

Are You Biased?

by

The Art of Balance (Balansekunst)

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"Bias" is when we allow our personal feelings and opinions to influence how we think and understand the world around us. Without thinking about it, we view the world with preferences and favoritism. One could say that bias is a fallacy of thought: we understand and interpret the world in a way that is not entirely in line with the truth.

Studies show that we all make unconscious judgments when meeting other people. We like to think that we treat all people fairly. "I do not care about gender" one might say, sincerely thinking that gender does not influence how we interact with people around us. Nevertheless, a number of studies show that most of us display unconscious prejudice in how we perceive people based on: gender, ethnicity, functional ability, age, sexual orientation, gender expression, and more.

Stereotypes, prejudices, and perceptions that we distance ourselves from in our conscious thoughts can still affect how we unconsciously perceive and meet other people and how we look at ourselves. The influence of Society on our perceptions - the norms and images we see around us - govern how we categorise information. Our biases are thus shaped by our surroundings.

Everyone is biased in some way, and this can be uncomfortable for us to think about. Fortunately, bias can be challenged. The first step is to acknowledge that these judgments are happening. We have collected examples of research that highlight biases in relation to gender, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, ethnicity, and functional ability.

Gender

Everyone knows what gender is, yet different people describe and explain gender in different ways. Many things in our society are divided by gender: clothes, toys, interests, professions, characteristics. As a society, we are used to dividing gender into two categories: girl / woman or boy / man. We are used to thinking that there are two types of bodies and that what body you have determines what gender you are. With that comes a set of expectations for how one should act as a boy or girl. In reality, there is a great diversity of bodies and ways to express and experience gender. There are many ways to be a woman, many ways to be a man, and many ways to be outside of the binary model. Gender is non-binary.

Boss and bossy

A number of studies show that women are more easily perceived as abrupt, aggressive and less competent. Women are often looked down upon for the same type of behaviour and communication that is accepted or respected by men. Men, on the other hand, may find that being modest is a negative personality trait.

A study by researchers at Harvard University asked a sample of people to consider video clips of men and women negotiating. Among other things, the researchers found that both men and women are penalized when they negotiate higher wages, but women are penalized more and are considered less sympathetic (Bowles et al., 2007).

A similar study from Stanford University asked participants to evaluate video clips of people making conversations and to assess the extent to which the interviewees interrupted each other.

*“Both men and women interrupted, but men in the study were more likely to perceive women who interrupted as rude and unsympathetic”
(Hilton, 2018)*

In a 2017 study from the Journal of Management, the participants are divided into two groups, where each group gets to listen to a clip where a sales manager talks to his team. In one clip the leader's name is Eric, in the other clip the leader's name is Erica - otherwise, the dialogue is exactly the same. Participants rated Eric as a leader who showed leadership and influenced the team. Eric was considered more competent than Erica - she was not described as someone who showed leadership (McClellan et al., 2017).

A study from Rutgers University showed that modest men were perceived negatively. Participants were shown video clips of fictional job interviews for a position as computer lab manager. Although modest men and modest women were considered equally qualified for the job, modest men became less equal (Moss-Racussin et al., 2010).

Without Recognition

Research has revealed that women are cited less and receive less recognition than men in academia (Sarsons, 2017 and Dion et al., 2018). From the music industry, we find examples that suggest similar trends. Björk tells Pitchfork that she spent three years producing songs with microbeats on her latest album. It was like making a huge embroidery, she explains. Matmos, an electronic music duo and friends of Björk, finally put drums on the beat. Björk and Matmos constantly encounter assumptions that Matmos has produced the entire album. By comparison, Björk highlights Kanye West who invited a number of high-profile beat producers to make beats for his album. Often, Kanye himself was not present in the studio.

Still, no one asks whether he himself is behind the music he releases. "It's weird," Björk concludes in the interview.

A similar example can be found in the Norwegian music industry. When the Norwegian artist Fay Wildhagen released her self-produced album, *Borders*, she discovered that people assumed that a male sound engineer had produced her album. The technician had to make an announcement and explain that Wildhagen herself had been the producer on the album (Wasshaug, 2020).

From the 1950s, more and more orchestras in the United States switched from hiring hand-picked musicians to arranging open auditions. The purpose of this was to prevent gender bias in influencing recruitment. Some orchestras chose to place a screen between the musicians and the jury during rehearsals, so that the identities of the candidates remained unknown during the selections. These measures eventually resulted in a marked increase in the proportion of female musicians in orchestras in the United States. While the proportion of women was 6 per cent in 1970, 21 per cent of orchestra musicians were women in 1993 (Goldin and Rouse, 2000).

Unconscious Norms

From textbooks to newspapers, we are used to seeing successful men. It can affect how we perceive men and women, and it can form a bias that causes women to be overlooked or underestimated. A socially created expectation that women should be milder than men can cause a reaction to arise in us when women break with these gendered expectations - without us being aware of it ourselves. There is also an expectation that men should be clear and take control. Men who do not meet these expectations may experience negative reactions.

Unconscious prejudices, norms and biases can, in the worst case, function as self-reinforcing and self-sustaining. Jonathan Baron, a professor of psychology at the University of Pennsylvania, offers a mini-experiment:

Here is a description of a person: Anonymous is smart, hardworking, impulsive, critical and jealous. We form a picture of how Anonymous is. Then we read again: Anonymous is jealous, critical, impulsive, hardworking and smart. A new and more negative image is formed. Which traits we notice first have a lot to say for what impression we form. Everyone has both positive and negative qualities.

Bias can affect what characteristics we notice and how we interpret and categorize different types of people.

What we term confirmation bias is simply the fact that we tend to interpret new information in a way that confirms the perceptions we already have - for example in the way we interpret and perceive gender. If I, the author of this article, have acquired an idea that women are more caring than men, I may notice women who show they are caring. I may not want to pay the same attention to women who show other qualities, such as those who are risk-averse,

fearless, sharp, critical and cool. Maybe I want to think of these women as "different". Instead of changing my ideas about gender, I can stick to my ideas and rather understand those who challenge the stereotypes as exceptions. Confirmation bias will make me look for loving and caring women who affirm my impression, and perhaps overlook caring men and examples which challenge my perceptions.

When we think, either consciously or unconsciously, that different types of people behave in a certain way, we often see what we think we know, which results in the nuances and diversity becoming more difficult for us to spot.

Gender bias is one of many forms of unconscious judgements that affect how we relate to different groups. Groups that are considered to represent difference or that experience being extra visible due to the way they are categorized as human beings are exposed to bias. Sexual orientation, ethnicity, functional ability and gender identity and expression are examples of characteristics that can trigger unconscious prejudice.

LGBTQ+

Imagine for a second that a friend tells you she just got engaged. "What is his name?" She is asked, even though her partner is a woman. In this situation, heterobias is expressed, an expectation that women like men and vice versa.

One who identifies as transgender comes into contact with a cisgender person. The cisgendered finds it exciting that the interlocutor is transgendered and asks personal questions about hormone treatments, operations, and says "you look like a real woman!". The way the cisgendered behaves here can be experienced as both invasive and exotifying, and is an expression of cis bias. The transgendered person is expected to answer intimate and personal questions about themselves that are unlikely to be asked to someone who is cis-gendered. The resulting effect is that the transgendered person is reduced to an interesting medical case. That looking like a cis-gendered, or "a real woman" as it is formulated in the example, is meant as a compliment, shows that there is a subconscious understanding of the cisgender as an ideal (National LGBT Health Education Center, 2018).

Ethnicity

A Norwegian study by Midtbøen and Rogstad, from 2012, showed that discrimination in employment processes constitutes a significant obstacle to access to working life for people with an ethnic minority background. The probability of being called for an interview was reduced by an average of 25% if the applicant has a foreign-sounding name compared with identically qualified applicants with a majority background.

Also, if people from an immigrant background are mentioned in a negative article in the Norwegian media, it is twice as often stated which country the person originally comes from, as when the article is written from a positive perspective (IMDi, 2017).

This differentiation is often interpreted as an expression of bias. However, the dividing lines between bias and conscious oppressive attitudes are often fluid.

In Norwegian cultural life, coloured music artists experience having their music categorised as “urban” or “world music”, although their music does not belong there. This is an example of how bias can make the artists' appearance shape how the music is perceived by journalists and decision-makers.

There is little research on indigenous peoples or national minorities and bias. Nevertheless, it is well documented that these groups experience discrimination. Based on reports of discrimination and unfair treatment, there is good reason to believe that prejudices and negative attitudes towards indigenous peoples and national minorities can be expressed as unconscious bias.

Impaired Functioning

In a chemistry seminar at a university, students are divided into groups to carry out a practical experiment. In one of the groups, one student is in a wheelchair, while the other three in the group do not have visible disabilities. What role in the group does the student get in a wheelchair? The other three students assume that the practical part of the experiment is too difficult to carry out for the fellow student, and suggest that he should have the task of noting the findings. One of the three students without disabilities goes unsolicited to the student's backpack in a wheelchair, finds stationery and gives it to the student who is to take notes. During the group work, the three take care not to pay much attention to the fourth in a wheelchair, to avoid it becoming uncomfortable (The DO-IT Center, 2019).

Perceptions about the disabled as very needy, less competent or as people one should not pay attention to in a group are typical prejudices related to disability. Such attitudes are often not expressed, but attitudes and bias are expressed through exclusion and underestimation.

Bias is Compromising Diversity

In addition to the fact that bias can affect how we meet each other based on gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, ethnicity and functional ability, there is a general tendency for people to be drawn towards people who are similar to oneself. Homosocial reproduction is an established concept in the social sciences, and points out that people often recruit and choose successors who are like themselves. For example, we tend to prefer people with similar social backgrounds and the same identity as our own. This often happens unconsciously. The consequence of this is that the same perspectives, norms and characteristics are constantly being perpetuated. Power and opportunity remain with one group of people while it is increasingly difficult for other types of people to achieve the same.

Be Aware of Your Bias!

We are all affected by norms and expectations in society. Most of us possess some unconscious bias and we are often drawn to people we think are like us. This is an obstacle to diversity and equality. To counteract exclusion, active and vigilant work is required. Discrimination is rarely conscious whilst working for equality always is a conscious choice.

Bias can be uncomfortable to recognise. We are all in danger of making mistakes and thinking and acting upon bias without being aware of it. The fact that bias occurs unconsciously makes it especially important to be aware of.

If we tell ourselves that "we treat everyone equally!" without taking bias into account, we close our eyes to less obvious discriminatory practices.

Everyone has biases. When we are exposed to norms, perceptions, and uneven representation in society develop these biases. It is said that we can not control the first thought that comes to mind but we *can* control the second thought, and not least we can control how we act. When we are able to see our biases, we can also challenge them. For example: If you are annoyed with a lady who you think is abrupt and bossy, ask yourself if you would feel the same way when meeting a man. Or if you think a man is low-key and modest, ask yourself if you would think the same way if you talked to a woman. By stopping and reflecting, we can challenge our unconscious biases.

Fun fact: when translating this article, ConductIT used Google Translate as a helping tool. We experienced that Norwegian gender-neutral words were automatically and wrongly translated to the male version of the English word. For example, the word "kjæreste" is the Norwegian word for boyfriend/girlfriend, just gender-neutral, meaning something like "loved one" or "significant other". Google translated this to "boyfriend" while the correct word should have been "girlfriend" or "partner". Do you think Google is biased or was this an innocent mistake?



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The article in Norwegian and reference list with correct links:

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