Sally | Yes ‘Arts,’ exactly.  |
| Ben | Appropriately, Art. But the research shows that in math classes, women and girls get called on fewer times; their responses get assessed and viewed as not as appropriate. So there’s a lot of work that needs to be done in schools. Teachers need to be aware of the power of implicit bias, they need to be regularly reflecting on the kind of choices and decisions they make. Then structurally, the heads of the schools need to think about whether there are systems and structures in the school that might unknowingly disadvantage girls, certain ethnic cultural groups etc.  |
| Sally | ANZAC Day commemorations. If your ethnic group wasn’t even here during WWI then what is its relevance, how are you going to tie those children into the discussion in a meaningful way?  |
| Ben | That’s a great example. One of the areas where implicit bias is really powerful is in policing. Lots of data from around the world in terms of types of people, the research where they have people either pull out a pack of cigarettes or a gun, or a bottle or a gun etc. And in the simulations they see how quickly someone shoots and then they change the race of the person and it’s just… It’s scary. I appreciate that many of us, myself included, have the time to analyse etc. and police officers have to make split-second decisions but when the split-second decisions are different depending on complexion, that’s… Yeah.And the comments, we were talking about in terms of being tired. One of the strategies that they tried to implement - and it’s not easy - is a police officer is involved and they may be chasing somebody, may be finally catching them etc. shouldn’t be the person who then does the following steps, whether it’s putting the person in handcuffs etc. Because the person whose tired, adrenalin is flowing etc., if they make the next level of decisions, it’s more prone to be biased.  |
| Sally | And thinking about that idea that stress brings on unconscious bias to the fore, especially if someone is potentially drawing a gun.  |
| Ben | Yeah. So the job of a police officer, exceedingly difficult, but boy it’s an area that’s prone for implicit bias.  |
| Sally | I guess the bottom line probably is that unconscious bias should not and cannot be an excuse for action.  |
| Ben | Cannot be. But it’s not only trying to help individuals behave differently but we’ve got to keep on working on the more structural systemic things because that’s what underlies implicit bias. We respond differently to gender and science in part because we have this structure and system that’s been here forever around gender and science. And so you’ve got to attack that along with the individual response.  |
| Sally | OK so this leads us in perfectly to our final segment, which will be what to do we about it? And we’ll have our final song now, then.  |
| Ben | What do we do about it?!  |
|  | **MUSIC BY CONNIE LIM – A BETTER PART OF ME** |
| Sally  | This is “Speak Up – Kōrerotia” with Sally Carlton and Benjamin Reese. We’re thinking about unconscious bias. And now the big question, right: What do we do about it?  |
| Ben | Yeah well let me first say that the research on what you do about implicit bias is in process, in progress, and implicit bias being a fairly young field - we’re really in our infancy in trying to figure out what we do. But there are some strategies that hold a little promise. So we know that increasing awareness helps, at least in the short run. So the kind of education that helps people understand what implicit bias is, how it develops, how it impacts decisions for everyone – not related to you being male or female, Māori, black, white etc.; it’s part of the human condition. We know that that awareness helps in the short run, I say in the short run because if you deepen awareness, it probably isn’t going to help five years later or a year later. Increasing your own self-monitoring of your behaviour we know helps. Part of the challenge is how do you keep people motivated to monitor their behaviour long term. One of the strategies I’ve been sort of playing around with is, if you get an email once every two months from the person who did the initial workshop, that might help cue you and remind you. I mean one of the other things I have is on my phone, I have the letters IB. Every time I pick up my phone and look at it I think about implicit bias and I change the screen on my phone every couple of months so I don’t become habituated to it. So we know that that helps. As we mentioned earlier, try not to make key decisions when you’re exhausted, when you’re stressed – that helps. Then the big strategy is constantly working on systemic and organisational things that perpetuate bias. For example, thinking about search committees. So it’s helpful for everyone on the search committee to do work about being more aware of their own biases but structurally: How do you think about excellence? Where do you look for outstanding talent? What are the kinds of regular questions you ask or don’t ask? Those kind of structural things are as important, or maybe more important, than each person around the table, their own individual biases. In terms of police officers, it’s critically important to train police officers to behave differently but how do we think about black people and crime? So trying to attack those kind of societal beliefs and norms and stereotypes, those are as critically important and perhaps more important than trying to change the mind of a police officer. So those are some of the strategies that are helpful. Certainly having people engage consistently with individuals or groups that are different than ourselves helps. There’s some research that a colleague shared with me recently where they had students on a college campus spending a semester in a dorm with someone of a different race, another group spending a semester in a dorm with someone of the same race. End of the semester they come into the laboratory and someone who was part of the experiment engages them individually in a discussion about race. What they find is that those who have been living for a semester with someone of the same race seem to show less ease in talking about race, mentioning the words, even differences in normal body language. Those students who have lived for a semester with someone of a different race: greater ease in talking about it etc. And then they give a bunch of surveys and questionnaires. The surveys and questionnaires suggest that the person living with someone of a different race has greater ease and openness etc. So the further questions are: How long does that last? Is there a similar dynamic for gender, religion etc? This particular colleague, Professor Sarah Gaither, is getting research funding to explore those questions. So the extent to which we can broaden our people and situations that we engage in that are different from ourselves. Whether that’s reading different books, watching different shows, seeing different documentary films etc., that helps in some small but significant ways. So tackling, if you will, implicit bias with a whole host of strategies as opposed to thinking if I do this one thing that’s going to change my biases. My business card is in Braille because I know that that’s a tendency I have around ability and disability, I know that that strategy in and of itself is not going to have as much of an impact as talking to people who are different levels of disability etc.  |
| Sally | I think one thing I’ve really taken from that discussion just then was you can’t just do something once and expect your bias to change, you’ve got to keep on at it.  |
| Ben | Yes.  |
| Sally | That’s a very important message. I think I sort of thought if you make an effort to challenge yourself then maybe your… |
| Ben | It’s multiple things and you’ve got to attack the larger societal structures and systems of racism, sexism, homophobia.  |
| Sally | To finish up then, is it true to conclude that unconscious bias need not be a problem, it’s how it’s acted upon that’s the problem?  |
| Ben | Yeah, you’re right. Unconscious bias or the process of bias isn’t inherently something bad. The problem is how it shows up in an interaction or a community or a society and what it leads to. It can’t be separated from the issues of power, structural issues around sexism, racism. By the way, we could have talked a bit about some of the research about what we think is going on in the brain.  |
| Sally | Do, yes please! |
| Ben | We know that the amygdala - through like an almond-sized part of the brain in the posterior part of the brain - among other things it shows excitation when we’re in a fearful situation, fight or flight situation. So one research, they show people either faces of black men or white men. When they show faces of black men there’s excitation in the amygdala. So the things that you can’t control, you can’t control brain excitation. We don’t know for sure, but that suggests that the stuff you see in society around black men and crime and fear etc., we take that in and that impacts us in some way. Another bit of research again, autonomic nervous system, we don’t have a lot of control over. So this was done in Italy, so you look at a screen and you see a hand and very slowly a needle goes through the hand and so most people would have a kind of aversive response to that. If you are measuring moisture on finger tips, the needle can either be going into a black hand or a white hand. When it’s going into a black hand there’s less moisture on the finger tips and they tested through skin conductors. So people say I feel the same way about someone being in pain whether they’re white or black. Research where kids 10-12 years old watch a screen and they see another youngster getting their fingers caught in the door or their head banged against the wall. Well they asked younger kids, some are watching a black child and some a white child, to rate the pain they think the child is experiencing on a ten point Likert scale. What they find was that younger kids rated about the same whether they were watching a black child or white child. As they get older they find that child rate the pain that the black child is experiencing as less. The research on pain and race, there’s a lot of research, research in emergency departments and hospitals. There is a tendency for black people to get less pain medication for seemingly the same level of pain. So what occurs in many hospitals now is a protocol. So there might be a ten point Likert scale, if you say your pain is a 7 then everyone gets the same medication. If it’s a 3 then everyone gets the same medication. Without the scale, if you just have a conversation with a doctor about how you are feeling, what your pain is then it opens the door for the possibility of bias and black people getting less pain medication for seemingly the same level of pain.  |
| Sally | Amazing, isn’t it, and the widespreadness of it.  |
| Ben | Yeah it’s part of the way we are as humans.  |
| Sally | I might be wrong about this but I think the amygdala is the part of the brain that also… It’s fight and flight but also stress, isn’t it?  |
| Ben | Yes.  |
| Sally | So that probably ties into what you were saying before about unconscious bias comes to the fore at times of stress, if that is being stimulated then… |
| Ben | You’re right. |
| Sally | …you’re more likely to respond in a particular way.  |
| Ben | Yup. There’s a lot of brain research being done and it’s controversial, we’re at the beginning of it, got to be careful about interpretations we make about it. We think there’s something going on in the brain that correlates with the way we behave in the environment.  |
| Sally | Fascinating stuff. Well I’d like to say thank you ever so much for coming in.  |
| Ben | Sure! |
| Sally | I know that you probably have 100 other things you could be doing in your time in Christchurch, it’s been really valuable and I found it lots of fun.  |
| Ben | I’ve really enjoyed this.  |
| Sally | So thank you so much for sharing your wisdom with us.  |
| Ben | OK, thank you for having me.  |