SHIFT
HR COMPLIANCE TRAINING™

UNCONSCIOUS BIAS:
EVERYTHING EMPLOYERS WANT TO KNOW

A father and his son are in a car accident. The father dies at the scene and the son, badly injured, is rushed to the hospital. In the operating room, the surgeon refuses to operate, saying, "I can't operate on this boy. He is my son."

This well-known brain teaser has puzzled readers for decades. Studies have shown that as many as 75 percent of people cannot solve it, and those who do figure it out take several minutes to grasp that the boy's mother could be the surgeon.[1]

NURSE? ↘

↖ CEO?

↗ IMPLICIT ASSOCIATIONS AND HIDDEN BIASES

Despite having good intentions, when we hear the words "surgeon" or "CEO," the image that pops into our minds is often male. Similarly, when we hear the words "nurse" or "administrative assistant," a female might quickly come to mind. These are implicit, automatic associations. They happen outside of our awareness, and they often happen in direct contrast to our consciously held, explicit beliefs.

These hidden, automatic, involuntary associations influence behavior in consequential ways. They extend beyond the images in our heads to our beliefs about performance and potential. Consider, for example, that job applicants with white-sounding names are 50% more likely to get callbacks for interviews than those with black sounding names.[2] Further, the job applicant "John" is rated as significantly more competent and hirable than "Jennifer," and is offered a higher starting salary, despite their identical credentials.[3]

↗ THE IAT: REVEALING HIDDEN BIASES OF GOOD PEOPLE

We all carry unconscious biases. That is, we hold assumptions about social groups that—without our awareness or conscious control—shape our likes and dislikes and our judgments about people's abilities, potential, and character.[4]

In the mid-1990s, psychologists at Harvard University and the University of Washington developed an intriguing way of uncovering these unconscious biases and revealing just how pervasive they are. This computer-based test, called the **Implicit Associations Test (IAT),** requires that users rapidly click specific letters on a keyboard in order to pair attributes (e.g., "logical" or "emotional") with one of two categories (e.g., "male" or "female"). Easier pairings (faster responses) are interpreted as having a stronger "association" than more difficult pairings (slower responses).

Most famously, the IAT has shown that even the most consciously fair people are quicker to associate positive attributes with white faces than with black faces. Indeed, of IAT users:

75% have an implicit preference for white people over black people[5]
76% more readily associate "males" with "career" and "females" with "family"[6]
70% more readily associate "male" with "science" and "female" "with the arts"[7]
76% have a preference for people without a disability.[8]

Over 2.5 million people have taken the IAT **(available at https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/).** From feminists to liberal scholars (including the psychologist who created the test), many IAT users have found it sobering to discover that, despite their good intentions and what they might believe intellectually, they hold hidden biases about many social groups.

↗ OUR BIASED BRAINS

The human brain is hard-wired to make decisions rapidly, drawing upon our assumptions and experiences without our awareness. In evolutionary times, humans needed to make instantaneous judgments--about who and what was safe, favorable, and valuable – as a matter of survival. Indeed, a quick determination of whether or not a person was in one's "in-group" could be lifesaving.

This implicit, hidden processing remains incredibly useful today. We are constantly bombarded by massive amounts of information through all of our senses. Our hidden, automatic associations enable us to manage all of this information efficiently but not always effectively. Completely unbeknownst to our conscious brain, we are constantly making lightning-fast generalizations about the people, places, and things we encounter. These generalizations are useful much of the time, but they often miss very important distinctions.

↗ THE IMPACT OF UNCONSCIOUS BIAS IN THE WORKPLACE

Race, gender, and age are some of the categories that come to mind when we think about biases. **However, people carry unconscious biases, both positive and negative, about a myriad of characteristics that can be much more subtle.** For example, we hold stereotypes based on height and weight, marital or parental status, foreign or regional accents, country or region of origin, introversion or extroversion, just to name a few. It can be harder to recognize the differential treatment that might occur based on these subtler biases. For example: Do we see the married man as a more stable employee? Does the single mother seem unreliable? Does an employee's Southern drawl make him seem less bright and savvy?

Positive and negative biases regarding such characteristics can imperceptibly affect:

- Recruitment, hiring, and offer terms
- Onboarding and benefit plan design
- Mentoring programs and identification of high flyers
- Employee interactions and employee satisfaction
- Team and project assignments
- Performance evaluations, compensation, and promotions
- Client or customer service
- Budget decisions and exploration of new business opportunities
- Openness to new ideas and innovative solutions

At every point of contact, unconscious biases can lead people to make decisions and act in ways that inadvertently undermine an organization's goal of creating a diverse and inclusive work environment and hiring the most qualified candidates. The results can be poor employee performance, stifled and stunted creativity, lost business, or, even worse, lengthy and costly litigation.

↗ WORKPLACE EXAMPLES: Affinity Bias and Micro-aggressions

AFFINITY BIAS

Interestingly, researchers who study unconscious bias contend that modern discrimination is less likely to take the form of harm inflicted on "them." More and more, discrimination results from our big and small actions that unfairly enable those who are "like us."[9] Perhaps the most subtle, and therefore the most insidious, of our unconscious biases are those that do not involve negative stereotypes. For example, we might favor our family members, members of our own community, and people with whom we feel a connection based on shared characteristics or experiences.

↗ This is known as ***THE AFFINITY BIAS***, and it can lead to preferential treatment of candidates and employees whom we consider to be more "like us."

Consider a manager who discovers that she and a candidate whom she is interviewing have a shared background – they both moved from small Midwestern towns to pursue their careers in the "big city." As a result of this connection, the manager feels an almost instant rapport with the candidate. Consequently, the manager views the candidate's accomplishments, demeanor, and presentation more positively than those of the other equally (or potentially more) qualified candidates, and she deems her to be a better "fit" for the job.

If the candidate is hired, the affinity bias will likely continue to exert its influence, as the manager eagerly welcomes ideas from this employee and provides opportunities for the employee to shine. The subtle, unintentional advantage conferred by this Midwestern "bond" has the effect of creating unequal opportunities that limit diversity and may undermine organizational performance. This manager is essentially, if unknowingly, reproducing herself throughout the organization.

MICRO-AGGRESSIONS

As a result of our unconscious biases, we might unwittingly send subtle messages to the people around us through our body language, word choice, and behavior.

> Derald Wing Sue, Professor of Psychology and Education at Columbia University, calls these signals ***MICRO-AGGRESSIONS*** and defines them as "the brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial, gender, sexual-orientation, and religious slights and insults."[10]

EXAMPLES OF MICRO-AGGRESSIONS INCLUDE:

- An employee jokingly asks a male and female co-worker who share an office: "Who does the dishes?"
- A male co-worker expresses surprise at a female co-worker's skill at a "typically male task"
- A third generation Asian American is complimented for his perfect English

Such communications can diminish employee engagement, undermine workplace relationships, and expose a company to legal risk.

WHAT CAN WE DO TO COMBAT UNCONSCIOUS BIAS IN THE WORKPLACE?

Hidden bias is universal. It does not make us bad people. Once we come to this understanding, we are in a better, more comfortable position to talk about it, recognize its harmful (albeit unintended) effects, and accept the challenge to work on counteracting the biases that we all have. The good news is that this does not need to involve complex new processes or costly initiatives.

Rather, we can start with deliberate, conscious efforts to incorporate inclusiveness in our business decisions and in our everyday workplace interactions.

In an effort to prevent instances of affinity bias, for example, managers might be encouraged to:

- **Conduct joint interviews so that multiple managers interact with the same candidate simultaneously**
- **Deliberately increase mentoring people who are not like them**
- **Examine critically who they are identifying to provide input and new ideas, attend client meetings, work on and lead projects, and be promoted. Ask, "Do they always resemble me in some way?"**

When it comes to reducing and eliminating micro-aggressions in the workplace, employees might shift their focus to the flip-side of micro-aggressions; that is, ***MICRO-AFFIRMATIONS.*** These are small, everyday gestures of respect that make people feel included and valued. Micro-affirmations focus on positive reinforcement and encourage fair treatment and respect.

Micro-affirmations include such simple but powerful actions as:
- Attentively listening when others are speaking
- Actively seeking input from all participants and stakeholders – even if their personal styles differ from your own
- Acknowledging how others are feeling, separate from the facts of a situation

When it comes to micro-affirmations, small details can make a difference. At Google, for example, a number of conference rooms, which have traditionally been named after scientists, were renamed after women scientists to promote a more gender-balanced work environment.

↗ SOME ADDITIONAL PRACTICE TIPS

We conclude with two additional practice tips for reducing the influence of unconscious biases on our decision-making, each followed by compelling real-world or research evidence that supports its effectiveness:

- **Focus on skills and eliminate distractions (e.g., implement blind resume screening)**

A study through the Clayman Institute of Gender Studies at Stanford University found that the percentage of women musicians in orchestras rose from 5% to 25% since the 1970s – an increase that occurred when judges began auditioning musicians behind screens.[11] Of course, this is not to suggest that all interviews must be done blind. However, a conscious refocusing on skills can help eliminate some of the irrelevant distractions that can trigger our biases.

- **Standardize interview questions and establish clear criteria for evaluations before looking at candidates' qualifications**

Researchers at the Clayman Institute found that gender biases in choosing between a male and female candidate for a police chief position were reduced when those making the selection committed to an evaluation criteria before reviewing applications. Overall, participants had overwhelming preference for the candidate with more education (rather than experience)—except when they knew that the more educated candidate was female. However, when participants stated their preference for education over experience ahead of time, they followed through on this preference—even when it meant choosing the female candidate. The take-home point: when it comes to decisions about choosing individuals to hire, mentor, promote, and reward, the establishment of clear criteria can keep us from unwittingly shifting our criteria to favor the employee whom we are predisposed to choose.

↗ DIVERSITY IS NOT JUST THE RIGHT THING TO DO; IT'S ALSO GOOD FOR BUSINESS

In an increasingly global business environment with changing workforce and client demographics, it is clear that a workplace that embraces diversity is simply good for business. ***Diverse and inclusive work environments promote more ideas, more innovation, and better problem-solving. They attract clients, and attract, cultivate, and retain talent.***

One of the most important things we can do to promote a diverse, inclusive workplace is to correct for the unconscious biases that we all have. This paper has touched on just a few of the many ways in which organizations might equip their well-intentioned employees with the tools to interrupt their hidden biases and to think deliberately about how to effect positive changes within their organization.

---

[1] Reynolds D.J, Garnham A., & Oakhill, J. (2006) Evidence of immediate activation of gender information from a social role name. Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology 59 (5): 886-903.
[2] Bertrand, Marianne, and Sendhil Mullainathan. 2004. Are Emily and Greg More Employable Than Lakisha and Jamal? A Field Experiment on Labor Market Discrimination. American Economic Review, 94(4): 991-1013.
[3] Moss-Racusin, C. A., Dovidio, J. F., Brescoll, V. L., Graham, M., & Handelsman, J. (2012). Science faculty's subtle gender biases favor male students. In Wyer, M., Barbercheck, M., Cookmeyer, D., Ozturk, H. O., & Wayne, M., Women, science and technology: A reader in feminist science studies. New York: Routledge, pp. 3-14.
[4] Banaji, M. R., & Greenwald, A. G. (2013). Blindspot: Hidden biases of good people. New York: Delacorte Press.
[5] Nosek, B., Smyth, F., Hansen, J., Devos, T., Lindner, N., Ranganath, K., Smith, C. T., & Banaji, M. (January 01, 2007). Pervasiveness and correlates of implicit attitudes and stereotypes. European Review of Social Psychology, 18, 1, 36-88.
[6] Nosek, B. A., Smyth, F. L., Sriram, N., Lindner, N. M., Devos, T., Ayala, A., Bar-Anan, Y., & Greenwald, A. G. (January 01, 2009). National differences in gender-science stereotypes predict national sex differences in science and math achievement. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America, 106, 26, 10593-7.
[7] Nosek, B., Smyth, F., Hansen, J., Devos, T., Lindner, N., Ranganath, K., Smith, C. T., & Banaji, M. (January 01, 2007). Pervasiveness and correlates of implicit attitudes and stereotypes. European Review of Social Psychology, 18, 1, 36-88.
[8] Employer's Network for Equality and Inclusion (2014). Disability: A research study on unconscious bias.
[9] Banaji, M. R., & Greenwald, A. G. (2013). Blindspot: Hidden biases of good people. New York: Delacorte Press.
[10] Sue, D. W., Capodilupo, C. M., Torino, G. C., Bucceri, J. M., Holder, A. M., Nadal, K. L., & Esquilin, M. (January 01, 2007). Racial micro-aggressions in everyday life: implications for clinical practice. The American Psychologist, 62, 4.)
[11] http://gender.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/UpRising2013.pdf