

An Introduction to Unconscious Bias

Imagine this.....

You are listening to the morning news on the radio.
They are talking about a nurse who has been awarded an OBE.

You get on a train and the driver announces that there will be a
twenty minute delay to departure.



Did you think of.....

A female nurse?

A male train driver?

If so, this is an example of unconscious bias.

The theory

The unconscious brain is designed to use short-cuts to make quick judgements. This is a deep-rooted survival mechanism from when we had to make snap decisions about our environment.



= danger

The unconscious mind calls on our bank of personal experiences, memories and thoughts to look for patterns. It then groups this information together so that it can be accessed quickly.

We can process around 200,000 times more information per second unconsciously than we can through conscious thought.

Most of the time this fast thinking unconscious process serves us well and frees up our conscious minds to concentrate on logical, rationale thought.

But sometimes the way our unconscious brain has grouped or categorised information can lead to biases that shape our thoughts before the conscious mind has had a chance to rationalise the information (nurse = female , train driver = male).

And even when you know it to be wrong, it is impossible to stop our fast-acting unconscious mind and it can take a while for the slower, rational workings of the conscious mind to feel right.

Patterns in our unconscious minds are reinforced on a daily basis by what we see, read and hear

Google “professor” and these are the first images you see....



We know that you don't have to be male, white and a certain age to be a professor but this reinforces those associations in our subconscious mind

What's the impact?

Although entirely natural, the associations of our unconscious mind can influence our behaviour towards others.

We have evolved not just to make instant categorisations about people but also to treat them differently such that we assign positive characteristics to people who are like us (the “in group”) and negative ones to those that are different (the “out group”).

As a result:

- we tend to favour people who look like us and who share our background, interests
- we tend to be less empathetic towards people who are not like us, we may pay them less attention, make less eye contact, talk to them less or act less warmly towards them
- we subconsciously ignore or dismiss anything that threatens our world view
- we subconsciously seek out information that reinforces our world view (e.g. when you get a new car and start seeing the same one everywhere)
- we may make decisions based on our unconscious biases rather than our rationale, logical thought eg. when recruiting, promoting, allocating work, giving feedback, rewarding, providing support, who we listen to and whose opinions we value
- and those that feel like they are part of the “in group” because of the way they are treated will feel more confident, and those in the “out group” will feel less confident



Triggers

We may categorise people on obvious and visible physical characteristics:

Age	Skin colour	Piercings	Clothing
Body weight	Gender	Tattoos	Height
Physical attractiveness	Physical Disability	Hairstyle	Voice

or on less visible/obvious ones:

Accent	Sexual orientation	Interests and hobbies
Social background	Nationality	Lifestyle
Religion/belief	Job title	Friends

We are more likely to rely on our unconscious mind when we are tired, stressed, hungry, emotional or feeling rushed to make a decision.





What can I do?

Unconscious bias comes from thinking habits we have learned

They need to be consciously unlearned

- **Think about your own unconscious biases**

Thinking rationally about characteristics will start to break any unconscious associations

- Look at the list of triggers, do any of these reveal an association in your mind?
- Review the people you have gone out of your way to support over the last year – are they all in your “in group”?
- Ask yourself whether you are behaving/managing inclusively
- Notice when you are categorising people and try to connect with individuals instead

- **Consciously remind yourself of the need to be fair and objective**

Creating a conscious intent to be rationale, logical will break the stream of unconscious processing

- Build an attitude of openness, celebrating difference
- Write yourself reminders /set personal goals to be fair, to be objective

- **Keep your energy levels up when making decisions**

Our unconscious biases are less well controlled when we are tired, emotional, hungry

- Take breaks, maintain your sugar levels



What can I do?

- **Avoid reinforcing biases**

Associations are reinforced daily by our environment, culture, language

- Join different groups on social media, change your news feed for a while
- Learn about those different to you through biographies/documentaries
- Look around your working environment (both physical and on-line) – are the images you use reinforcing certain associations?
- Display images that counter stereotypical associations (young female professors!)
- Look out and challenge language that reinforces negative associations
e.g. calling a woman “bossy”

- **Deliberately slow down decision making**

When we are rushed we are more likely to fall back on our biases

- Give yourself enough time
- Avoid falling back on first impressions or “gut feelings”

- **Review decisions**

- Check there is evidence to back-up judgements /decisions you and others have made
- Have you made a decision based on first impressions or gut-feel?

What can I do?

- **Shortlisting and Interviews**

Ensure equal treatment for all before, during and after the interview

- Selecting a candidate on the basis of “fitting in” runs a high risk of unconscious bias being used to make the decision

To mitigate against this, include the requirements that address softer skills and ways of working in the essential criteria for the role and ask about them at interview

This takes more effort upfront but is worthwhile because

- You get to think about the working styles needed for the role
 - Your candidate gets an insight into the working culture and style required
 - Every candidate gets asked the same questions e.g.
 - this role will require a lot of lone working. How do you find that?
 - how do you manage and motivate different personalities in a team?
 - The structured questions help eliminate bias and you can make a rational decision
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- Be mindful that you may unconsciously build rapport with one candidate over another before the interview, based on associating them with your “in group” (eg we went to the same school/had the same supervisor etc). This will give the “in” candidate more confidence and they may perform better than the “out” candidate
 - Give every candidate the same amount of time and try to avoid being rushed



Final thoughts

- We all have unconscious biases and we are all affected by bias
- The impact of unconscious biases are more of a barrier to creating a thriving, diverse and inclusive community than conscious acts of discrimination
- We can take action to recognise and break our unconscious streams of thinking
- We can manage the impact of our unconscious biases on our own behaviour and decision making, and that of others

