

Interrupting and Mitigating Implicit Bias

Only 5% of our brain is doing active explicit processing. The other 95% of what we are doing is being determined unconsciously. Remember that biases come from schemas and heuristics—mental shortcuts that help us process information and make a million little decisions all the time. We might be more familiar with “demographic bias,” which is about the social messages and stereotypes we hold about certain groups of people. However, it isn’t simply racism, sexism, etc. but rather a series of connections in our brains that lead to all sorts of biases. In fact, there are 150+ named biases. And these biases are helpful and adaptive. They allow us to use previous information and experiences to inform new decisions. They are cognitive shortcuts that allow our brains to function. They can also prevent us from receiving new information, inhibit us from considering all options, or cause us to make illogical decisions. The 150+ biases can be roughly categorized into five types: similarity, expedience, experience, distance, and safety.

Interruption and Mitigation Strategies

Each type of bias can be interrupted or mitigated with different strategies. **Interruption** strategies are those that prevent the bias from being enacted. **Mitigation** strategies reduce the effects of the bias.

Similarity: This type of bias is most likely to show up in “people decisions.” To counter similarity bias, look for ways to build connection and reduce difference.

1. Remove identifying information from materials for hiring promotion, scholarships, etc.
2. Find shared values with people who seem different. You can also look for or create similarities.

Expedience: Expedience bias is especially likely to occur when people are in a hurry or cognitively depleted; people tend to take the easy path. To counter expedience bias, you need to slow down and engage in more cognitive effort.

1. Slow down!
2. Engage in “if..., then...” planning.
3. Encourage rationalized decision-making and process identification. Lay out decision-making logic step-by-step.

Types of Biases

Similarity

These are positive associations for those who are like you and negative associations with those that are unlike you.

Expedience

These are mental shortcuts that help us make quick and efficient decisions.

Experience

This is the belief that we see reality clearly and correctly and that anyone who sees it differently is incorrect. We have a strong conviction that our intuition is correct.

Distance

We value things that are closer to us more. This can be “closer” in terms of space, time, or even ownership.

Safety

It seems that our decisions are generally more driven by negatives than positives (i.e. bad is stronger than good).

Demographic: The social messages we all receive and the stereotypes we are taught about people based on where they live, their race, gender, age, ability, religion, etc.

Experience: This is one of the hardest biases to overcome because it is so hard to realize that the way we see things isn't the only way to see them. To counter experience bias, seek outside input and feedback and aim for greater objectivity.

1. Practice perspective taking. Imagine yourself and the issue from other people's perspectives.
2. Invite "outsiders" to offer their perspectives on issues or decisions.

Distance: To counter distance bias, you need to take distance out of the equation when analyzing outcomes and resources. Evaluate all options as if they were equally close to you in distance, time, or ownership.

1. First, make sure to consciously understand the full value of each option and then *consciously* deliberate on time, distance, and resources.
2. Not to say time, distance, and resources shouldn't factor into the equations, but that they should factor in consciously rather than unconsciously influence your decision.

Safety: Safety biases are mostly likely to occur in making decisions about risk and return. To counter safety bias, try to create greater distance between you and the situation.

1. Separate the self. Imagine you are making the decision for someone else.
2. Imagine the decision has already been made and you are not looking back at the pros and cons more objectively.

Demographic: This type of bias shows up under each of the other categories, but there are some specific strategies to help interrupt or mitigate the systems that rely on demographic biases to reinforce dominance and marginalization.

1. Engage with counter-stereotypical examples of marginalized groups before meeting with people from those groups (the positive effect is short term so this must be in immediate proximity to the meeting).
2. Seek out the voices of marginalized people. Listen and learn from their life experiences and use that knowledge to question your own narratives. Engage in an active practice of self-awareness.
3. Build authentic relationships across difference.

Other Strategies: There are a myriad of other strategies that may help generally. There are considered some of the best practices when it comes to reducing bias in decision-making.

1. Make important decisions in groups.
2. Create a culture where it is acceptable to identify potential bias and reward efforts to address it.
3. Encourage people to disagree (civilly), "check" each other, and present alternate options.
4. As a leader, encourage people to challenge you.
5. Pay attention to who speaks (and gets heard) and who doesn't and consider ways to make speaking at meetings more equitable.
6. Intentionally seek out other perspectives.
7. Debate yourself from the opposing viewpoint.
8. Avoid making important decisions when you are overwhelmed, stressed, tired, or emotionally activated.
9. Practice mindfulness.
10. When decisions get tough, make it a question of what best aligns with organizational values.
11. Make these practices systemic and the cultural norm!