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What is cultural bias and why you need to avoid it

Understand your
mind, ditch cultural
stereotypes and
embrace cultural diversity

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made people read backwards. The English were uptight, standoffish, and love a good moan.

Welcome to the uncomfortable world of cultural bias: the assumptions we form about the culture of a group based on our own cultural background. Different from racism, cultural bias targets cultural differences rather than anthropological characteristics like skin colour. And unlike stereotyping — where a pre-conceived idea attributes social characteristics to all — cultural bias leans towards the viewer's perspective being correct, simply because the different values and beliefs don't align with their own. Put simply, it's viewing 'the other' with 'your own' cultural glasses on (and never cleaning them).

“Cultural biases occur when our brains take a shortcut to interpret another culture from the viewpoint of our own culture,” explains Karyen Chai, Communications Chair at Singapore Psychological Society and psychologist at Cog+ and The Therapy Platform. “For example, judging some of Singapore's governmental policies from the perspective of a culture where they talk a lot about human rights and human freedom.”

Cultural biasness exists in just about every nuance of cultures across the globe. To say that it can be destructive would be an understatement: it can cause a teacher to take preference of a student from a particular community; it can cause a court judge to give a harsher sentence to someone from a culture that they consider inferior; it has been found to play a part in determining where people choose to live. It can also affect employment (for example, one study found that only one in five Asian workers in Australia believe their company highly values diversity). Such cultural chasms have led to



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The reassuring news is that according to Karyen, our biased thoughts are a natural part of our complex human psychology. “The brain is busy and therefore constantly takes shortcuts to make sense of things that it doesn’t fully understand,” she explains.

“Because it doesn’t have time to stop and delve into the history and beliefs of a culture, it automatically starts filling in the gaps. Without research a cultural bias can manifest. Our brain sends us a fast conclusion that we decide is ‘good enough’ for us to survive.”

Unfortunately, the opportunity for applying cultural bias is everywhere, and neuroscience has found that many biases are formed throughout life and held at a subconscious level, mainly through societal and parental conditioning. It’s almost impossible *not* to develop a cultural prejudice on a daily basis due to socialising agents that surround us — we’re even influenced by just hearing a different language or accent.

As unpleasant as this can make us feel, Karyen states that, “Having a cultural bias can be positive in that it stops us from overthinking and preserves our energy. Putting people into groups with expected traits helps us to navigate the world without being overwhelmed by information. With cultural bias, we can start examining different cultures from multiple perspectives. The downside is the high potential for prejudice and stereotyping.”

Indeed, ethnic biases can become problematic when you behave poorly because of them — when this happens you need to pull yourself up. Facing up to your culturally biased beliefs may feel shameful, but doing so will give you the opportunity to appreciate and respect others’ differences, and to think in ways



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How to keep your beliefs in check

“Fear is a strong reason why we don’t challenge our cultural bias as we stay away from what we are afraid of,” says Karen. “But the first step to keeping your beliefs in check is to be aware of them in the first place. As a bid to understand your mind better, challenge your cultural bias and question its truth and origination.” Here’s how:

- **Build awareness:** Notice your thoughts. Rather than jumping to conclusions, ask yourself; ‘Why do people behave this way?’ Are you thinking that certain practices are ‘silly’ because they are not in your culture? Remain open and find out the motivation behind the behaviour. If you’re an expat in Singapore, [this](#) piece on bias busting is helpful.
- **Educate:** Seek out information that goes against your cultural beliefs. A gesture or custom that doesn’t bother you might offend someone from another background.
- **Remain open:** Everyone operates in different ways and has different outlooks, even within the same sub-cultures. Understand this, set an intention of curiosity and compassion, and learn to respect others’ customs.



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you have more in common with one another
than you think.

- **Avoid generalisation:** Says Karyen, “When I was young, my father used to say to me; ‘Do not generalise people. Just because one person behaved poorly, it doesn’t mean the whole culture will behave poorly. No matter what the culture, there will be people who behave badly and those who will be upstanding.’ This is a rule I’ve always tried to live by.”

For a healthier understanding of our thought patterns and an acceptance of all the cultures around us, we should all perhaps consider being a bit more ‘Karyen’s dad’ too.

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