

UNDERSTANDING BIAS

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Bias affects every person and affects our thoughts, beliefs and interactions with one another. As neutrals in a mediation or organizational intervention, it is important to be aware of the effect of your own biases on the situation.

Bias is defined as "prejudice in favor of or against one thing, person, or group compared with another, usually in a way considered to be unfair." One can be biased in favor or against another leading to positive or negative effects. Most often people think of bias in terms of race or ethnicity, but it can be directed toward any characteristic or adherence to a social group. Potential biases may involve gender, age, physical ability, weight, sexual orientation, mental health, and religion. There are two types of bias:

1. Explicit or Conscious Bias

2. Implicit or Unconscious Bias

Implicit biases are stereotypes and attitudes we harbor in our unconscious that influence our actions and understanding of others. Deeply ingrained, implicit biases activate automatically - for better or worse - to help us make sense of and react to the world around us. These unconscious associations develop over time through experiences beginning at a young age. They are influenced by our family upbringing, social groups to which we belong, and what we observe in the media. Often our implicit biases come into play when we are in stressful situations or trying to multi-task. During times of distraction, our unconscious associations kick in to help us make snap judgements and quickly process what is happening.

One example of structural gender bias shows how the public reacts to and prepares for male and female hurricane names. A study shows that people (male and female participants) perceive female-named hurricanes to be less powerful and less destructive than hurricanes with masculine names. This hits on a societal gender bias that men are perceived to have more power and strength than women.

Key points about implicit bias:

- They are pervasive and powerful. No one is immune to implicit bias.
- Implicit and explicit bias are different but can operate at the same time and often work together to reinforce the other.
- We may have implicit biases that do not match or even contradict outwardly expressed beliefs.

- Formed implicit biases usually benefit our in-groups or groups to which we belong. However, it is possible to hold implicit biases that go against our own groups.

- Implicit biases can be slowly changed or unlearned with debiasing techniques.

The first step to changing implicit bias is to recognize that we all have them and to identify how they are operating and influencing your own unconscious. Harvard University hosts free online Implicit Association Tests (IAT) through Project Implicit covering a variety of topics like gender, age, religion and race. You can take unlimited tests on their website.

Resources

<https://diversity.ucsf.edu/resources/unconscious-bias>

<http://kirwaninstitute.osu.edu/research/understanding-implicit-bias/>

<https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/aboutus.html>