UNCONSCIOUS BIAS: A SUMMARY REMINDER

What is unconscious bias?
Unconscious bias is our preference for or against other people or groups of people. These biases our relationships with other people and whether we are able to make objective decisions about them.

Key forms of Unconscious Bias to remember
- Confirmatory bias
  - Expectations & experience
- Contrast effect
- Groupthink
  - Social pressure for consensus
- First impressions & stereotypes
- Selective attention
- Priming

Conditions under which bias has most impact

You can therefore reduce the chance you will act on a bias by...
- Taking your time to make decisions
- Avoid multitasking when trying to make a high quality decision about someone or something
- Avoid acting on your gut instinct when making a decision about someone
- Spend a bit of time getting to know people before you judge them
- Avoid making decisions about people when you’re tired, drunk, or otherwise under the influence!

Practical steps you can take to reduce the impact of bias

1. Get to know your biases - https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html
2. Manage the above 6 conditions under which we’re most likely to let a bias influence our decisions
3. Develop a diverse personal network & avoid simply talking to the same people all the time
4. Make a decision – are you going to be complicit with the bias around you, or are you going to call it out?

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CASE STUDY - Perspectives on bias

Jared Mauldin, a 34-year-old senior in Mechanical Engineering at Eastern Washington University, wrote a letter to his female peers in the School's newspaper, highlighting gender bias in Engineering.

To the women in my engineering classes:

While it is my intention in every other interaction I share with you to treat you as my peer, let me deviate from that to say that you and I are in fact unequal.

Sure, we are in the same school program, and you are quite possibly getting the same GPA as I, but does that make us equal?

I did not, for example, grow up in a world that discouraged me from focusing on hard science.

Nor did I live in a society that told me not to get dirty, or said I was bossy for exhibiting leadership skills.

In grade school I never had to fear being rejected by my peers because of my interests.

I was not bombarded by images and slogans telling me that my true worth was in how I look, and that I should abstain from certain activities because I might be thought too masculine.

I was not overlooked by teachers who assumed that the reason I did not understand a tough math or science concept was, after all, because of my gender.

I have had no difficulty whatsoever with a boys club mentality, and I will not face added scrutiny or remarks of my being the “diversity hire”.

When I experience success the assumption of others will be that I earned it.

So, you and I cannot be equal. You have already conquered far more to be in this field than I will ever face.

By Jared Mauldin
Senior in Mechanical Engineering

Discussion Questions

1. What is your reaction to this letter?

2. In what ways do you think the biases alluded to in the letter are reflected in Engineering Schools in the UK?

3. What are the implications for Imperial?
CASE STUDY: LSE’s Men’s Rugby Team

LSE men’s rugby team handed out leaflets advertising their club at the Athletic Union fresher’s fair (where students sign up for different sport societies).

These leaflets contained an array of homophobic, sexist and discriminatory language:

- Describing “rugby, hockey and netball birds” as “beast-like women who play sport just so they can come out with us on Wednesdays”
- Calling Kings College London the “strand polytechnic” “who will work for us one day”
- They also claimed “not to tolerate Poly [Polytechnic] activities that involve outright homosexual debauchery.”

Discussion Questions

1. What is your reaction to the content of these leaflets?

2. What is the likely impact of this leaflet (for example, on those who wrote and distributed the leaflets, the impact on LSE, the impact on those targeted by the leaflet etc)?

3. What are the implications for you as a student here at Imperial?
CASE STUDY: Bias highlighted through the National Student Survey results

Researchers at the University of Reading examined the key drivers of satisfaction for UK students. They compared scores on the National Student Survey 2014 database with a wide range of factors that might affect contentment. These included university-wide variables that capture the reputation of the university and the quality of its research, and school-specific measures incorporating the demographic and ethnic profiles of the teaching staff.

The researchers found that students gave higher satisfaction ratings for lecturers who are:

- White (the ethnicity of the lecturer was one of the biggest predictors of student satisfaction ratings)
- Full professors
- PhD qualified
- On fixed-term contracts

Discussion Questions

1. What is your reaction to these results from the National Student Survey?

2. What factors do you think might have caused students to rate in this way?

3. What are the implications for you as a student here at Imperial?