Understanding the impact of unconscious bias

This note draws on recent seminars and publications exploring the impact of unconscious bias on decision-making, for example in staff recruitment, promotion and other opportunities.

What is unconscious bias?

Put simply, unconscious bias is identified by psychologists as part of everyone’s social identity: we are each ‘hard-wired’ to respond positively to people we perceive to be like us and to react against people perceived to be too different to ‘fit in’ or to pose a threat to us. Such bias can be the product, for example, of social stereotypes, family influence or experience (real or perceived – e.g. crossing the road to avoid proximity to a group of noisy young men, who may be perfectly harmless.) In the same way as a pleasant memory automatically produces a smile, we respond in very predictable ways to internal messages that we formulate and send to ourselves.

Demonstrating unconscious bias

The Implicit Association Test (IAT) developed at Harvard measures the hidden attitudes and beliefs that determine our preferences for certain groups over others. It uses images flashed on screen which participants match with a list of words, some carrying positive and others negative associations, to test a wide range of possible biases, including age, gender and race. The outcome measured is not the actual association reached but the time taken to reach it. It is common, for example, for participants to take longer to identify images of BME people with positive rather than negative words than it takes them to similarly match images of white people. The implication is that, in a situation like this, where we know that our views are being tested, we are taking the time to use our conscious mind to mitigate the impact of buried bias. So the IAT not only demonstrates that we are biased, but that mindfulness (exercising our conscious mind) can help to mitigate bias.

So, although we all have biases, they do not necessarily result in discrimination. However, if we are not aware of them and taking steps to keep them consciously under control, they will affect our thinking and decisions, particularly those taken under pressure.

Research on unconscious bias

Research in this field includes:

A survey carried out on behalf of the charity Changing Faces, which found that nine out of ten people implicitly judge those with facial disfigurements negatively.

A study carried out by business psychologists Pearn Kandola looking at the associations between senior and junior positions, and men and women: they found a bias towards associating men with senior jobs and women with junior ones. This bias was as true of the women in the sample as of the men.

Work with an orchestra whose auditions tended to result in the appointment of men: auditions held with candidates screened from the selectors, who then had no information about the sex of the candidate, resulted in greater equality in appointments.

Research commissioned by the Department of Work and Pensions in association with Oxford University in which two matched applications or CVs with names recognised as having different ethnicities were submitted to the same advertised vacancies: where the recruitment process allowed shortlisters to see applicants’ names, there was significant discrimination based on perceived name ethnicity.
Economists at the University of Bristol found that teacher assessments of their black students marked them lower than did external examiners’ assessments. This difference was not present in the assessment of white students.

It’s unlikely that any of these research subjects wanted to be biased.

**Mitigating unconscious bias**

Yet research suggests that, despite the complex nature of the problem, mitigating the impact of unconscious bias is a relatively simple matter of raising awareness and developing a more mindful approach at key decision-making times. Occupational psychologists Pearn Kandola, starting from the perspective that inclusive equality and diversity has not so far proved achievable, even in organisations with high-quality policies and practices, and that many such organisations are now ‘stuck’, with under-representation of minorities and women continuing despite their best efforts, have developed a process for eliminating bias. This is based on evidence that consciously creating an ‘implementation intentions plan’ (telling ourselves what we intend to achieve) can train us to recognise certain situations and to consciously behave differently in them. This differs from a ‘goal intention’, which remains abstract (‘I will exercise more’ compared with ‘I’ll go for a 30-minute walk when I get home’). Psychologically, the goal intention remains abstract and remote from us, while the implementation intention has a psychological weight more akin to a lived experience – we can feel ourselves doing it.

Validated experiments in this field include use of the IAT to look at the extent to which bias can be reduced using an implementation intention. For example, when three groups of volunteers were asked to associate various ‘hire and fire’ words with dark or light skin-toned faces (no other features other than skin tone changed):

- the control group, given no further instructions, showed a preference for hiring light-skinned people;
- the group given the goal intention ‘don’t be prejudiced’ demonstrated half the race bias of the control group;
- participants given the implementation intention ‘if I see a dark face, then I’ll ignore colour’ demonstrated no prejudice.

A further study used the IAT to look at the stereotype associating management with maleness and produced similar outcomes. In this case participants were re-tested after three weeks, when the positive effects measured in the implementation intention group were still active, suggesting that we can train ourselves to reform habits based on bias. Other experiments have looked at attitudes to short men, homeless people and football fans.

**References**


**Oxford Learning Institute courses**

Managing diversity: understanding and minimising the impact of stereotype and unconscious bias

Equality and diversity