



PRESIDENT'S COUNCIL  
ON DIVERSITY AND  
INCLUSION

# Understanding and overcoming our

# *biases*



By **Ashita Chandra**, B.Comm(H), Candidate Member AIC, Realtor, Musso Appraisals Inc., Ontario; and **Andy Pham**, BBA, AACI P.App, Vice President, Canadian Asset Management, BentallGreenOak, Sun Life Mortgages Investments, British Columbia

“Human beings are poor examiners, subject to superstition, bias, prejudice, and a profound tendency to see what they want to see rather than what is really there.” – **M. Scott Peck**

*You have implicit biases.* Bias does not have to be a bad word. It does not mean that you are racist, sexist, homophobic or anything of the sort. It simply means that you have a brain and that you are human. In their book *Blindspot: Hidden Biases of Good People*, Mahzarin Banaji and Anthony Greenwald state that, “Bias in behaviour and/or judgement results from subtle cognitive processes and occurs a level below a person’s conscious awareness, without intentional or conscious control. Implicit bias is based in the subconscious and can be developed over time because of the natural accumulation of personal experiences.”<sup>1</sup>

The brain processes billions of stimuli per day and our brains must quickly choose what to focus on. This information is used for survival, to make inferences or categorize, and to feel emotions that attract us to certain people. Because the brain must process these billions of stimuli, our conscious brain does not have the opportunity to interpret all that we see.<sup>2</sup>

Your first take on a situation may not be based on a fully processed interpretation of the facts or images in front of you due

to the massive amounts of information coming at you, at any one moment. Consequently, our ‘first take’ often includes biases of some kind that we did not consciously ‘think,’ but that our brain unconsciously categorized to synthesize the massive amount of information being experienced. For example, you only need to be burned by fire once to develop a quick, instinctual reaction to fire. These emotional reactions are due to the brain’s survival instinct.<sup>2</sup>

As time passes, a person’s socialization and personal memories produce implicit biases and apply them as the brain defines incoming stimuli efficiently and unconsciously. It is common for these survival responses to translate into situations with individuals with whom we have limited contact, and we begin to quickly categorize those outside our normal circle as ‘like me’ and ‘not like me.’

Not every bias is negative or hurtful. The issue, however, resides in the problematic nature of our implicit biases (or our blindspots) because they can operate outside of our conscious awareness, yet have an impact on the choices we make and the things we do.

Many people’s first reaction to this notion that we all have biases is, “No, not me.” You may tell yourself: “I had black/brown/Indigenous friends growing up;” “I grew up in a family or neighbourhood where diversity and inclusion were part of our basic values;” “I am a minority or racialized individual, I cannot be biased since I have experienced the negative effects of bias and stereotyping;” “I am a woman, how can I be biased against other women;” or “Human beings are poor examiners, subject to superstition, bias, prejudice, and a profound tendency to see what they want to see rather than what is really there.” – M. Scott Peck

But we all have implicit biases. They are learned stereotypes that are **automatic, unintentional, and deeply ingrained** within our beliefs and worldview. For example, if you are stuck in a parking lot with a flat tire, chances are you are most likely to approach a man, rather than a woman if you need help in changing it. While this implicit bias may seem innocent, problems can arise when these types of biases make their way in to workplaces and other aspects of our lives.

### How do our implicit biases affect us?

Biases affect many aspects of our lives and many biases are associated with stereotypes: older people are too judgemental, younger people are too immature, etc.

The issue of racial stereotyping and implicit bias, for example, has been in Canadian and US headlines recently, with countless stories of police officers associating criminality with black or Indigenous bodies and acting on those biases — sometimes with deadly consequences.

However, implicit bias is not just reserved for race or gender. We see implicit bias in many places, about many characteristics including age, religion, weight, appearance, disabilities, accents, gender identity, sexuality, single parents, stay-at-home moms (or dads), kids with pink hair, people with tattoos and piercings, people with certain bumper stickers on their cars, the list goes on.

### Why should we care about our biases?

As appraisal professionals, these biases can impact how we deal with our clients, how we interact with our colleagues, and even how we evaluate data gathered for a report we are writing. We need to work to ensure that the decisions we make are based on facts, and not implicit biases of which we may not even be aware.

In a work environment, implicit biases can affect hiring and promotion decisions, work assignments, and career tracks, and can sometimes result in hostile work environments. These biases can also damage relationships, as well as affect the reputations of businesses.

Biases are reoccurring over the lifetime of a person in a wide variety of contexts and can be incredibly painful for the victims. People who are subject to positive biases often find doors opening for them, while people who are subject to negative biases at best have to open the door themselves, or at worst find it locked or have doors slammed in their face.

And when people in particular social identity groups, such as women or racialized Canadians, are widely and consistently subject to negative biases, it creates systemic disparities in all areas of society such as education, employment, healthcare, housing, and so on.

### How do we recognize and interrupt our own biases?

There are, of course, steps you can take to avoid implicit bias. Here are some ways that you can reduce your own implicit biases and help to prevent them from impacting your decision-making.

#### 1. Recognize your implicit biases/stereotype replacement

Start to think about the implicit biases you may have. What decisions have you made regarding people without really giving it a second thought? Question why you made the decision that you did.

For example, maybe you believe that men and women are equally capable of leading, but you think that men lack the ability to show empathy the way that women do, so you chose a woman for a role that you knew would require empathy. While this might not sound like a negative, decisions should be based on who is the right person for the role, and not which gender you perceive to be most capable.

The more we convince ourselves of our own 'unbiased-ness,' the more of a blind spot we may have when it comes to recognizing our implicit biases. A great place to start is by taking the **Harvard Implicit Association tests (Project Implicit)**<sup>3</sup>, meant to help people identify their biases.

In a nutshell, "Think about the stereotype you hold and consciously replace it with accurate information"<sup>4</sup>.

#### 2. Focus on people

Rather than thinking about the characteristics of someone's ethnicity, gender or class background, focus on them as an individual. Give them merit

on the evidence you see in front of you, instead of relying on your intuition or 'gut feeling' (often disguised as your own biases).

#### 3. Increase exposure to biases

Once you have identified what your biases are, try exposing yourself to them more regularly. If you seek to prove your biases wrong, it can have a positive impact on your behaviour.

### Tips for minimizing the influence of bias and assumptions

1. Spend sufficient time evaluating your information. Studies have shown that people who are busy or distracted by other tasks let their biases prevail. One effective countermeasure is to slow down, to move your thinking from the primitive, reactive parts of the brain to more reflective levels.<sup>5</sup>
2. Apply the criteria consistently to evaluate all data gathered. Research shows that different standards may be used to evaluate applicants of different distinctions.
3. Evaluate the entire data set. Do not rely too heavily on only one element of the data to reach any conclusions.
4. Introduce friction into the system. Question the reasons for evaluating data. Are you taking time to stop and reflect on the data?
5. Periodically evaluate your judgements and consider whether evaluation biases are influencing your decisions. Ask yourself hard questions such as: Are you using different standards to evaluate different applicants? Are you evaluating underrepresented applicants unfairly despite evidence to the contrary?

### Bringing allyship into the conversation

"Fortunately, for serious minds, a bias recognized is a bias sterilized."  
– Benjamin Haydon

Although we must be willing to identify and interrupt our own biases, we must also recognize and be willing to interrupt bias in others. This is probably the most difficult and the most uncomfortable part of overcoming implicit bias.

The challenge when dealing with others is deciding when to say something, how to say it, and to whom. You can always make an effort not to address another's bias in front of other people, instead try to find a place to talk in private, and perhaps begin the conversation without laying blame. If someone is not made aware that they have a particular bias, it will only continue to cause pain to another

individual or group of individuals and could lead to significant problems down the line. If you see something, say something, in a manner that is sensitive to the feelings of everyone involved.

Overcoming and addressing bias is a life-long task and will not be realized overnight, neither at an individual, institutional or societal level. However, we can take solace in Jennifer Eberhardt's quote that, "There is hope in the sheer act of reflection. This is where the power lies and how the process starts."<sup>6</sup>

**For more on this topic, please visit the resources section on the Diversity Council Webpage.**

#### End notes

- <sup>1</sup> Banaji, Mahzarin R., and Anthony G. Greenwald. Blindspot: Hidden Biases of Good People
- <sup>2</sup> *Advantages of bias and prejudice: an exploration of their neurocognitive templates*, A Tobena 1, Marks, R Dar
- <sup>3</sup> <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html>
- <sup>4</sup> <https://www.chairs-chaire.gc.ca/program-programme/equity-equite/bias/module-eng.aspx>  
[https://www.azquotes.com/author/23364-Benjamin\\_Haydon](https://www.azquotes.com/author/23364-Benjamin_Haydon)  
[https://www.azquotes.com/author/11465-M\\_Scott\\_Peck](https://www.azquotes.com/author/11465-M_Scott_Peck)
- <sup>5,6</sup> <https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2020/03/meet-psychologist-exploring-unconscious-bias-and-its-tragic-consequences-society>

“Fortunately for serious minds, a bias recognized is a bias sterilized.”  
– **Benjamin Haydon**