



Embracing Diversity:

Recognising and Overcoming Unconscious Bias

Unconscious Bias – What’s the Deal?

We all have unconscious biases that operate outside of our awareness and help us process the volumes of data we deal with every day. To quote Dr David Rock of the NeuroLeadership Institute: “If you have a brain, you are biased”. There are many different kinds of bias. However, biases are not useful in all situations. In particular, biases can lead to errors in decision-making. The good news is, we can learn to recognize our biases and change them if they are not helpful.

Biases can be subtle and triggered by many different factors. David Rock describes these as the “SEEDS”¹ of bias. These include similarity (preference for people like oneself), expedience (familiarity and ease), experience (belief that perceptions are accurate), distance (closer in terms of time & location perceived as better than distant) and safety (bad is stronger than good). Multiple biases may come into play at once.

Organizations can consider many dimensions of diversity: gender, race, ethnic group, religion, age, LGBT, and disability. The Harvard Implicit Bias² tests allow you to establish your level of bias in relation to many of these dimensions.

The business case is convincing: various studies have shown that diverse companies are more successful. For example, the 2015 DiversityInc report showed that the 50 companies which had the most diversity also outperformed the market. These companies had better corporate governance and created opportunities for innovation.³ All the same, most companies do not yet display diversity at the tops of their organizations.

Diversity is important because diversity of thought leads to better decisions and increased innovation, reducing “groupthink”.

Most studies have been conducted in the area of gender and racial diversity. It is particularly useful to consider various types of Unconscious Bias when examining the root causes of diversity challenges: Performance Bias, Performance Attribution Bias, Likeability/Competence Bias, Maternal Bias, Confidence Bias.

By understanding and learning to recognize the mechanisms of these biases, we can learn to interrupt bias when it happens, allowing us to make more objective people decisions and ultimately build more diverse leadership teams.

¹ https://neuroleadership.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Breaking-Workplace-Bias-at-its-Source_Rock_17Mar15.pdf

² <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/education.html>

³ <http://www.ibtimes.com.au/diversity-helps-market-performance-novartis-tops-diversityinc-ranking-1443730>

Performance Bias

What is it?

White males are assumed to have higher potential than either females or black males. Their performance is often overestimated in comparison to female performance. This can have an impact in hiring or promotion decisions and various other situations.

What does the research say?

- Goldin and Rouse (2000) demonstrated that when auditioning for orchestras, females were 50% more likely to succeed in the first round when they played behind a curtain, so that their gender was not visible.⁴
- Steinpreis et al (1999) showed that identical CVs differing only in male versus female names, led to the “male” CVs being seen as the better candidates than the “females” (79% versus 49% selected).⁵
- Bertrand & Mullainathan (2004) conducted a study in which they showed that candidates with white-sounding names were 50% more likely to be invited to an interview than candidates with a black-sounding name.⁶
- Reeves (2014) found that law partners grading a memo full of errors would give authors a better grade if the author was thought to be white. They also made more negative qualitative comments regarding the black authors.⁷

Performance Attribution Bias

What is it?

Attribution biases are displayed by both men and women, both towards themselves and towards others. Men’s successes tend to be explained by innate ability & skills, their failures by external factors, such as lack of preparation or bad luck. Women’s successes are often explained by external factors, such as hard work or luck, their failures are assumed to be lack of skill. Women’s mistakes judged more harshly than men’s. Minority groups might be perceived as receiving opportunities for diversity reasons rather than ability.

As a result, performance is not evaluated in the same way – less credit given for successes, less influence in group, receiving more blame⁸ & judged more harshly for errors.

In addition, self-assessment can be negatively impacted in women, with women under-estimating their abilities and resulting self-limiting behaviour.⁹

What does the research say?

Heilman & Hayes (2005) explored how ambiguity about the source of a successful joint performance outcome promotes attribution biases, negatively affecting evaluations of women. Participants read descriptions of a mixed-sex dyad’s work and were asked to evaluate its male and female members. Results indicated that in the absence of clear evidence to the contrary, female members were devalued as compared with their male counterparts—they were rated as being less competent, less influential, and less likely to have played a leadership role in work on the task.¹⁰

⁴ Goldin, C. & Rouse, C. (2000). Orchestrating impartiality: the impact of “blind” auditions on female musicians. *The American Economic Review* 90 (4): 715-741.

http://www.cos.gatech.edu/facultyres/Diversity_Studies/Goldin_Orchestrating%20Impartiality.pdf

⁵ Steinpreis, R.E., Anders, K.A., Ritzke, D. (1999). The impact of gender on the review of curricula vitae of job applicants and tenure candidates: a national empirical study. *Sex Roles*, 41(7-8), 509-28.

<http://advance.cornell.edu/documents/ImpactofGender.pdf>

⁶ Bertrand & Mullainathan (2004). Are Emily and Greg more employable than Lakisha and Jamal? A field experiment on Labor market discrimination. *The American Economic Review*, 94 (4), 991-1013.

⁷ Reeves, A.N. (2014) *Written in black and white: exploring confirmation bias in racialized perceptions of writing skills*. Yellow Paper Series, Nextions Consulting.

⁸ Hayes M.C. & Lawrence, J.S. (2012). Who’s to blame? Attributions of blame in unsuccessful mixed-sex teams. *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, 34(6), 558-564.

⁹ Clance, P.R. & Imes, S. (1978) *The Impostor Syndrome in High Achieving Women (Dynamics and Therapeutic Intervention)* Psychotherapy Theory, Research and Practice Volume 15, #3, Fall 1978

http://www.paulinroseclance.com/pdf/ip_high_achieving_women.pdf

¹⁰ Heilman, M.E. & Hayes, M.C. (2005). No credit where credit is due: attributional rationalization of women’s success in male-female teams. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 90(5), 905-926;

Likeability/Competence Bias

What is it?

For women to be seen as effective, they need to be likable as well as competent. This is related to female stereotypes that women should be warm, nurturing, supportive etc. As a result, women's behaviour is often judged more harshly when it does not conform to the female stereotype e.g. seen as "aggressive" versus "assertive", "self-centred" versus "focused" etc.

However, leadership is often associated with more stereotypically male qualities – such as decisiveness, authoritativeness or strength, putting females in a difficult position trying to balance both kinds of behaviour. In performance evaluations, women are much more likely than men to receive negative feedback about their communication style.

What does the research say?

Studies have shown that gender stereotypes and the expectations they produce about both what women are like (descriptive) and how they should behave (prescriptive) can result in devaluation of their performance, denial of credit to them for their successes, or their penalization for being competent.^{11 12}

Maternity Bias

What is it?

Women tend to be judged as less effective or less dedicated on the basis of being a mother. For instance, women are assumed to be distracted by family responsibilities. Often, women may not be considered for promotion or are not offered larger roles (that would lead to promotion). They are also held to higher performance standards. Due to the performance attribution bias women may also doubt their own ability to balance both work and family responsibilities.

What does the research say?

Research by Correll et al (2007) demonstrates that women with children are systematically disadvantaged in hiring and other career related settings.¹³

Confidence Bias

What is it?

Confident individuals are perceived as more competent than less confident but equally (or even more) competent individuals. Often, being vocal and opinionated is valued over other equally important leadership principles, leading to the perception of an individual's "presence" as a more desirable attribute than other equally effective skills. As a result a person's achievements can be over-estimated, and less confident people are seen as less competent than equally or less competent individuals with more confidence.

What does the research say?

A study by Cameron et al (2012) indicated that overconfidence leads to higher social status via behavioral signature that makes the individual appear competent to others.¹⁴

¹¹ Heilman, M.E. (2001) Description and Prescription: How Gender Stereotypes Prevent Women's Ascent Up the Organizational Ladder (Journal of Social Issues Volume 57, Issue 4, pages 657–674, Winter 2001)

<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/0022-4537.00234/abstract>

¹² <https://kathrynwelds.com/2013/05/05/womens-likeability-competence-dilemma-overcoming-the-backlash-effect/>

¹³ Correll, S.J., Benard, S., Paik, I. (2007) Getting a Job: Is There a Motherhood Penalty? (American Journal of Sociology, Vol. 112, No. 5, pp. 1297-1339, The University of Chicago Press.

<http://gender.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/motherhoodpenalty.pdf>,

¹⁴ Cameron, Brion, Morre & Kennedy, „A status-enhancement account of overconfidence (2012);

<http://haas.berkeley.edu/faculty/papers/anderson/status%20enhancement%20account%20of%20overconfidence.pdf>