

Unconscious bias

What is it, why should we care and what can we do about it?

Biases can be **explicit** in that we are aware when we are expressing them, or **implicit**, that operate outside of our day-to-day awareness. **Unconscious Bias is another term for implicit bias.**

Jennifer Eberhardt writes that “Implicit bias is a kind of distorting lens that’s a product of the architecture of our brain and the disparities in our society.”

To have bias is to be human

We all have preferences, or biases, based on our life experiences and belief systems.

Humans are hardwired to be on the alert for danger, and just as we tend to feel safe around people we sense are familiar, we also tend to feel wary around those we perceive as different.

We might have bias about someone’s accent, language or clothing choices. We might trust someone quickly because they remind us of an old friend. We might assume they are competent because they are tall, or incompetent due to their weight.

Why do we have bias?

Our brains create simplicity from chaos. They are constantly processing vast amounts of data, making meaning of different stimuli so that we can take action. The brain’s job is to keep us safe by detecting patterns, avoiding danger and allowing us to thrive in the future. Over time, the brain notices patterns and categorizes these to remember what has kept us safe, and what has caused us pain. These categories become biases.

“But I’m a scientist, I work with data.”

No-one is immune from bias. Research has shown that what we notice is impacted even when we rationally know stereotypes to be false!

Here are some common ways our brains create simplicity from chaos:

1. We fill in characteristics from stereotypes, generalities and prior histories.
2. We notice flaws in others more easily than we notice flaws in ourselves.
3. We are drawn to details that confirm our own existing beliefs = confirmation bias.
4. We **think** we know what other people are thinking.

Why is this important?

1. Our decision making is not as objective as we think it is.
2. We tend to expect people to agree with us and to hold similar sets of assumptions. If they do not, we may miscommunicate.

“Neither our evolutionary path nor our current culture dooms us to to be held hostage to bias. Change requires a kind of open-minded attention that is well within our reach.”

Jennifer Eberhardt, PhD

How can we mitigate against bias?

1. When making decisions about people, choose measurable, consistent criteria and stick to them.
2. Become aware of your own personal biases and acknowledge where you have a preference before making a decision.
3. Talk openly about team biases, ask a group to identify any ‘group think’ vulnerabilities.
4. Consider a ‘bias-busting’ prep meeting before important discussions, to remind the team of known biases and be prepared to pause and reflect.



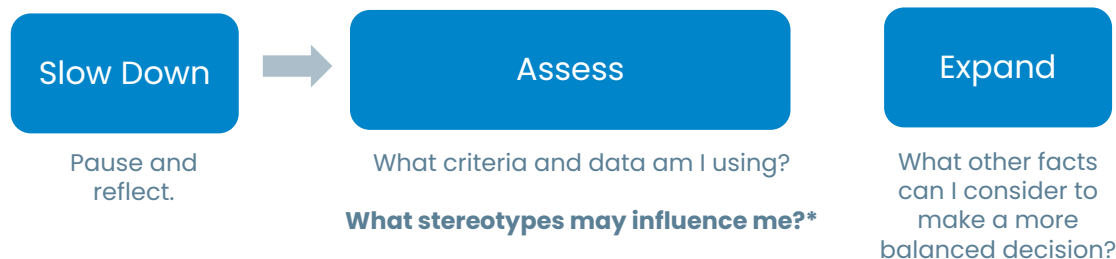
Common Types of Bias.

Which of these do you recognize, in yourself or others?

Type of Bias	Brief Description
Affinity	Tendency to form an impression based on shared, non-relevant characteristics, e.g., speaks with a familiar accent, takes part in same community activities.
Attribution	Tendency to attribute credit to ourselves for successes and to outside causes for failures. Conversely, to view others as more responsible for their own failings.
Confirmation	Tendency to listen more often to information that confirms our existing beliefs. Through this bias, people tend to favor information that reinforces the things they already think or believe.
False-Consensus	Tendency to overestimate how much others agree with our beliefs, behaviors, values.
Halo/Horns	Impression overly weighted by a single factor (either positive or negative), e.g., 'strong presenter' = top performer.
Diagnosis Bias	Tendency to associate certain qualities with initial perceived value, e.g., height and leadership abilities; warmth and competence, obesity and low competence.
Pattern Recognition	Tendency to sort information based on prior experience and habit; "they've always been a top performer".



Checking your Biases



* You can test to see what biases you hold on the Harvard Implicit Association Test website (link below).



Where can I go to learn more?

Biased: Uncovering the Hidden Prejudice That Shapes What We See, Think, and Do by Jennifer L. Eberhardt, PhD

www.wef.org/dei for WEF DEI Committee resources

[Harvard Implicit Association Test](https://implicit.harvard.edu) <https://implicit.harvard.edu>

[Hidden Brain Podcast](#) on NPR

[Cognitive Bias Codex](#) on Wikipedia

Questions: Self-Reflection

1. Which of these commonly occurring biases do you already recognize?
2. What early life experience, cultural values or beliefs might explain your preferences?
3. How could you adjust for this bias, e.g., in day-to-day decision making?
4. What bias or tendency might be an obstacle to you being perceived as an inclusive leader? Who might be impacted?