

Unconscious Bias Hand-out

What is 'unconscious bias?'

The term 'unconscious bias' refers to the shortcuts our brains make when helping us to make sense of a situation or an interaction. The human brain is using shortcuts the whole time. These shortcuts enable the brain to cut through the overload of information and stimuli presented to us every second of our waking lives so we can both survive and function. In a split second they can prevent us from making bad choices, like sticking our hand into an open flame, or can help us make good ones, like jumping out of the way of a swerving car. Put simply, these shortcuts protect us.

This works not only in emergency or life and death situations. To a greater or lesser extent, our brains are powering away the whole time using a series of shortcuts designed, if not to keep us alive, at least to make our existences highly functional. There's so much going on around us the whole time, these shortcuts allow us to make decisions when faced with a potentially mind-boggling array of possibilities. Without realising it, we rely on them to help us make good decisions over bad ones, moment by moment.

Our unconscious minds work at high speed - before our conscious minds have even caught up - transforming signifiers into the basis upon which we make quick decisions designed to benefit us or, at least, keep us safe. When any of us comes into contact with a person the same thing happens: our unconscious minds, seeking to enable us to make quick and successful decisions about how we should relate to or feel about that person uses shortcuts based on pre-existing knowledge we have stored in our brains. It means that all of us, depending on the nature of the stored knowledge we have will make snap decisions we are not even aware we are making about how we should feel towards or relate to that person, in order to do well out of the exchange and to stay 'safe'.

It's important to note that unconscious bias is normal and natural. All of us have unconscious bias and, based on our experiences and what we have been exposed to throughout our lives, all of us will have a uniquely positioned set of characteristics we are biased towards and others we are biased against. What is important is to acknowledge this and to see that when we first meet someone our unconscious bias – without us realising it – may be affecting how we view them or what we expect they will be like.

The different types of bias we covered:

Selective attention: failing to see some things and being overly aware of others (we see what we look for and we look for what we know).

Diagnosis bias: making decisions about someone based on first impressions.

Value attribution: the inclination to imbue a person or thing with certain qualities based on an initial perceived value.

Internalised bias: unconsciously forming biases about ourselves based on the stereotypes we are exposed to.

Group think: automatically assuming the biases of the group (at some point we stop thinking and the group thinks for us).

Tonic's four key pieces of advice:

1. Acknowledge you have unconscious bias and your perception of a situation may be different to the reality
2. Develop the ability to observe your own reactions
3. Slow down - be alright with not instantly having all the answers (constructive uncertainty)

Remember:

PAUSE - Howard J. Ross, *Everyday Bias* (Rowman& Littlefield, 2014)

Pay attention to what's happening beneath the judgements and assessments

Acknowledge your assumptions, own reactions, interpretations, and judgements

Understand your perspective, there could be any number of reasons for your perspective or interpretation of a situation

Seek different perspectives – what other possible reasons might there be for the way a person is behaving?

Examine your options and make a decision

4. Seek to train yourself into new thought patterns (neuro-plasticity) and learn to be okay with discomfort

Our unconscious bias reading list:

Everyday Bias by Howard J. Ross

This is the book we'd most recommend for anyone looking for an in-depth but engaging deep dive into the topic.

[Audio book](#) | [Hard copy book](#)

Blink by Malcolm Gladwell

Gladwell gives a different spin on unconscious bias - looking at how it can be useful in certain situations! This book further illuminates the areas we were exploring in the sessions through case studies...including a very interesting one on orchestras...

[Audio book](#) | [Hard copy book](#)

Invisible Women by Caroline Criado Perez

Showing the impact - in this instance for women - that unconscious bias can have on how society is designed and functions.

[Audio book](#) | [Hard copy book](#)

For those of you who would like something theatre-specific, there's a chapter on unconscious bias in:

All Change Please by Lucy Kerbel

[Hard copy book](#)

Further Resources:

A version of the Implicit Association Test (IAT) can be found [here](#)

If you'd like a brief refresher on unconscious bias at any point, this [short audio description and accompanying animation](#) from the Royal Society is a great way to remind yourself in three minutes

Take a look at the Invisible Gorilla Test: <http://www.theinvisiblegorilla.com/videos.html>

Further videos/resources: <https://www.theatrecastingtoolkit.org/understanding-unconscious-bias/>