



Life

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THERE'S AN UNCONSCIOUS BIAS IN VIRTUAL MEETINGS. HERE'S HOW YOU CAN AVOID IT.

Contact(s): [Caroline Brooks](#), [Amy Bonomi](#)

While employees use videoconferencing now more than ever, there's an issue happening beneath the surface with platforms like Zoom, Teams and Skype beyond stress and mental health that's affecting its users.

Amy Bonomi, a social science researcher from Michigan State University, and Nelia Viveiros from University of Colorado, said that these platforms are a ripe setting for unconscious bias — or, attitudes towards people or associated stereotypes with them without our conscious knowledge. These can be related to gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, etcetera.

"Unconscious bias can intersect with language, symbolism and nonverbal cues that reinforce normative social identities with respect to gender, race, sexual preference and socioeconomic status," Bonomi said. "For example, when the virtual background of a Zoom meeting attendee has pictures of his or her wedding, it unintentionally reinforces the idea that marriage is most fitting between opposite sexes."

In fact, even a simple icebreaker — common for videoconferencing settings — can be a pathway for unintentionally reinforcing dominant social norms and identities.

"In a recent videoconference, we were asked the 'most fun thing you've done with your family during quarantine.' Participant answers ranged from 'gardening with my husband' to 'dance parties with my family,'" Viveiros said.

While these experiences are valid and we celebrated them, Viveiros said that the way the ice breaker question was phrased unintentionally crowded out the experiences of people with minoritized social identities. For example, afterwards Viveiros learned that asking about "fun family things" prevented several Latinx attendees from sharing their experiences of losing family members and community members to novel coronavirus.

Additionally, microaggressions are also communicated in virtual meetings just as they are in face-to-face meetings, Bonomi said. Microaggressions are brief, commonplace verbal, behavioral or environmental indignities that communicate hostile, derogatory or negative slights related to race and other identity points.

For example, during a recent virtual meeting, the white facilitator lamented that there weren't any diverse people to help with an analysis. Yet, when several participants clarified that they were persons of color, the facilitator said, "I mean someone who can speak eloquently about this topic."

So, what can we do?

The researchers offer tips on how to mitigate unconscious bias and improve inclusivity.

Use inclusive language. Using inclusive language validates participants' diversity of experiences, including participants whose lives may be unduly affected by the novel coronavirus.

"This can be done by acknowledging that there are a range of diverse experiences of participants and by establishing conversational norms that respect these differences," Bonomi said.

Approach conversations with sensitivity to differences. Instead of opening with the typical "tell us what your lives are like during shelter in place," consider framing a question around what participants are noticing about communities around them.

"Meeting hosts need to prepare follow-up questions, like whether participants know anyone going through this crisis alone," Viveiros said.

Symbolism. Be conscious about what your "virtual environment" might



Amy Bonomi, professor and former chair in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies.

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symbolize. It's unlikely that in face-to-face meetings, participants be seated in front a wall of family photos. While virtual backgrounds may be a way for participants to express themselves, it is important to understand who is being excluded and included with these types of actions.

"To mitigate the potential of exclusion, some organizations are guiding participants to consider background choices to reflect the organization's values, as opposed to personal choice," Bonomi said.

Challenge microaggressions. Be a strategic ally in calling out microaggressions when they occur. This can be done by naming microaggressions on the spot or addressing them privately. It is important to share how the microaggression affected you and may have affected others and to provide tools for improving skills, they said.

Time bounding. Respect people's space in long videoconference settings by building in frequent breaks.

"Due to a variety of factors, such as the need to care for self or for a family member with a disability, participants may need frequent breaks," Viveiros said.

By understanding unconscious bias in virtual settings, Bonomi and Viveiros say we can mitigate and counter its effects.

"Without paying attention to how unconscious bias and how dominant paradigms get reinforced, we risk unintentionally alienating and potentially harming minoritized people," Bonomi said.

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