

UNTANGLING THE WEB OF EVERYDAY BIAS

A journey towards potential



They wait. Lost in thought. Why did the phone have to break now?! The queue at the phone shop in Euston station is long and there are only two assistants working.

"Oh no, I hope I don't get her, what could she know about technology?"

Moving towards the male assistant, they notice the thought driving the move. Wait a minute, where did that come from?!

Unconscious biases are stereotypes about certain groups of people, which we form outside of our own conscious awareness.

Phone fixed. The train journey north is long and scenic. They are off for a week in the mountains. Meeting the group, they feel a sense of excitement and ease. What lovely people. Pack, prepare, off we go.

That evening in camp the Mountain Guide lights the stove. Twist, spark, whoosh. The water bubbles. Sunset lights up the surrounding peaks, a glowing orange as the last of the fading light sparkles on the water nearby. A magical place.

The guide calls over their assistant and explains the stove lighting. Twist, spark, whoosh. Simple.

"I wouldn't want Rickie (another adult with plenty of solo, multiday expedition experience) to do it though, we wouldn't want an accident, you make sure you keep hold of the lighter, ok?!"

The group look on, soaking up this message.

Sleepy campers slowly awake. Morning dew on the ground feels cold on bare toes. Tea is required. Twist, spark, whoosh. What to do? In the absence of the guide and assistant the stove cannot be lit.

Rickie arrives, *"Oh, I'd better not do it, it's too tricky."*

"Oh yes, better wait for the guide, looks really technical," echo the group.

Self-efficacy eroded. An unnecessary image of impossibility created in a simple interaction.

Twist, spark, whoosh!

Unconscious (or implicit) biases are automatic, unintentional, deeply engrained, and able to influence behaviour. **Unconscious bias** is far more prevalent than conscious prejudice and often incompatible with one's conscious values¹.

We all make assumptions about different groups that inform our language, attitudes, and actions in subtle ways. We make these, not because we are bad people, but because we are people. The human brain has evolved first and foremost for survival, not potential. And certainly not for the collective

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potential of all individuals within society. Fortunately, we are also intelligent beings, capable of self-awareness and making behavioural choices in line with conscious beliefs and values. Bias has been learned and can be unlearned. Increasing understanding about some of the complexities of being human can help to ensure we are not sleep walking our way into unintended consequences.

Our brains have an amazing capacity to adapt to a world where we are receiving 11 million bits of information in each moment, while we can only process 40 bits². Without the brain's ability to take subconscious shortcuts, our predecessors would've been killed by predators. Identifying a noise or flash of colour in the forest as a threat in a millisecond was a key skill. Sticking around to consider whether the pitch of the noise, or shade of colour indicated friend rather than foe, was not an option! For those who wanted to survive at least. The fight, flight, freeze response is one of our most powerful and automatic responses. Being wired to make short term survival decisions, often at the expense of possibility (perhaps the noise was a potential food source for us?) was adaptive in the dangerous days of the past. It still assists us in today's modern civilised society, but with far fewer real threats to life, we find ourselves reacting in ways which may hinder rather than help our individual and collective potential.

It is the ability for fast, subconscious processing of information which enables us to navigate each day without being overwhelmed, but also leaves us vulnerable to making unhelpful assessments of some groups of people. Our desire to create order from chaos also prompts us to categorise. And our need to find a sense of safety and belonging in the world prompts us to make quick judgements on these categories. Like me/ not like me. Good/bad. Familiar/ unfamiliar. Safe/dangerous. Such shortcuts are necessary to cope with all the information coming our way. How we form, and judge categories is based on our backgrounds, cultural norms and life experiences³.

There is a legacy of humans being exposed to messages of explicit discrimination and of certain groups being marginalised within society (e.g. in the recent past apartheid, male only vote and the illegality of same sex marriage to name a few). Within the outdoor world you may be aware of examples such as women not being allowed to join the Alpine Club until 1974 due to “supposed physical and moral deficiencies in the matter of mountain

climbing”⁴. In the UK we are moving from a place where such marginalisation's were codified in rules and law, to the modern day where in legal terms, many groups are now protected, though translating this into an equal society is another matter. Regardless of our explicit beliefs around equality, it seems we still have some psychological hang ups!

It is no secret that the demographics of The Outward Bound Trust staff team is less diverse than that of the young people we aim to benefit. It seems this is true of many parts of our sector, as highlighted in the infographic (see figure one). We have committed to exploring this area over the coming years. Understanding unconscious bias may be one piece of a much more complicated puzzle.

Countless studies demonstrate how some people in society are negatively affected by the impacts of continued unconscious biases, particularly when it comes to employment and career pathways. Everything from initial career selection, advertising and recruitment, right through to training, progression and pay are shown to be affected. For example, researchers sent off thousands of CV's to various employers, with slightly different names on, either names such as Emily or Greg, or Lakisha or Jamal. They found that names often linked to stereotypically white names received 50% more call backs for interview, despite the CV's being of comparable quality and showing similar experience⁵. Who loses out here? It's not just the people not getting the jobs. It is also the hiring companies who may

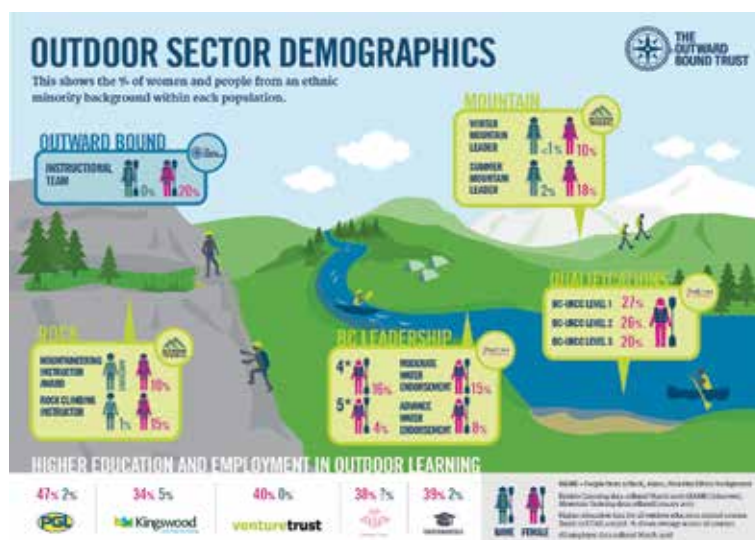
be missing out on great talent and the opportunity to develop a more balanced workforce, due to unconscious bias in recruitment decisions.

Bias doesn't simply affect our judgements of others and expectations of what others may or may not be capable of it. It also affects how we view ourselves. Internalising of societal biases can lead to self-limiting thinking and behaviour, impacting on significant life choices as well as performance in achievement contexts.

The web becomes more complex when you consider the biased thinking of self and others tangled together.

Stereotype threat describes how an individual's behaviour and ability, change to align with a negative stereotype of a group they belong to⁶.

Research into stereotype threat shows that people hold subconscious beliefs about what their “group” (gender, ethnicity, socio-economic etc) will be able or less able at.





You can join Kate O'Brien and Colin Wood at the Outdoor Learning Sector Conference where they will be exploring further some of the ideas presented here. Go to page 24 for more information about the conference.

and beliefs definitely matter. Multiple studies show that when a stereotype about a group is primed, it can lead to impaired performance and lowered achievement. For example, men perform worse on a test of social sensitivity when they are reminded that this is typically recognised as a

feminine trait⁷. Female leaders' performance is hindered when they are reminded of typically masculine leadership traits⁸. Again, who is losing out here? As we all belong to at least one social group which is negatively stereotyped in one way or another, most people are vulnerable to stereotype threat if they encounter a situation where that stereotype is present. If we are blind to this, individuals lose out, organisations lose out and society loses out as fewer people collectively reach their potential.

What is clear is that people of different identities interact with and experience the world in different ways, with some identities benefitting in power terms (perhaps losing out in other ways) from systems which have been in place in society for a very long time. It can be hard for us to get out of our own lived experience and imagine how someone from a different identity background may think, feel or act. How they may feel able, or not, to access different experiences and opportunities. How the attritional impact of seemingly small, yet regular interactions, both with others and within the self, can build to have a significant detrimental impact on learning and development towards potential.

Returning to the beginning of this story. Who is they? And who is Rickie? You may have noticed you assigned a gender to each, perhaps an age, maybe even an image of what each looked like (their body shape, skin colour, accent). Perhaps they are the same person. Belonging to a group who are subject to particular biases doesn't exclude us from being biased towards others, or even ourselves. You may have noticed that the experiences within the story were not directed from one group, at another group, but a web of assumptions. We all categorise. Increasing diversity is not about one group winning at the cost of another.

AUTOMATIC REACTIONS & SKILLS

IMPLICIT KNOWLEDGE

INSTINCT & INTUITION



Unconscious Bias is a hot topic within the society we operate in. We are in a particular moment in history, looking to move away from the explicit biases of the past and consider how we can overcome our collective unconscious biases in the present. With the introduction of the Equality Act in 2010, has come widespread investment in understanding and action on equality and diversity issues. From Starbucks and Google, to the Police and Fire services, many public and private sector organisations are investing millions in training and initiatives for staff. Although not without controversy there are useful lessons to be learned.

To make progress towards a more socially just, stable, economically prosperous, and less divided world, it is necessary to consider how such biases affect our sector, our organisations, ourselves and impact on the clients we work with. Of course, there are a myriad of other factors influencing diversity and potential, but unconscious bias is the stuff of the everyday and the actions resulting from this are largely within our control.

Perhaps if we can work together with awareness, understanding and kindness to provide opportunities for people from groups who are under-represented (as well as those who aren't), we can ensure a culture which promotes potential for people from all identities. Untangling the web, with sensitivity, thought by thought, action by action. ■



If you enjoyed reading this, you can read more about The Outward Bound Trust's research and progress at www.outwardbound.org.uk/news/blogs/exploring-our-diversity/

References

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Brain image source: www.youtube.com/watch?v=dVp9Z