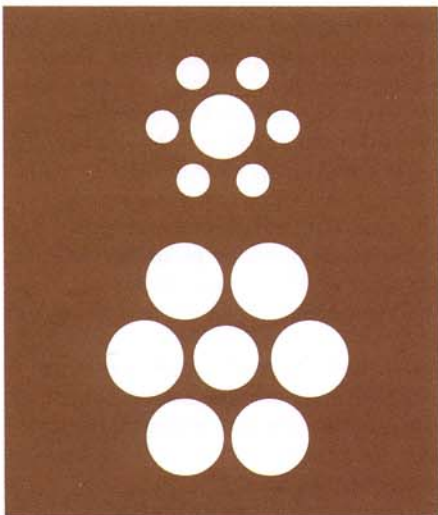


# I'm not biased... am I?

We like to think of ourselves as objective and reasonable beings who can make detached and rational decisions. The more experienced of us may even consider themselves to be wise but how true is that really?

**Professor Binna Kandola** investigates



**T**ake a look at the first picture. Which of the centre circles looks the biggest? In the second image, what do you see?

The centre circles are in fact the same size but then you probably knew that. But what is actually one of the remarkable things about this image is that, despite knowing they are the same size, the one on the left still looks bigger. We cannot help ourselves - our brain works out the size of the objects relative to what is around it - and there is nothing we can do to stop it.

In the second image you see a face. Now cock your head to one side or turn the page around and you will see the word 'liar'. This demonstrates the importance of looking at things from different angles. If you have a team who are all similar in background, education, etc, it is likely that they will all agree on the nature of the problem that confronts them and as a consequence the solutions that would be appropriate without considering other perspectives.

Psychologists are fascinated by visual illusions as they give us an insight into how our brain works and how we make decisions and this is of crucial importance when

we start to look at issues of diversity and inclusion within the workplace.

Diversity and inclusion are being taken more seriously than ever before. Legislation obviously has helped not only to punish those found guilty of discrimination but to create a climate of much greater awareness.

The changes can be seen in organisations too. Many leading organisations now have diversity policies and strategies and of course the more commonplace these become the greater the pressure on those that do not have them.

There is furthermore an established approach that could be considered best practice. This will involve examining processes, creating network groups, diversity weeks etc. And yet, despite all of this the evidence shows that change is occurring very slowly. For example, the unemployment gap between ethnic minorities and the general population has been around 15-16% for the last three decades. Women's pay in relation to men's has hardly changed over the last 20 years. Women, despite representing close to half the workforce, are a minority in senior positions. For example, within

the European Union women constitute, on average, about 10% of the highest level executives in the top 50 publicly quoted companies.

These are things we know. Where we struggle, though, is in working out what we can do about it. Legislation has made an impact, but not enough to change the statistics. Setting targets for the employment of minorities remains controversial. Organisations create policies and strategies and hope things will change, but mostly they don't.

What all this tells me is that there is a general reluctance to recognise the part our emotions and prejudices play in decision-making. (I once sat on a government committee examining the disparities in employment rates between ethnic minorities and the rest of the population, where the chair - who was white - found it almost distasteful to talk about discrimination at all, never mind racism.)

The fact of the matter is we are all biased. Bias is related to identity and we relate more comfortably to people who have the same social identity as ourselves, while also displaying a related, opposing bias against people we see as different. How do we identify people like ourselves? Not surprisingly, factors such as sex and ethnicity are commonly used.

While such preferences would once have been openly expressed, we now live in very different times, with legal protection against discrimination as well as widespread moral condemnation of overt prejudice. It is therefore not surprising that most of us will want to hide any racist or sexist views we have from others. More interestingly, though, we may also hide them from ourselves.

One of the most common biases we have is towards ourselves (ask a couple what proportion of household they do - don't be surprised if it comes to more than 100%).

But we also have a natural bias toward people like ourselves and much of this is based on visual appearance but will also include attitudes, religions, etc.

In addition to those biases there are unconscious biases, ones that we are not even aware that we have but which will impact on behaviour and our decision making.

Read the passage in the box and come up with the solution

A father and his son were involved in a car accident in which the father was killed and the son was seriously injured. The father was pronounced dead at the scene of the accident and his body taken to a local morgue. The son was taken by ambulance to a nearby hospital and was immediately wheeled into an emergency operating room. A surgeon was called. Upon arrival, and seeing the patient, the attending surgeon exclaimed, 'Oh my God, it's my son!'



A lot of people come up with answer such as it was his step father, or the father in the car is a priest. In fact, the answer is the surgeon was the boy's mother. The association we make, without being aware of it, is between surgeon and male and this link drives our decision making.

It was unconscious associations like this which we wanted to explore at the Institute of Work Psychology at the University of Sheffield. We used a group of over 100 professionals as participants in a project studying concepts of 'race' and 'hiring'. The participants were shown a number of faces – some black, some white. They were also shown a selection of either hire-related words (such as accept or select) or fire-related words (reject, sack and so on). We wanted to see whether participants displayed a bias towards associating white faces with hiring and black faces with rejection. In addition, each participant also completed a paper and pencil test about explicit racial attitudes. The results of this test showed that, as a group, they did not see themselves as being racially prejudiced.

We split the sample into three groups. One group of participants was asked merely to complete the IAT. A second group was told to complete the test, but that in addition their goal was to be fair. A third group was also told to be fair and that the

way to be fair was to react as quickly for a black face with 'hire' related words as they would for a white face.

The results were remarkable. The first group showed the highest level of racial bias towards white people. Among the second group, the level of bias was half that of the first, and the last group effectively displayed no bias at all.

## The fact of the matter is we are all biased. Bias is related to identity and we relate more comfortably to people who have the same social identity as ourselves

There are a number of things worth drawing attention to here. Firstly, remember that this was a group of people who all, from the results of the paper and pencil test on race, believed they were fair minded and free from racial bias. Their test reaction times, however, suggested unconscious prejudice.

Secondly, it showed that having fairness as an explicit goal can reduce the degree to which we may hold and display bias.

Finally, it showed that a fairly straight-

forward mental orientation exercise can help us tackle our own unconscious biases.

We have followed this up with a second study. This time looking at the associations between senior and junior positions and men and women. We found a bias towards associating men with senior jobs and women with junior ones. Intriguingly, this bias was as true of the women in our

sample as the men. The same interventions described above also had the same impact.

What it demonstrates is that good intentions are not enough. Each of us needs to accept that we are biased. We then need to take action to address our personal prejudices. Our research shows that spending a few minutes before making important decisions instructing ourselves on the importance of being fair can help us to produce just – and therefore better – decisions. ●