

Mitigating the impact of unconscious bias

What is unconscious bias?

Unconscious bias refers to a bias that we are unaware of, which happens automatically and is triggered by our brain making quick judgments and assessments of people and situations, influenced by our background, cultural environment and personal experiences. (ECU: 2013 Unconscious bias in higher education)

Although we all like to think we are open-minded and objective, research shows consistently across all social groups that this is not the case. We are heavily influenced in ways that are hidden from our conscious mind about how we view and evaluate both others and ourselves. Once we accept that we all naturally use subconscious mental shortcuts then we can take time to consider them and reflect on whether such implicit thought processes are inappropriately affecting the objectivity of our decision-making.

Negative Stereotypes: Characterized by presumptions of incompetence. For example, the work of women and under-represented minorities is scrutinized much more than majority faculty, at all stages of academic career.

Positive Stereotypes: Dominant group members are automatically presumed to be competent. Such a member receives the benefit of the doubt, negative attributes are glossed over and success is assumed.

Visionary: Members of dominant groups are evaluated based on their potential whereas under-represented groups are judged on their accomplishments and their track record only. For example: "He has vision" or "She lacks vision."

Things that exacerbate unconscious bias:

In-groups and out-groups - Shared interests, similar lifestyle, physical characteristics, similar background...

Confirmation bias - selectively searching for, interpreting and recalling information about someone that confirms what we 'know' and believe

Stereotype threat - Feeling the impact of a negative stereotype about our group

Increased pressure - Time, stress, low blood sugar

What can you do about it?

Once we accept that we all naturally use subconscious mental shortcuts, then we can take time to consider them and reflect on whether such implicit thought processes are inappropriately affecting the objectivity of our decision-making. **It is easier to recognise bias in others than in yourself.** For this reason, **polite challenge** is possibly the most powerful form of mitigating bias - respectful intervention can increase accountability and improve decision-making.

Snap judgements and shortcuts are more likely to occur if one is stressed either by time constraints, work pressures or by hunger and dehydration.

Practical steps to mitigate bias

- Ensure that you are able to be fully present with no other immediate stresses on your mind.
- Ensure that you have completed the Unconscious Bias online training.*
- Notice your habits
- Challenge stereotypes
- Check your language
- Check your assumptions, get a different viewpoint
- Notice micro inequalities
- Use micro affirmations – set yourself specific targets
- Change perception and relationship with out-group members
- Sit next to someone you wouldn't usually
- Treat people as individuals
- Be an active bystander
- Lead by example
- Think about your body language – eye contact, smile, nodding...
- Practise being more assertive
- Ask for feedback
- Challenge their assumptions
- Have difficult conversations when you need to
- Use examples of success of others in same target group
- Encourage and support development
- Consider your own development needs
- Monitor to check you are being fair and consistent

*Details of Equality and Diversity training is available at: <http://www.equality.admin.cam.ac.uk/>