

## Testing Your Own Unconscious Bias

The most effective tool available for testing one's own unconscious bias is the Implicit Association Test (IAT), created and maintained by Project Implicit, a consortium made up of researchers from Harvard University, the University of Virginia, and the University of Washington. The IAT was created more than 10 years ago and has now been used by millions of people in over 20 countries. Researchers at these three schools, as well as others, have used the test to study many aspects of organizational and social performance, ranging from healthcare decisions to the operations of the criminal justice system. To take the IAT, without charge, go to <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/>.

## Exploring Unconscious Bias

by Howard Ross, Founder & Chief Learning Officer, Cook Ross, Inc.

Consider this: Less than 15% of American men are over six foot tall, yet almost 60% of corporate CEOs are over six foot tall. Less than 4% of American men are over six foot, two inches tall, yet more than 36% of corporate CEOs are over six foot, two inches tall.<sup>1</sup> Why does this happen? Clearly corporate boards of directors do not, when conducting a CEO search, send out a message to “get us a tall guy,” and yet the numbers speak for themselves. In fact, when corrected for age and gender, an inch of height is worth approximately \$789 per year in salary!<sup>2</sup> Similar patterns are true for Generals and Admirals in the Military, and even for Presidents of the United States. The last elected President whose height was below average was William McKinley in 1896, and he was “ridiculed in the press as ‘a little boy.’”<sup>3</sup>

It seems not only unfair, but patently absurd to choose a CEO because of height, just like it is unfair and absurd to give employees lower performance evaluations solely because they are overweight. Or to prescribe medical procedures to people more often because of their race. Or to treat the same people different ways because of their clothing. Or even to call on boys more often than girls when they raise their hands in school. And yet, all of these things continuously happen, and they are but a small sampling of the hundreds of ways we make decisions every day in favor of one group, and to the detriment of others, without even realizing we're doing it.

<sup>1</sup> Malcolm Gladwell discusses this phenomenon in his book, *Blink*, based on research conducted by Timothy Judge and Daniel Cable.

<sup>2</sup> Judge, Timothy A., and Cable, Daniel M., “The Effect of Physical Height on Workplace Success and Income,” *Journal of Applied Psychology*, June 2004, p. 435

<sup>3</sup> Judge, Timothy A., and Cable, Daniel M., “The Effect of Physical Height on Workplace Success and Income,” *Journal of Applied Psychology*, June 2004, p. 428

Lately, the concept of unconscious bias or “hidden bias” has come into the forefront of our work as diversity advocates because the dynamics of diversity are changing as we enter the 21st Century. Our tradition paradigm has generally assumed that patterns of discriminatory behavior in organizations are conscious; that people who know better do the right thing, and those who don’t cause bias. As a result, we have developed a “good person/bad person” paradigm of diversity: a belief that good people are not biased, but inclusive, and that bad people are the biased ones.

One of the core drivers behind the work of diversity and inclusion professionals, almost since the inception of the first corporate diversity efforts, has been to find the “bad people” and fix them; to eradicate bias. There is good reason for this. If we are going to create a just and equitable society, and if we are going to create organizations in which everybody can have access to their fair measure of success, it clearly is not consistent for some people to be discriminated against based on their identification with a particular group. Also, clear examples of conscious bias and discrimination still exist, whether in broader societal examples like the recent incidents in Jena, Louisiana, or in more specific organizational examples.

Driven by this desire to combat inequities, we have worked hard through societal measures, like civil and human rights initiatives, to reduce or eliminate bias. We have put a lot of attention on who “gets” diversity, without realizing that to a degree our approach has been self-serving and even arrogant. “If they were as (wise, noble, righteous, good, etc.) as us, then they would ‘get it’ like we do!” Usually this is based on the notion that people make choices to discriminate due to underlying negative feelings toward some groups or feelings of superiority about their own. There is no doubt that this is often true. But what if, more times than not, people make choices that discriminate against one group and in favor of another, without even realizing that they are doing it, and, perhaps even more strikingly, against their own conscious belief that they are being unbiased in their decision-making? What if we can make these kinds of unconscious decisions even about people like ourselves?

The problem with the good person/bad person paradigm is two-fold: it virtually assures that both on a collective and individual basis we will never “do diversity right” because every human being has bias of one kind or another. Secondly, it demonstrates a lack of understanding of a reality: *human beings, at some level, need bias to survive*. So, are we biased? Of course. Virtually every one of us is biased toward something, somebody, or some group.

The concept of the unconscious was, of course, Freud’s primary gift to the science of the mind, and, while it is not the purpose of this paper to delve too deeply into the esoteric, this concept drove the development of modern psychology. Yet, as behavioral psychology moved into the forefront during the 50’s, 60’s, and 70’s, the study of the unconscious became de-emphasized. Recent research, driven largely by our ability to now manage huge quantities of data, and new exploratory techniques have given us an ability to not only observe the unconscious, but also to track and quantify its impact.

We now have a vast body of research, conducted at some of our finest institutions of learning – Harvard, Yale, the University of Washington, the University of Virginia, MIT, Tufts, and the University of Illinois, among others – that is showing us the same thing: unconscious or hidden beliefs – attitudes and biases beyond our regular perceptions of ourselves and others – underlie a great deal of our patterns of behavior about diversity.

## The Necessary Purpose of Bias

Let’s begin our exploration here by trying to understand the purpose of bias. We go out in the world every day and make decisions about what is safe or not, what is appropriate or not, and so on. This automatic decision making is what psychologist Joseph LeDoux has suggested is an unconscious “danger detector” that determines whether or not something or someone is safe before we can even begin to consciously make a determination.<sup>4</sup> When the object, animal, or person is assessed to be dangerous, a “fight or flight” fear response occurs.

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<sup>4</sup> LeDoux, J. *The Emotional Brain: The Mysterious Underpinnings of Emotional Life*, New York: Simon and Schuster

On a conscious level, we may correct a mistake in this “danger detector” when we notice it. But often, we simply begin to generate reasons to explain why it was accurate to begin with. We are generally convinced that our decisions are “rational,” but in reality most human decisions are made emotionally, and we then collect or generate the facts to justify them. When we see something or someone that “feels” dangerous, we have already launched into action subconsciously before we have even started “thinking.” Our sense of comfort or discomfort has already been engaged.

From a survival standpoint this is not a negative trait. It is a necessary one. We have all heard the axiom, “it is better to be safe than sorry,” and to a large degree this is true. If you sense something coming at your head, you duck. And if later you find out it was only a shadow of a bird flying by the window, better to have ducked and not needed to than to ignore the shadow and later find out it was a heavy object!

Where people are concerned, these decisions are hard-wired into us. At earlier times in our history, determining who, or what, was coming up the path may have been a life or death decision. If it was a hostile animal, or a hostile tribe member, you might die. Our minds evolved to make these decisions very quickly, often before we even “thought about it.”

Our fundamental way of looking at and encountering the world is driven by this “hard-wired” pattern of making unconscious decisions about others based on what feels safe, likeable, valuable, and competent. Freud knew that the unconscious was far vaster and more powerful than the conscious. He described it as an iceberg: far more under the surface than above. Yet, recent research indicates that even Freud may have underestimated the unconscious. As Timothy Wilson, a University of Virginia psychologist who has studied the subject extensively has written: “According to the modern perspective, Freud’s view of the unconscious was far too limited. When he said that consciousness is the tip of the mental iceberg, he was short of the mark by quite a bit – it may be more the size of a snowball on top of that iceberg.”<sup>5</sup>

Scientists estimate that we are exposed to as many as 11 million pieces of information at any one time, but our brains can only functionally deal with about 40. So how do we filter out the rest? How is it that we can walk down a busy street in New York City with a virtual ocean of stimulus in front of us and still look for a specific person or thing? How can we have a conversation with a friend in the middle of thousands of people at a rock concert? We do it by developing a perceptual lens that filters out certain things and lets others in, depending upon certain perceptions, interpretations, preferences and, yes, biases that we have adapted throughout our life.

We can see this in some very mundane ways: if you or your partner was pregnant, did you notice how many more pregnant women you saw all of a sudden? If you were looking for a new car, how often did you suddenly start to see that car in commercials and on the street? Our perceptive lens enables us to see certain things and miss others, depending on the focus of our unconscious. It filters the evidence that we collect, generally supporting our already held points-of-view and disproving points of view with which we disagree.

As a result of these pre-established filters, we see things, hear things, and interpret them differently than other people might. Or we might not even see them at all! In fact, our interpretations may be so far off that we have to question, how do we know what is real anyway?

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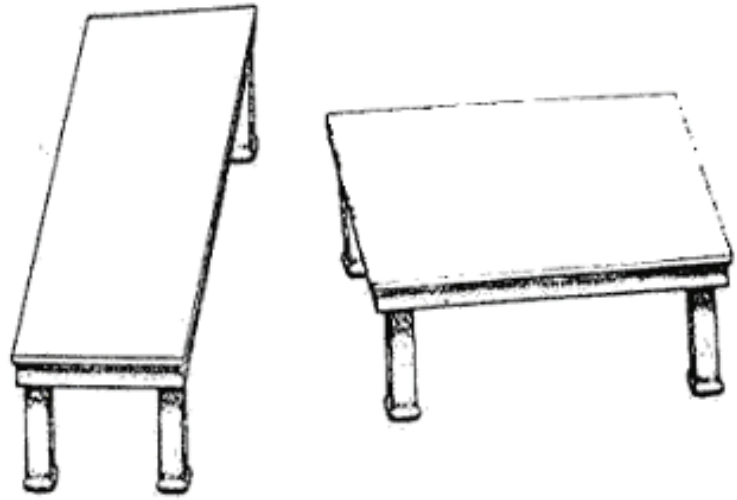
5 Wilson, Timothy, *Strangers to Ourselves*

## Seven Steps to Identify and Address Unconscious Bias

1. Recognize that you have biases.
2. Identify what those biases are.
3. Dissect your biases.
4. Decide which of your biases you will address first.
5. Look for common interest groups.
6. Get rid of your biases.
7. Be mindful of bias kick back.

## Exercise of the Unconscious

Look at the picture below of the two tables and see if you can determine which of the tops is bigger. Or are they the same size, the same shape?



You probably would say: “Obviously they are not the same shape. The one on the left is clearly narrower and longer than the one on the right.” Or is it?

Now take a piece of paper and either cut out or trace the table top on the left. Then lay your cutout or tracing over the top of the table top on the right. Which is bigger? That’s right, they are both identical.

This picture was created by Roger Shepard, an Oxford and Stanford University professor.<sup>6</sup> We all have seen some of these kinds of illusions over the years, in Readers Digest or e-mail exchanges, and we often refer to them as optical illusions. We would be more accurate describing them as cognitive illusions, because the illusory experience is not created by our eyes, but by our brain. As Shepard says,

“Because we are generally unaware that we are imposing a perceptual interpretation on the stimulus, we are generally unaware that our experience has an illusory aspect. The illusory aspect may only strike us after we are informed, for example, that the sizes or shapes of lines or areas that appear very unequal are, in fact identical in the picture.”<sup>7</sup>

When we look at the picture, having no reason to assume that there is an illusion at play, we don’t even consider that we might be seeing something different than what is obviously right in front of us. The problem is that it is not what is right in front of us at all.

<sup>6</sup> Shepard, Roger, *Mind Sights: Original Visual Illusions, Ambiguities, and Other Anomalies*, New York: W. H. Freeman and Company, 1990, p. 48

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, p. 46

“When we get conscious about managing diversity, we are “tuning in” to the indicators around us that tell us everyone does not see the world the way we do. While we know that intellectually, when it plays out in a difference of opinion, a different response, or a different way of being, behaving, dressing, talking -- you name it, we forget that everyone is not ‘just like me.’ It is at that moment that we have to wake up, realize we need to manage the diversity that is facing us and begin by thinking, “OK, who is in this mix and what are their perspectives?””

Dr. M. Elizabeth Holmes,  
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Roosevelt Thomas Consulting  
& Training, from “Getting  
Conscious About Managing  
Diversity”

The bottom line? We make assumptions and determinations about what is real every moment of every day. We sort out those 11 million pieces of information, we see what we see, and we believe that what we see is real. Only occasionally do we realize how subjective those determinations are, and how much they are impacted not by what is in front of us, but by what we interpret is in front of us, seen through our own lens on the world.

The challenge is that even knowing that we are inherently biased, we may not be able to help ourselves. According to Shepard,

“Because the inferences about orientation, depth, and length are provided automatically by (our) underlying machinery, any knowledge or understanding of the illusion we may gain at the intellectual level remains virtually powerless to diminish the magnitude of the illusion.”<sup>8</sup>

Our perception, in other words, is so deeply buried in our “underlying machinery,” our unconscious, that even knowing that it is there makes it difficult, or impossible, to see its impact on our thinking and on what we see as real.

## The Deep Impact of Unconscious Bias in the Workplace

Now, if all of this is about a silly illusion about a table, then who really cares? But what if it determines whether or not you will hire the most qualified candidate for a job? Or give an employee a fair performance review? Or hire the right CEO?

Where diversity is concerned, unconscious bias creates hundreds of seemingly irrational circumstances every day in which people make choices that seem to make no sense and be driven only by overt prejudice, even when they are not. Of course, there are still some cases where people are consciously hateful, hurtful, and biased. These people still need to be watched for and addressed. But it is important to recognize that the concept of unconscious bias does not only apply to “them.” It applies to all of us.

Each one of us has some groups with which we consciously feel uncomfortable, even as we castigate others for feeling uncomfortable with our own groups. These conscious patterns of discrimination are problematic, but, again, they pale in comparison to the unconscious patterns that impact us every day. Unconscious perceptions govern many of the most important decisions we make and have a profound effect on the lives of many people in many ways.

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8 Ibid

## The Résumé Study

A number of studies point directly to how unconscious decisions impact business decisions. Researchers at MIT and the University of Chicago have discovered that even names can unconsciously impact people's decision-making.<sup>9</sup> These researchers distributed 5,000 resumes to 1,250 employers who were advertising employment opportunities. The résumés had a key distinction in them: some were mailed out with names that were determined to be “typically white,” others with names that were “typically black.” Every company was sent four resumes: one of each race that was considered an “average” résumé and one of each race that was considered “highly skilled.”

Pre-interviews with company human resources employees had established that most of the companies were aggressively seeking diversity, a fact that seems more likely to have them lean toward somebody with a name that suggests a black candidate. And yet, the results indicated something else was occurring. Résumés with “typically white” names received 50 percent more callbacks than those with “typically black” names. There was another striking difference. While the highly skilled “typically white” named candidates received more callbacks than the average ones, there was virtually no difference between the numbers of callbacks received by highly skilled versus average “typically black” named candidates. Even more strikingly, *average “typically white” named candidates received more callbacks than highly skilled “typically black” named candidates!*<sup>10</sup>

## The Affinity Bias Example

Unconscious patterns can play out in ways that are so subtle they are hard to spot. Imagine, for example, that you are conducting an interview with two people, we'll call them Sally and John. John reminds you of yourself when you were younger, or of someone you know and like. You have that sense of familiarity or “chemistry.” You instantly like him, and though you are not aware of why, your mind generates justifications. (“He seems like a straightforward kind of guy. I like the way he ‘holds’ himself.”) You ask him the first interview question and he hems and haws a bit. After all, it's an interview. He's nervous. Because you feel an affinity toward him, you pick up on his nervousness. You want to put him at ease. You say, “John, I know it's an interview, but there's nothing to be nervous about. Take a breath and let me ask the question again.” John nails it this time and he's off and running to a great interview. The whole interaction took four seconds, yet it made a world of difference.

Then you sit down with Sally. There is nothing negative about her, just no real connection. It is a very “business-like” interaction. You ask her the first question and she's a little nervous too, but this time you don't pick up on it. This interview moves forward, but not quite as well as John's. The next day a co-worker asks you how the interviews went, and you respond: “John was great...open, easy to talk to. I think he'll be great with staff and clients.” And your reply about Sally? “She's okay, I guess.” Your perceptions about the interviews constitute your reality. You probably don't even remember the four-second interaction that changed John's entire interview. In fact, if somebody asks you, you would swear you conducted the interviews exactly the same way with the same questions. Your own role in influencing the outcomes was completely invisible to you, driven by your background of comfort with John.

<sup>9</sup> Bertrand, Marianne and Mullainathan, Sendhil, Are Emily and Greg More Employable than Lakisha and Jamal? A Field Experiment on Labor Market Discrimination, University of Chicago Graduate School of Business, NBER and CEPR; MIT and NBER, 2004

<sup>10</sup> Bertrand, Marianne and Mullainathan, Sendhil, Are Emily and Greg More Employable than Lakisha and Jamal? A Field Experiment on Labor Market Discrimination, University of Chicago Graduate School of Business, NBER and CEPR; MIT and NBER, 2004



Now, imagine that same dynamic occurring in the way you:

- recruit people
- make hiring decisions
- conduct your initial orientation interview
- mentor employees (or not!)
- make job assignments
- give people training opportunities
- listen to people's ideas and suggestions
- make promotional choices
- give performance reviews
- decide organizational policy
- conduct marketing campaigns
- choose board members
- treat customers

...and literally hundreds of other choices, and you can see that we have an issue that dramatically impacts our organizations. And almost all of it can be invisible to us.

## Unconscious Self-Perception and Performance

While it's clear that unconscious beliefs impact the way we perceive others, unconscious beliefs also impact how we view of ourselves and, as a result, our work performance. In a 1995 study by three psychology professors, a group of Asian-American female undergraduates were asked to fill out a brief questionnaire, then complete a math test. The women were split into three groups. The first group was given a "female identity salient" questionnaire designed to activate the gender identity of the tester. The second group's questionnaire was designed to activate the Asian cultural identity of the tester. And the third group was a control group whose questionnaire had no conscious focus.

Based on these different questionnaires, participants in the group that answered the "Asian salient" questionnaire performed at the highest level, 54%, while the control group averaged 49% and the "female identity salient" group had only 42%. The positive stereotypes about Asians in math seem to have had an "encouraging" impact on the first group, while the negative stereotypes about women and math may have had a suppressing impact on the group that was focused on their gender identity.

## "Confirmational" behavior

We make decisions largely in a way that is designed to confirm beliefs that we already have. This phenomenon of "confirmational behavior" occurs unconsciously in both positive and negative ways.

Our thoughts and decisions are constantly influenced by widely held stereotypes. Imagine, for example, that you have an ingrained unconscious belief that "young Hispanic men are lazy" (as untrue as that stereotype might be). How do you manage a young Hispanic man who reports to you? What actions are you likely to take? Isn't it likely that you will have a tendency to micro-manage him? Are you more or less likely to invest in developing him? Are you more or less likely to put him on high level assignments? Are you more or less likely to introduce him to significant players in the organization? When he makes a mistake, are you more or less likely to accept his explanation?

The answers are apparent. As a result of your stereotype and consequent actions, the employee would become frustrated, perhaps even angry. He would become resigned and lose motivation. He might leave, but, then again, having experienced the same kind of treatment in other places, he might believe that this is "just the way it is" and stay while "going through the motions" on his job. In other words, he would behave in a way that appears "lazy" to you, further confirming your erroneous stereotype.

“Time and again, the research shows that interviews are poor predictors of job performance because we tend to hire people we think are similar to us rather than those who are objectively going to do a good job.”

-Ori Brafman, quoted in “Overcoming the ‘Sway’ in Professional Life”. The New York Times. July 15, 2008.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/15/jobs/15shift.html>

On the other hand, take “John” from the interview mentioned earlier. For some reason, you believe in him. He reminds you of yourself when you were younger. How do you treat him? You show a deep interest in his career. You introduce him to all of the “right” people. You make sure he gets key job assignments for upward mobility. If people express concerns about him, you say: “Don’t worry. He’s a good kid. I’ll talk to him.” Not because you are helping him, but because you really see him as more competent. The impact? John flourishes. In fact, two years later the announcement comes out: John has been appointed a director, the youngest person ever to get such an appointment. And your response? “Boy, am I a good judge of talent, or what?”

Our patterns of belief and their impact are so deeply ingrained, and so concealed in our unconscious, it becomes difficult for us to fully understand their impact on our decision-making. Our minds automatically justify our decisions, blinding us to the true source, or beliefs, behind our decisions. Ultimately, we believe our decisions are consistent with our conscious beliefs, when in fact, our unconscious is running the show.

## The Organizational Unconscious

Unconscious behavior is not just individual; it influences organizational culture as well. This explains why so often our best attempts at creating corporate culture change with diversity efforts seem to fall frustratingly short; to not deliver on the promise they intended.

Organizational culture is more or less an enduring collection of basic assumptions and ways of interpreting things that a given organization has invented, discovered, or developed in learning to cope with its internal and external influences. Unconscious organizational patterns, or “norms” of behavior, exert an enormous influence over organizational decisions, choices, and behaviors. These deep-seated company characteristics often are the reason that our efforts to change organizational behavior fail. Despite our best conscious efforts, the “organizational unconscious” perpetuates the status quo and keeps old patterns, values, and behavioral norms firmly rooted.

“Flexible work” arrangements are one area in which the conflict between our conscious choices and the “organizational unconscious” is coming to a head. Flexible work arrangements – alternative arrangements or schedules that deviate from the traditional working day and/or week – are often established to allow employees, especially parents, to meet personal or family needs. In principle the policy makes business sense and may even draw a lot of corporate and employee support. Turnover among young, talented parents can cause an organization to lose some of its best employees and cost hundreds of thousands, or even millions, of dollars in replacement costs. Thus, many organizations have a flexible work policy clearly articulated in the employee manual.