Unconscious bias

As humans we often make instinctive decisions about other people. Decisions which ‘feel right’ at the time and often these ‘snap’ decisions will be right. We are likely to think that we have assessed the pros and cons, considered alternatives, and weighed the possible outcomes before making that decision. But what if the people decisions we’re making aren’t really based on the facts? What if we’re being influenced by hidden thoughts and feelings we’re not even aware of? What if our decisions are made or at least influenced by feelings buried deep within the complex networks of our brain? What if it is these, not the dispassionate facts which are really driving our decisions?

In fact our behaviour towards other people is more likely to be influenced by our instinctive feelings than by any complex thinking about the facts at hand even if we convince ourselves it is purely a rational decision. There is a growing body of scientific evidence, and a growing number of social and work psychologists and leaders, who now believe that our unconscious people preferences (biases) play a significant part in the way we engage with people and the decisions we make about them.

Our brains are hard wired to rapidly categorise people instinctively, and we use the most obvious and visible categories to do this: age, body weight, physical attractiveness, skin colour, gender and disability. But we use many other less visible dimensions such as; accent, social background, sexual orientation, nationality, religion, education, and even job title or organisational department. These categories automatically assign a whole suite of unconscious characteristics, good and bad, to anyone categorised as being from that group. They are automatic and unconscious biases over which we have little control, and they influence everyone, no matter how unbiased we think we may be.

Despite our people biases being a natural and necessary process, having any sort of bias has been demonised by the law and organisational culture. Talking about our biases has become an organisational taboo. Nobody admits to having biases, and organisations prefer not to acknowledge that all of their staff will almost certainly have a myriad of differing biases. But denying they exist doesn’t mean they go away. In fact they work insidiously underground, many without our knowledge or control and without being acknowledged by the individual or organisation. This has profound implications. It means that when we make a decision on who gets a job, who gets disciplined or promoted or who we see as a confidant.
or as a suitable coachee, that we may be adding our own subliminal and emotional criteria to the decision. Criteria we may not even be aware of and which may have no basis in facts about the individual. These unconscious biases operate below the level of our consciousness such that we continue to see ourselves as fair and unbiased, whilst our subtle behaviours give away our unconscious feelings. We all see bias as vested in others but not in ourselves as this protects our fundamental self perception of being ‘fair’. Implicit and unconscious social biases and our bias 'blind spot' in being unable to see ourselves as biased make us vulnerable to exhibiting unintentional behaviours we probably won't notice and will almost certainly deny.

**Why do we have unconscious biases?**

When individuals interact with one another the abundant information available to them about each other is cognitively overwhelming. We simply cannot process everything about each new person we encounter. As a result information about people and objects is suppressed, grouped and placed into easy to use categories. This enables us to make rapid judgments about new people and situations without having to process in great detail everything about every individual and context.

Social psychologists call this phenomenon "social categorisation" whereby we routinely and rapidly sort people into groups rather than think of each as unique. The advantage of categorisation is that it allows us to save time and effort when processing information about others, thereby allowing us to pay attention to other tasks or more novel information with our limited processing resources. Categorisation has a useful and necessary social function in providing us with handy 'scripts' for what to expect from others. For example, when a person goes to the doctor it is important that the patient recognises how doctors are likely to behave (ask questions, carry out an examination, make a diagnosis). The doctor expects the patient to answer questions, and to comply with directions such as undressing when asked; this is one of the few occasions when most people do this without question. Without these prejudgments social encounters would become very stressful and complex as both parties seek to establish the roles and expectations of the other every time. This prejudgement of groups of people is both normal, and to be expected as our default position. Understanding that make this prejudgments automatically is critical to understanding and countering the effect of the biases we ALL have.
People form categories with which to prejudge others and other groups of people based on their prior experiences with a group, but also from what they have seen and heard, much of which they will absorbed unconsciously during the course of their lives. It may have come from family and friends but may also arise from what the media report and from patterns they unconsciously process and store. These are reinforced on a daily basis without us knowing, or thinking consciously about it. They create sorting and categorising patterns which are based on stereotypes of the group to which an individual belongs. We all do this all of the time as it makes our lives easy and enables us to focus attention on other more novel things. The disadvantage is that this categorisation can then guide the our actions towards others on the unconscious assumption that the other person possesses traits included in the stereotype associated with the group under which they are categorised. We don't need to believe the stereotype for it to impact our behaviour, we just have to be exposed to it. Society labels this prejudgment as 'prejudice' or 'bias' but it is an automatic and rapid process over which we have very little control. Less emotive labels for the behaviours which arise from our unconscious biases include unintentional incivility or micro-inequities and the research suggests that even using 'prejudice' in feedback can actually make the bias worse.

Each person's categories give rise to their own personal set of values. These are categories which require very little thought and people are likely to affirm and defend them fervently. People often share these categories with their family, friends, work colleagues and wider social network. These form our identities. An attack on our categories is an attack on our shared values, and is therefore an attack on our intrinsic notion of who we are. The human instinct is to value, support and defend those who are like ourselves and who and share our categories. This is the 'love prejudice' which can lead to the rejection of those who are dissimilar. This process of affirming our values and preferring those who are like us and who share them can lead us to the very brink of bias. It is both immediate and pervasive.

Once formed, these prejudgments (and in particular negative prejudgments) are fiercely protected against change. If a new situation or person is encountered that clearly does not conform to a particular prejudgment, people tend to 're-fence' or re-categorise the event or person as 'atypical' in order to protect their original categorisation from having to change.
For example, if someone has a perception of older people as being frail and unintelligent but then meets an octogenarian who is physically strong and intellectually sharp, they may re-categorise that person as atypical of older people in order to protect their simpler categories even though there are many people of that age who are both fit and alert. Even memory works to protect these categories by recalling facts which support the categories, and conveniently forgetting or losing facts which contradict the category. We attend to facts which confirm our categories and screen out those which do not. This is why women at work might often report that their ideas are ignored, and then adopted when suggested later by a man. It is rarely a conscious exclusion, it is simply part of our unconscious preference for people who are like us and who clearly share our values.

What does this tell us?
- That bias is natural and largely unavoidable
- That people are disposed to be biased against people who are unlike them and show more favour people towards who are like them; it's not all about being negative
- That people will often not have insight to their own biases
- That situations where people are under emotional or cognitive load are more like to invoke behaviour driven by bias
- That suppressing or demonising bias makes the problem worse not better, and this worsening is more likely in people who were least biased to start with
- That unconscious bias affects our behaviour in subtle and unintentional ways

What action should I take?
- Accept that YOU and everyone else have biases
- Be honest about your biases; try not to simply choose your more socially acceptable biases to discuss and address
- Raise awareness of unconscious bias within the organisation, its impact and what can be done to manage or counter it
- Arrange testing so that you and others are aware of the type and strength of their unconscious biases
- Encourage people to be honest about their biases and to act to manage or control them

©Shire Professional 2010
• Avoid demonising bias and preventing others from discussing (but not just expressing) their biases
• Avoid emotive language or confrontational training, the evidence is that to date this has had no impact on bias and has often just made it worse.
• Use one of the neurological tools designed to weaken problematic categorising or imagined contact with the target group

The neurology of unconscious bias

The physiology and neurology of the cognitive processes of bias have, until recently, been inaccessible and much of the evidence we had gathered has been indirect; behavioural shadows of the cognitive processes which instigated them. Unconscious bias is based on the evidence that categories are spontaneously activated and develop as a result of our exposure to the attitudes of others, images and stereotypes throughout our lives from an early age. Typically our unconscious biological reactions take place below our level of consciousness, well before 100 milliseconds, and about 250 milliseconds before our conscious processes engage. However, they can occur as quickly as 30 milliseconds. Unconsciously we process around 200,000 times more information each second than we do consciously which gives our unconscious a powerful edge over our conscious minds. Our unconscious biases can impact our behaviour negatively because of associations we develop between groups (e.g. women or gay men) and evaluative constructs, for example ‘women-dependent’ or ‘gay men-promiscuous’. Once we establish automatic biases they begin to function unconsciously, rapidly and without recourse to the resources required by the more demanding mental processes typified by our conscious control processes. Such unconscious bias acts whether or not we have any regard for the truth or validity of the association or stereotype driving the bias. These associations and their contingent biases are likely to be activated every time we encounter a group member, even if we consciously think and state for example that most women are independent and most gay men are not promiscuous. Just reading this text has probably activated those associations for you. Once activated, which happens with little cognitive load, they exert influence over our information processing in the direction of our association. For example, when we encounter a person with whom we have associations, any ambiguity in the encounter will be interpreted in line
with those associations. They also produce small and spontaneous behavioural effects such as colder, less friendly nonverbal reactions. With the luxury of time and attention it may be possible for people to consciously consider their reactions but the speed and pervasive influence of the unconscious bias is such that the impulsive automatic reaction has often already become behaviour. The impact may not always be strong enough to be overt nor lead to legal censure but can often be 'micro-behaviours' (or micro-inequities) such as giving less eye contact, taking less interest in and feeling less comfortable with some groups of people.

The normality and automation of prejudice is particularly vigilant in situations when strong emotions are evoked, or where the behaviour and appearance of the people involved is very different to one's own. Brain imaging scans have demonstrated that when people are shown images of faces that differ in ethnic origin to themselves, it activates an irrational prejudgment in the brain's alert system for danger; the amygdale.

What does this tell us?

- That bias has a biological base, it is not simply about what we think
- That we don't have to believe a stereotype for it to impact our behaviour
- That bias is triggered at great speed and often escapes our conscious monitoring
- That our unconscious process are many more times more powerful than our conscious processes and cannot be expected to dominate our unconscious, no matter how hard we try
- We shouldn't assume that bias is static thing; it can be created or re-created by exposure to new situations, images or stories

What action should I take?

- Avoid supporting or strengthening your unconscious biases. Exposure to negative messages or images can reinforce negative associations, whether or not we consciously dismiss them.
• Expose yourself to positive images or stories prior to key decisions, for example reminding yourself of successful employees or experiences of a group for whom you may hold a bias
• Recognise and be particularly vigilant in situations when you have incomplete information or are being rushed to make a decision
• Recognise and be particularly vigilant in situations where your own biases are likely be most active
• Use one of the neurological tools designed to strengthen your positive associations and induce better processing of other group faces.

Bias control
Our bias control mechanisms utilise the same part of the brain as our day-to-day attentional resources. Usually they also operate automatically at about 100 milliseconds, well before our conscious processes engage. They turn our instinctive response into one which is more socially acceptable by shunting the decision to the frontal lobes for social processing. When we are placed under cognitive load we do not have the cognitive resources to allow our bias control mechanisms to operate. There is plentiful evidence that our unconscious associations about groups (the traits and expectations we have connected with the group) are unconsciously and automatically triggered without making demand on our attentional resources. This is why they are our preferred and more powerful option at times of other emotional and cognitive load. At work we are usually obliged to respond to others with limited time and attentional resources which creates the ideal conditions for our unconscious biases to take control of our decisions. When we are rushed, stressed, distracted, confused or angry this can lead to bias impinging upon our actions and decisions which is why bias may impinge on behaviour more often when we are busy with other things or under an emotional load. This automatic or implicit bias is largely inevitable and often unrelated to our conscious processes, and so escapes our insight and conscious control.
The control of our prejudices is part of the executive function of self regulation and uses the same limited cognitive resources as our working memory and attention. Self regulation is thought to take place within the brain’s medial pre-frontal cortex and studies with brain damaged patients have confirmed this. A highly proficient executive function can act as a
buffer against the adverse effect of our automatic biases (but the executive function is impaired by other cognitive and emotional load.

People are able to exert some control through simple compliance if told not to carry out a prejudiced act such as declining a job application. Conformity is often motivated by a desire not to be the subject of censure or sanction but also to avoid others seeing them as prejudiced. These 'costs' to the individual motivate them to want to manage or change their prejudices. Often this is contextually driven, and they may for example only wish to exert control in some settings (e.g. at work, at social gatherings or specifically during work decision making such as in appraisals). This situational or business case for control is useful when people are as being 'Externally Motivated' to be unbiased in given contexts to avoid censure or disadvantage. People may also be motivated to act in an unprejudiced manner based on the 'moral case' where the individual is less concerned with the personal costs and more concerned with the egalitarian desire to be unprejudiced across situations. So we can see that people can have either, both or none of these motivations to control.

Bias does not take place within a social vacuum. Indeed, bias requires a social context. Many of the studies of bias have been removed from any real social encounter where this reality can give bias a very different effect where the encounter is high-stakes, for example in interacting with colleagues, in selecting people for jobs or conducting performance reviews. Concerns about appearing prejudiced, especially in a organisational setting, can trigger new effects not seen in laboratory settings. Even the use of words like prejudice and bias can trigger this concern amongst majority or dominant groups and lead to more avoidance behaviour. Those concerned with being seen as prejudiced (externally motivated) are more likely to try to avoid the person or situation. This may include complete avoidance but also micro-behaviours such as sitting further away from someone, especially when the subject matter is sensitive to the aspect of individual difference (e.g. race, disability or gender). Being told to avoid being prejudiced increases reported actual anxiety but leads to more anxious non-verbal behaviour which suggests that under direction we can exert some control over our prejudices but that it induces an overt sense of anxiety which we are less able to control non-verbally. These deliberate attempts to control have individual differences in terms of behaviour. Those already skilled in the process find attempts to consciously control actually inhibit their regulatory performance, whereas those usually unable to control find
monitoring and control enhances their control performance. Providing negative feedback to someone around their prejudices impeded their cognitive ability and in turn their capacity to self regulate.

Some control is achieved through social norms. Where egalitarian values are evident with an organisation overt behaviour such as handing out job applications forms or inviting people to interview may be controlled but less overt micro-behaviours such as avoidance, less eye contact and spending less time with the individual may persist. Asserting a non bias position actually leads to an increase in the likelihood of prejudiced behaviour in people with low levels of bias (known as the ironic rebound effect). For those with an external motivation to control, pressure to be non biased can lead to anger and a feeling of threat which invokes a negative reaction (the 'backlash effect'). Public pressure to respond without bias leads to greater bias arising from an arousal which invokes the dominant group response to act against the minority group and more pronounced stereotyping. This response undermines the ability to act in a more egalitarian fashion. That having been said there is evidence that simply asking someone to be fair can achieve better decision making.

What does this tell us?

- That our bias control mechanisms may also operate automatically, if we create the right conditions
- That we can exert some control as long as we have some self insight, along with the attentional resources and mindfulness
- That people have different motivations to control and 'one size does not fit all' in terms of intervention
- The fear of being seen as biased make dominant group members anxious and likely to avoid or withdraw

What action should I take?

- Get tested to identify the types and strengths of your unconscious biases. This can enable you to avoid making unchallenged decisions about groups for whom you know you have negative associations. It enables you to create a
space, especially when under cognitive or emotional load, to consciously shunt the decision through your conscious, socially more adept parts of the brain (the frontal lobes). It also affords you the chance to hold your decision making up for scrutiny and challenge whether the decision is being influenced by your unconscious processes.

- Know where you are in terms of your motivation to change or manage your biases. It is unrealistic to expect to change deeply held beliefs, it may be all you can expect to manage them in key situations (e.g. appraisals, bonus awards, interviews, budget allocations)
- Our natural bias control mechanism needs energy to maintain its guard. Making sure we are supplying our brain with energy (sugar) at key times can help us maintain our defences. Taking breaks during extended or emotional discussions to replenish sugar levels can help.
- Remind yourself of the need to be fair and objective at key times, either in your head or with written reminders such as posters and cards
- Recognise that when we are majority or dominant group members working with minority or non-dominant groups members that our performance may be impacted by this inter-group anxiety
Reducing Organisational Bias

Much can be done at a personal level to enable us all to recognise, monitor, manage and reduce the impact of our personal biases. Organizations can support this in very practical ways within policies, practices and at key people decision making points.

**Selection**

**Market with an eye and an ear for unconscious bias.** Even before selection begins we can combat negative images which help create and reinforce negative associations. Producing positive role images and models within marketing can unconsciously begin to weaken negative associations. These need not be overt or made overly explicit: let the unconscious mind take the strain as research suggests that this can impact unconscious biases. Making a simple declaration about valuing a diverse workforce does have an impact, as can making it clear that the selection tools used and the assessors involved have undergone bias testing (if this is the case). Using language about the role and the assessment which do not reinforce unconscious bias and reduce anxiety about the assessment or role due to stereotype threats can also have a significant positive effect.

**Don’t rush.** When we are rushed to make a decision we are more likely to suppress abundant information and fall back onto our biases. Making sure we have sufficient time to carefully consider will help to reduce the impact of unconscious biases within the selection (and any other) process. This may mean being firm around how much time we spend on considering each employee/candidate so that those further down the paper pile don't get rushed as time runs out. In particular over stretching assessors in terms of the amount of information they have to process in a short space of time is likely to create the ideal conditions for unconscious bias to operate effectively.
Create the right environment for assessors. Assessors will believe that they already make fair decisions and may be resistant to having processes which they regard as taking away their powers. Training assessors (including sifters and interviewers) in unconscious bias and explaining why change to the process is necessary will help reduce this resistance. Poorly constructed or explained assessment criteria create ambiguity and confusion in which unconscious bias can flourish. In particular assessors should not use their intuition about people without being asked to evidence the basis for that intuition. Intuition is an unconscious process and can be a useful and powerful support for an assessor as long as we can be confident it isn't drawing on unconscious biases. Practically speaking assessors should take regular breaks and make sure brain sugar levels are maintained as this can help maintain the natural bias defences. This may sound incredibly simple but missing refreshment breaks to catch up or finish on time may help reintroduce our personal unconscious biases.

Sift unsighted. It is often more of an administrative convenience that a necessity for selectors to have access to irrelevant information during selection which can trigger our unconscious biases. Where possible sifting and other assessment should take place without assessors knowing anything which could unintentionally induce bias. For example, having candidate names on application forms alongside the critical information being used for sifting candidates will often tell an assessor the gender (James or Jane) and possibly the ethnic origin of a candidate (Jahaan or Judith). It may also trigger unconscious biases based on social class (Jocasta or Jackie) or age (Jade or June). Where possible paper or online applications for jobs or a promotion should be sifted using a reference number instead of a name. We should challenge the need for every piece of information sought in an application in terms of the selection decision to be made. Often we fall into the trap of asking for particular information (e.g. hobbies and interests) without thinking about the relevance of these questions, what role these will play in the decision making and what impact they may have for assessors with unconscious biases. Often these pieces of information will
be used unconsciously to decide if a person has similarity with the assessor, triggering affinity bias. Sometimes a candidate's university may be relevant but very rarely if at all, will the school they attended or their home address play any overt and conscious part in the decision. Simply restructuring applications forms so that irrelevant information is removed, or is able to be removed if irrelevant for a particular stage of assessment. Assessors may complain that they get less of a 'rounded picture' but often it is the small details which make up that rounded picture which are associated with group stereotypes.

**Select in, not out.** The research suggests that we tend to be harsher when we are selecting people out of a job pool than into the pool and that this tends to impact the groups who are the subject of our biases more strongly. This isn't just about the number of people in the potential pool. By asking assessors to match candidates to an agreed criteria and select them 'in' rather than to look for reasons to remove them from the process can reduce the potential for unconscious bias to influence the decision.

**Aggregate scores.** More complex selection methods often involve discussions amongst interviewers or assessors. The evidence is that this can often reintroduce bias to an otherwise very fair process as the opinions and language of individuals will be coloured by their unconscious biases. Even the unconscious biases of the assessor group themselves will make them attend to the views of some (often dominant group) assessors more than others and ascribe more weight to that view. Research shows that by getting assessors to decide their own ratings of a candidate and then simply aggregating scores across assessors, that fairer decisions are made. This does not preclude discussion about a candidate but discussion is more managed and directed to clarifying the evidence for a rating, and is not directed at getting any assessor to change their rating based on group consensus as that consensus is likely to be towards the dominant assessor's position. Practically speaking, aggregating scores can actually speed up the decision making process as
well as reducing the potential for unconscious bias. Assessors are often reluctant to use aggregating, possibly because part of the reward of assessing is in making that final decision. However, if the reasons are properly outlined assessors will quickly adapt.

Test assessors. Getting assessors bias tested to make them more aware of their personal biases is an excellent first step. If an assessor knows that they have unconscious and unintentional bias towards a particular group they can be more vigilant, as the research suggests that focussing our conscious intent can reduce our predilection for bias. Some assessors may decide to absent themselves from decisions where they know they have a stronger bias or seek support to verify and check their interpretations and decisions. If assessors maintain development logs or are statistically monitored for fairness, testing can help focus these activities. Hogrefe UK offer a suite of bias tests called 'Implicitly' which can tap and measure unconscious biases and link scores to the likelihood of this unintentionally impacting behaviour. The tests are offered looking at; Age, Body Weight, Disability, Ethnic origin, Faith, Gender, Sexual Orientation and Nationality. They can also be made bespoke to particular contexts and to address particular problems or issues. It can be a powerful message to candidates and good evidence in the event of complaint, that assessors are all tested for their personal biases.

Run neurological bias reduction exercises before assessment. Although there is no evidence that infrequently used neurological exercises can reduce bias in the longer term, there is evidence that they can, even when used once, reduce unconscious bias for short periods. One of the most effective and accessible is to create a short positive imagined contact with the group towards whom we may have a bias but there are a range of such exercises, some of which are web based and others are paper based.
Create an intent. Attitudes change when a host of factors come together which includes group norms and perceptions about the sanctions and the ability to act. Creating an intent to act both specifically (e.g. "I will only take account of the objective evidence presented to me") and more generally ("I will try to be fair") can impact bias in the short term. Getting assessors to reaffirm this commitment in the form of a signed 'contract' and reinforcing this with posters or pledge cards kept visible during assessment can reduce the impact of our unconscious biases.

Politely challenge. This may be as simple as asking an assessor what the relevance of a piece of information is in terms of the decision being made, and if that is self-evident or requires qualification. If an assessor suggests that a candidate 'lacks the relevant sector experience' or conversely 'was a major player in a key project' it should be usual to seek clarification as to what they mean by these comments and what the evidence is. The expectation of polite challenge should be part of assessor training and of the culture of assessment.

Listen carefully to the language being used. The type and frequency of language often gives insight to what is going on in assessment. There is a tendency for more positive performances to be given sporting or military overtones, which tend to be associated more with some groups than others. Phrases about people who are 'big hitters' or who would 'die in a ditch for the team' are more often used about males. Some very vague but positive phrases such as having 'charisma' are also associated with dominant groups and need to be politely challenged and evidence sought. The evidence is that the same behaviours which are seen in dominant groups as positive (e.g. described as 'assertive and focused on success') are seen as negative when exhibited in other groups (now being described as 'pushy and self interested'). Studying how assessors talk about different candidates or employees will give insight to the biases at work. More, and more enthusiastic language tends to be used towards favoured groups.
Check the language in reports and references
If assessors are reviewing or reading out reports, is it possible to edit those reports to make the language more neutral before they do this? We should not get carried away and try to sanitise all written reports as that will simply make the situation vague and re-induce bias but removing or changing overtly biased language before assessors see them will go somewhere to prevent triggering of unconscious bias.

Walk in someone else's shoes. Not literally, but being able to take the perspective of someone else can reduce our biases. We all have the ability to empathise with others but our biases tend to flood that capacity and quickly shunt information passed the parts of the brain where empathy is created (in the Anterior Cingulate Cortex). By forcing us to process that information socially we engage the empathetic response. By temporarily detaching the person from the negative situation we break the link between our biases and the person and look first to the context for blame. Asking assessors to think about performance in the wider context in this way can work but they need to have the authority to act with this new perspective: little point in me seeing where you are coming from if that cannot impact what I do about it. The research suggests that if an assessor has low self-esteem themselves they are less able to use this technique to reduce bias, so the organisational context has to be considered before using the method. If assessors (e.g. line managers) see themselves as treated badly and without respect, and are given no room to change what they do (e.g. because it is strictly dictated) they are less likely to display empathy.