



Fig.1 "Our Implicit Assumptions"

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Minds Littered with Bias

A few nights before our phase one design review we were practicing our persona introductions and made an upsetting discovery. We introduced our first two personas, Immersive Ivan and Amicable Amy, but as we described what was then Transactional Tania we realized that most of her attributes were negative and judgemental. "I just don't like her motivations," I said, "I feel like she's the kind of person that does things to feel good about herself". Even her picture was a stock image of a stern older woman, looking disgruntled and unhappy. We had been focusing on phrases such as 'doing them a service' and 'There's only so far I can go' without expanding to include the nuances behind these (such as creating limits to their aid in order to empower immigrants and refugees to seek out help for themselves and have an active interest in bettering their lives). After a moment of looking at each other in silence, we all began talking, pointing out the biases we had been employing. "I've thought of her as the strict elementary school teacher type!" One person commented. "Yeah, any time we thought of a bad characteristic, we've put it on her!" someone else pointed out. We stopped our presentation preparation and digressed into a discussion to try to figure out how we could have allowed our biases to so strongly affect this persona in particular.

In our own minds we had been so good at checking our own biases and trying our best to put them aside. In fact, we had thought we were doing such a good job of this that we had forgotten to account for inherent biases, ones we may not have realized were present. In this particular situation, we had been allowing our own ideas of what is "good help" to be based off our own opinions that valued personal relationships and large-scale change over routine services. We had unknowingly allowed ourselves to become stuck in a narrative mindset in which we had pushed all of our negative opinions towards service providers, making them the antagonists of our story. This created a general feeling of dislike towards this persona and was more focused on capturing the image of this character we had imagined than being rooted in real people and their experiences.

In situations where we try our best to remove biases, we must still acknowledge that it is impossible to completely view things separate from ourselves because we all have inherent biases based on our own values and experiences. A good way to apply this is to call out these biases explicitly and check assessments against them frequently. Activities such as value mapping and identification of individual lenses (ex. political views, racial background, inherent privilege, etc.) that contribute to such values are good for doing this. Immediately upon discovering that we had been attributing negative feelings towards this persona, we created a brainstorm of some of our initial assumptions that had allowed us to justify our choices (Fig. 1) and ended up using this to re-image and re-phrase our description of that persona. We realized that many of these appointed attributes stemmed from the idea that “we’re the good guys” and “we ascribe anything good to ourselves” in our story, seeking to call out the faults of others while also accounting for our own biases. But this in itself revealed a bias in which we applied our own metrics to assess what is good and helpful. This process of searching for, identifying, and accounting for biases is much like picking up trash in a city filled with litter. As much as one tries to clean up a small area, there will be so much more unseen debris until one walks to the next street corner. Much like this, there are always so many latent biases waiting to be picked up. The fact that litter is pervasive throughout modern, industrialized cities doesn’t mean we should give up all together and allow the litter (or biases) to accumulate untouched.

As important as it is to accept that you will always have inherent biases, it’s worth mentioning that there are some limitations to this approach. For groups that are not checking their biases in the first place, jumping right to “biases are inherent” may lead them to justify continuing to not check their own biases. This is advice more focused on an audience of design students that are already working to actively identify biases but need to realize they won’t be able to remove all biases completely.

While it may seem pessimistic to urge the acceptance that we cannot fully account for all of our biases and remove them from affecting our thoughts and proposals, it actually pushes us to become more self aware and open-minded individuals. If we were to think that biases could be simply removed like picking up litter from under a park bench, we would be ignoring the greater issue and satisfying for low-effort accountability. We as students, designers, and people must hold ourselves to a higher standard by accepting that we are inherently flawed and cannot achieve perfection but instead must push ourselves by frequently checking the underlying biases that shape our perspectives and character assessments.