



Implicit Bias, Dehumanisation and Legal Companions in Official Spaces

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In this essay I am going to explore how prejudices based on stereotypes affect the support which gets extended to individuals and how legal companions and accessible legal documentation may be needed as a corrective to implicit bias. I reflect on how bureaucratized and managerial professional organisations can lead to the depersonalising of agent/client relations resulting in the ultimate dehumanization of both the principle agent and the client. The effects are however most felt by the client who is at the bottom of a power differential. I draw on my own experiences to illustrate this and use principal-agent theory to analyse the power differentials found in the support-need juncture.

I bring to this an anecdote of how many years ago when I was going onto the streets and leaving a household where I was being physically and psychologically brutalised by women in my life I turned to the social services who told me “come back when you are homeless”. When I turned to the police to report physical assaults, the police laughed at a six foot man with heavy build saying this about his female partner. When I went onto the streets I did not drink alcohol nor did I have any problem relationship with drugs but after living through 18 months of homelessness with long periods of rough sleeping I had turned to alcohol to self medicate due to sheer distress. My psychological health deteriorated in relation to the experience of frank and open dehumanization where every account I offered was met with suspicion and doubt.

I experienced this kind of concatenation of prejudices effect on the personal journey I have lived through and this informs how I perceive the necessity of legal companions for those at the bottom of the support-need juncture.

For those at the bottom of the support-need juncture they experience inherent disadvantage as being there in need of support. I am going to explore how dehumanization psychology and cultures of implicit bias are key factors which people face at the bottom of the power differential. I shall be using principal-agent theory to express the relationships.

Principal agent theory, which emerged in the 1970s from a number of theorists, describes the pitfalls that often arise when one person or group, the 'agent,' is representing another person or group, known as the 'principal'. A simple example is where the 'patient' is the principal who engages a doctor – the 'agent' – in order to resolve some health issue.

In relation to psychiatry and cultural outgroups the agent-professional (doctor, support worker, etc) may not be aware that they are perceiving a principal-client in less than human terms. Rather, they may believe they are acting in the client's best

interests whilst being errant or counterproductive.

Support is allocated in society via bureaucratized, vertically line managed, highly professionalised alienating environments. By alienating I mean places which are governed by esoteric and opaque practices for the outsider. A civil servant exists in their role partly to differentiate the institution from a machine. They act to serve a need and the institution functions as an organ of society generating public value in a way analogous to how private enterprises generate share holder dividends (MOORE, 1996). A range of pathobureaucracies occur which are reframed in terms of personal inadequacies rather than an issue of the system or the professionals working within it. Professor Gerald Caiden articulates in detail all the public maladministration and bureaucratic corruption which the principal-client must contend with (CAIDEN 1981) (See Appendix A).

Locke and Spender's recapitulation of systems of "scientific management" illustrates a depersonalisation of the workspace having wide ranging implications on society (LOCKE, & SPENDER, 2011). I argue this kind of scheme sets the scene for the depersonalisation and dehumanization of principal-client groups. The professionalisation of health and support needs has encouraged implicit bias by creating strict and rigid ingroups and outgroups accentuated by a natural process of homophily (WILLEMIEN & SANDRONI, 2019). Homophily speaks of the tendency to form strong social connections with people who share one's defining characteristics, as age, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and personal beliefs.

The formation of ingroups and outgroups happens remarkably easily in a formal setting where the colour of eyes need be the only stimulus to form a basis of discrimination (ERICKSON, 2004). This propensity of people to associate with people like themselves gives rise to sorts of tribalism and group identity used to shore up personal identity and existential uncertainties (JUNGER, 2017). What accompanies this is the formation of outgroups which dehumanized perception develops from. Waytz and colleagues (WAYTZ, SCHROEDER, & EPLEY, 2014) propose that implicit bias privileging our own viewpoints is written into our perceptual experience.

Not only this but if we factor the general experience of the population it becomes apparent that there are other factors which may contribute to seeing principal-clients as less than human. Prejudices can arise from bad experiences and where an individual associates negative personal experience with a characteristic a group shares. Bias can affect the interactions with someone seeking support who shares characteristics with a person who has perpetrated a negative incidence. For example, if a women has experienced sexual harassment from one particular male then the

way she may consciously or unconsciously perceive other males may be affected. This kind of transference happens in every day life and shapes the interactions and opportunities which are extended across the support-need juncture.

The Mental Health Foundation estimate that “Around 1 in 3 adults in England report having experienced at least one traumatic event” (MENTAL HEALTH FOUNDATION, [N. D]); the All-party parliamentary group for United Nations Women reported “71% of women of all ages in the UK have experienced some form of sexual harassment in a public space – this number rises to 86% among 18-24-year-olds” (APPG FOR UN WOMEN, 2021); The Racism at Work Survey Results revealed that “60% of Black people, 42% Asian people and 14% white people have experienced racism in the workplace. Of the people who had experienced racism, 20% had experienced verbal or physical racial abuse” (RACISM AT WORK SURVEY RESULTS, 2018). All of this potentially has bearing on how an individual is met in the support-need juncture.

Prof Susan Fiske has documented how extreme outgroups are dehumanized to three orders of magnitude more than other social groupings (HARRIS & FISKE, 2006). Homelessness, drug users, those with criminal records and those with certain psychiatric labels (FISKE, 2012) all represent extreme outgroups and which meet with extreme levels of dehumanization. When people in professional roles are called to work with people who fall into these social identities, a range of implicit bias' might affect the support they receive or fail to receive.

There need be no active devaluation of the outgroup for dehumanization effects to manifest; an ingroup of colleagues may easily embody infrahumanization (DEMOULIN et al., 2005). Leyens and colleagues describe Infrahumanizing as involving “considering outgroups less human and more animal-like than the ingroup, which is perceived, in essence, as fully human” (LEYENS, DEMOULIN, VAES, GAUNT, PALADINO, 2007). People in professional roles may embody discriminations at the same time as believing that they are acting in egalitarian and meritocratic ways (UHLMANN & COHEN, 2007; CASTILLA, & BENARD, 2010).

What this means in practice is that the agent(ial)-professional may not even be aware that they are not perceiving the principal-client as less than human but believe that they are acting in their best interests despite not offering the same opportunities and support they might to someone with different social identifiers – social identifiers which they positively relate to.

What this means for people at the bottom of the power juncture is that they are most

vulnerable to the prejudicial forces at work in humans. The professional (agent) in the professional setting is inherently agential in relation to the client (principal) group as they are empowered by the structure they work in. Compounding this the exclusive structure of the professionalised institution is constructed of the decisions and values of the most privileged who are embodied gatekeepers of the social power and place.

Implicit bias is well documented in institutional spaces and to remedy this mechanisms are needed by which the citizen (principal-client) can protect themselves and be protected by human rights law when in their position of need. As someone who is perceived through a psychiatric label and other intersecting identifiers is commonly doubted, questioned and disbelieved they need representation by documentations and proofs throughout all the professional junctures they must negotiate – especially those who contend with multiple needs as they must shoulder the responsibility of getting numerous agencies, institutions and private enterprises to coordinate and capitulate beyond conveniences.

I argue the necessity for Appropriate/McKenzie-like Friends whilst mediating institutional engagements as well as access to legal representation for any disputes that may arise. I also argue that transparency documentation (e.g. email) must always be available as a mode of communication. This serves the role of providing a detailed legal document of interactions as well as an organizational reference for personal coordination of medical and social notes. Along with this I argue is that there should always be direct appeal to a senior in the given chain of command along with Plain English transparency of rules, regulations and policies at work.

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Appendix A

Excerpt from Gerald Caiden's work detailing the obstacles which a principal-client must face:

“I have found in my empirical research into administrative corruption that often public administrators are victims of political corruption and valiantly try to preserve their personal integrity. I have also found that though bureaucratic corruption manifests itself in public maladministration, by no means can the whole gamut of public maladministration "from simple clerical errors to oppression" including "injustice, failure to carry out legislative intent, unreasonable delay, administrative error, abuse of discretion, lack of courtesy, clerical error, oppression, oversight, negligence, inadequate investigation, unfair policy, partiality, failure to communicate, rudeness, maladministration, unfairness, unreasonableness, arbitrariness, arrogance, inefficiency, violation of law or regulation, abuse of authority, discrimination, errors, mistakes, carelessness, disagreement with discretionary decisions, improper motivation, irrelevant considerations, inadequate or obscure explanation, and all other acts that are frequently inflicted upon the governed by those who govern intentionally or unintentionally" be attributed to bureaucratic corruption. They are more the fault of thoughtlessness, accident, inefficiency, expediency, incompetence, stupidity, indifference, ignorance, self-deception, and self preservation.“