

# UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACT OF UNCONSCIOUS BIAS IN A UNIVERSITY SETTING: A MODULE FOR FACULTY AND STAFF AT BROWN



BROWN

## DISCUSSION GUIDE

### Using This Guide

This guide is divided into five main sections: 1) Opening the discussion, 2) Why we're focusing on unconscious bias, 3) Discussing key concepts and learning points from the e-learning module, 4) Helpful discussion questions to help guide your conversation, and 5) Action orientation and continuing the discussion. If time allows, please try to touch on each of these sections with your group.

To help participants get the most from their experience with the e-learning module and the discussion, we strongly encourage your audience to complete at least two of the [Implicit Associations Test](#) to create the opportunity for self-reflection. However, we do not recommend asking your audience to share their results of the IAT with you or the group during the discussion as this may keep people from fully participating.

**Important reminder:** The priority in these discussion groups is not necessarily to focus on the IATs themselves, but on the self-reflection that taking IATs coupled with the e-learning module triggered for individuals. Please also remember it is not your responsibility to explain or defend the IATs. Your job is to keep the communication open and flowing. However, if individuals have questions regarding the IAT, please refer to any of the resources listed at the end of this guide. Individuals may want to focus on the test itself, individual results, the mechanics of the test, or its validity. As such, it is important that you, as a facilitator, provide room for discussion of these issues, but also identify opportunities to guide conversation to a broader discussion of bias and how it affects human interaction and decision-making.

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### Opening The Discussion

We suggest you open the discussion by proposing a set of communication agreements to prevent your audience from falling into counterproductive habits like interrupting each other and competing for the floor. The agreements below serve two general purposes: (1) they discourage old ritualized patterns of communication and (2) they foster a respectful environment in which participants can have a purposeful and engaging exchange of ideas, inquiries, and personal experiences.

## **Suggested Communication Agreements**

1. We will speak for ourselves and allow others to speak for themselves, with no pressure to represent or explain a whole group.
2. We will listen with resilience, “hanging in” when something is hard to hear (see message about discomfort below).
3. If tempted to make attributions about the beliefs of others (e.g., “You just believe that because...”), we will instead consider asking a question to check out the assumption we are making (e.g., “Do you believe that because...?” or “What leads you to that belief?”).
4. We will share airtime and participate within the suggested timeframes.
5. We will not interrupt except to indicate that we cannot or did not hear a speaker.
6. We will assume good intentions without ignoring impact.
7. We will keep in mind that understanding and agreeing are not the same thing.
8. What is shared here stays here; what’s learned can leave.

***“We cannot unlearn what we are too afraid to acknowledge. If you’re not uncomfortable while talking about diversity and inclusion, then I assure you, you’re not doing it right.” - Michelle Kim***

## **A Message about Discomfort**

Conversations about diversity, especially those that require us to be vulnerable, can make people feel uncomfortable. Providing a thoughtfully designed space which allows for both compassionate and critical dialogues can help your audience engage with the material in meaningful ways. Encourage vulnerability and invite your audience to sit in their discomfort and make learning personal and productive. Create the container in which personal growth can happen through discomfort.

## **Managing Naysayers**

Depending on the department’s climate and how the e-learning modules and follow-up discussion was messaged, you may have some naysayers in the room. Be prepared for determined individuals who may try to derail the conversation. Understand that if you don’t manage them effectively, the learning experience of others could be impacted. Further, comments from naysayers may invalidate the experience of those with marginalized identities in the room and cause them harm. Prioritize those who want to learn, while quickly understanding what the detractors need to stay focused and engaged.

One suggestion is to acknowledge the naysayers comments and ask for other perspectives from the rest of the group. Revisiting communication agreements 2 and 7 prior to moving the discussion forward may also be a helpful strategy.

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## Why We Focus on Unconscious Bias?

Unconscious bias is part of a larger system that maintains institutional inequities and creates narratives that perpetuate biases. However, institutions are made up of individuals, and these individuals hold unconscious biases. Thus, unconscious bias at the individual level contributes to the larger systemic issue. That's why it's important that we, as individuals, address our unconscious biases. By not doing so, there can be a temptation to depersonalize the work, blame the system, and make it appear as though we are the exception to unconscious bias. For instance, if a search committee fails to invite a single candidate from a Historically Underrepresented Group (HUG) for a job interview, they may say, "Well, it's the field that's racist and has barred access to HUG candidates, not us." Therefore, the best way to address systemic biases is to first unpack our own unconscious biases.

Using the guided questions below, your audience can begin to reflect on how their identities and experiences have shaped their worldviews and the assumptions they make about others.

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### Key Concepts and Learning Points

#### Key Concepts

- **Systemic or institutional bias** is prejudice, discrimination or unfairness directed by health, educational, government, judicial, legal, religious, political, financial, media, or cultural institutions through policies and practices that create different outcomes for historically underrepresented and marginalized groups. While institutional policies may never mention exclusion of marginalized group, their effect is to create advantages for those from advantaged groups and oppression and disadvantage for people from groups classified as marginalized.
- **Implicit or unconscious bias** (hereafter unconscious bias) refers to the attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner. These biases, which encompass both favorable and unfavorable stereotypes, are activated involuntarily and without an individual's awareness or intentional control. These biases cause us to have feelings and attitudes about other people based on characteristics such as race, ethnicity, age, appearance, etc. These unconscious associations develop over the course of a lifetime beginning at a very early age through exposure to direct and indirect messages. In addition to early life experiences, the media, the stories and books we are exposed to, and news programming are often-cited origins of unconscious associations.
- **Affinity bias** is the unconscious tendency to show preference for those who are like us. This bias often shows up in hiring process as we search for candidates that "fit" the culture of the department.
- **Confirmation bias** occurs when we make a judgement or assumption about another person (these judgements and assumptions can be fueled by stereotypes), and we unconsciously look for evidence to back up our assumption of that person. We do this

because we want to believe we're right and that we've made the right assessment of a person.

- **Stereotypes** are an exaggerated belief, image or distorted truth about a person or group—a generalization that allows for little or no individual differences or social variation. Stereotypes are based on images in mass media, or stories and perceptions about other groups passed on by parents, peers and other members of society. Stereotypes can be positive or negative.
- **Microaggression** are everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, and insults, whether intentional or unintentional, which communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group memberships.
- **FLEX Model**, developed by IBIS Consulting Group, is a useful tool to address biases and promote inclusion. Below is the model and the actions belonging to the acronym.



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## Discussion Questions

### Introduction

Start your discussion by getting people on the same page on the “why” you are all gathered for this discussion first so that people feel invested in learning. We recommend framing the beginning of your discussion by answering the questions below and having answers align with your departmental/teaching/research goals as much as possible. Trying to really get at the negative impact unconscious biases can have on the workplace/teaching/research culture and society at large will set the stage for the rest of the session.

1. Why is learning about unconscious bias important for the work we do?
2. Why should we focus on *unlearning* them?

- a. What happens if we don't?
- b. What are the benefits we may reap if we are successful at unlearning them?
3. Why is this important for our department/unit/center? Why now?

### **Discuss the experience of taking an IAT**

1. What was it like to do the IAT?
2. Were you able to see any connections between your IAT results and the types of biases presented in the e-learning modules?
3. Were you able to see any connections between your IAT results and stereotypes that you may have been exposed to while growing up?

**Potential challenge:** Your audience may challenge the validity of the test, and may need some time to express this first.

**Strategies:** You may find it helpful to remain silent which encourages others to comment, acknowledge concerns of validity, ask the participants “what was useful/provocative/interesting about taking the IAT?,” ask other participants how they see the IAT, etc.

**Strategies to move the audience past test validity:** To move the discussion forward, consider asking:

- Did taking the IAT trigger you to reflect on any of the concepts presented during the e-learning module?
- How do you think taking the IAT relates to any past experiences you have had with students, faculty or staff?

### **Discuss comprehension of bias**

1. From your understanding of the e-learning module, how are unconscious biases developed?

**Note to facilitator:** Unconscious biases are developed through the pervasive cultural stereotypes that we have been exposed to through the messages we received while growing up, the movies and TV shows we watch, the books and news stories we read, the jokes we hear, and music we listen to, etc.

2. How are systemic and implicit biases connected?

**Note to facilitator:** Systemic biases are barriers maintained by institutions while unconscious biases are ones upheld by individuals.

3. As you understand, in what ways can a person genuinely believe that discrimination is wrong and still hold unconscious bias? If your audience has a difficult time understanding this question, feel free to be more specific by asking:

- In what ways can a person genuinely believe \_\_\_ism is wrong (e.g., racism, sexism, homophobia, cis-sexism, ableism, xenophobia, ageism, etc.) is wrong and still hold unconscious bias?

**Note to facilitator:** Unconscious bias is often in direct conflict with our conscious values.

4. How can unconscious biases be harmful?

**Note to facilitator:** You may want to connect this to the potential impact that unconscious bias has in your specific field. For instance, unconscious bias impacts:

- Performance reviews and evaluations
  - Who gets promoted
  - The peer review process, affecting whose work gets published and whose grants get funded
  - Health disparities, affecting who gets appropriate medical care, accurate diagnoses, appropriate treatment
  - Admissions process
  - Teaching evaluations
  - Who we chose to mentor
5. Can you give examples of how confirmation bias or affinity bias may show up in our admissions/hiring practices?
  6. Can we change our unconscious biases?

**Note to facilitator:** Implicit biases are malleable. Our brains are incredibly complex, and the implicit associations that we have formed can be gradually unlearned through a variety of debiasing techniques. The FLEX model is one technique that can help us unlearn these biases.

7. How do you see yourself using the FLEX model? In what situations do you see yourself using the FLEX model?

## **Action Orientation**

It is important that people leave the discussion committing to an action informed from the knowledge they just gained. Dedicate time at the end of the discussion to brainstorm action items as individuals, teams, or as a department/unit/center. Make sure to take notes and follow up with the group afterwards with reminders or progress updates. Try to connect these actions to the actions and goals you have identified for yourselves in your departmental diversity and inclusion action plans (DDIAP).

Also consider what the next steps are after a lively discussion session. What comes next in your department's continued effort towards diversity and inclusion and your DDIAP goals?

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## **Closing**

Remember, the e-learning module and discussion are just starting points. It takes time to unlearn harmful behaviors or beliefs. It takes practice and intentional effort to sustain behavior change. In order for the learning to stick, the dialogue must continue. Schedule recurring small discussion groups after the initial workshop to unpack, digest, and reinforce the learning. Consider providing additional training that builds on the knowledge participants just gained. We typically recommend addressing microaggressions, debiasing feedback and performance review, stereotype threat, inclusive goal setting, or practicing thoughtful allyship as potential follow-up training topics for different groups.

Below are some additional resources that may be able to offer assistance with these training goals:

**[Office of Institutional Equity and Diversity](#)**

**[Office of Diversity and Multicultural Affairs](#)**

**[The Sheridan Center for Teaching and Learning](#)**

**[LGBTQ Center](#)**