Stereotypes and unconscious bias

Factsheet

Definitions

- **Bias:** Distorted cognitive perceptions leading to incorrect judgments and decision-making, often occurring unconsciously
- **Stereotypes:** Generalised judgments categorising individuals based on incomplete knowledge about social groups others believe they belong to, leading to certain expectations about their behaviour and abilities
- **Prejudices:** Emotionally charged evaluations of individuals from specific social groups, often stemming from the presence of stereotypes
- **Discrimination:** Behavioural response to stereotypical evaluations, which can have negative or positive effects and may be referred to as privileges in the context of equal opportunities

Origin of biases

Understanding the origin of biases allows us to explore the root causes and underlying mechanisms that contribute to the formation and perpetuation of biases. Everyone has biases, regardless of gender, education, or social status. They can help our brains to make quick decisions, but can also lead to discrimination and making us bad decisions.

Our individual biases are influenced by our systems of thinking and our experiences.

1. Systems of thinking

- Two systems of thinking: **System 1** (unconscious) and **System 2** (conscious)
- **System 1:** enables us to act quickly based on stored experiences.
- **System 2:** slower and requires conscious effort.

2. Experiences

- Experiences shape our unconscious thought processes.
- Sometimes these processes can be faulty or go against our conscious beliefs (= unconscious biases).

3. Take home points

- Unconscious biases can occur due to information overload, low informative value, need for quick decisions, and diversity of information.
- They are like shortcuts that our brains use, especially when we are feeling stressed or scared.

- Sometimes these shortcuts can cause unfair treatment or discrimination, thus it is important to understand one's own unconscious biases.
- To address unconscious biases, we should question our perceptions and re-evaluate our experiences.

Biases in the context of domestic violence and their consequences

Gender norms and gender role expectations

- **Gender norms:** Standards that are placed upon individuals in a society to present, act, and express themselves based upon their assigned sex at birth.
- **Gender role expectations:** Societal norms that dictate to individuals what constitutes "manhood" and "womanhood".

The negative impact of gender roles can be seen in the phenomenon of toxic masculinity, the objectification of women, and the lack of or incorrect representation of LGBTIQ+ in the media.

- **Toxic masculinity:** Harmful social norms that are aimed at men and boys, promoting the idea that masculinity or expressing masculinity is the most important part of being a male.
- **Objectification of women and sexualisation of violence:** Occurs in advertisements, music videos, video games, movies, pornography, and in other contexts (e.g., sexist language, catcalling). It makes it harder to empathise with women who have experienced abuse or sexual violence.
- **Representation of LGBTIQ+ in the media:** Lack of representation, or full of outdated stereotypes, painting them either as victims or as mentally ill contributing to the discrimination directed towards them.

Victim-blaming

- Tendency to hold victims of domestic violence partially or entirely responsible for the abuse they endure, instead of placing accountability on the perpetrator.
- Stems from societal attitudes and misconceptions that unfairly place the burden of responsibility on the victim, often implying that they somehow provoked or deserved the violence inflicted upon them.
- Perpetuates a culture of silence, trivialises the experiences of victims, and can discourage them from seeking help.

Examples:

- *"The victim provoked him."*
- *"They both have problems."*
- *"The victim shouldn't have married him."*
- *"The victim was drunk."*

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Find more information on gender in Module 1.

The linguist and feminist author Julia Penelope used these examples to illustrate how, depending on the language used, victims are either blamed or avoided being blamed.

John beat Mary.

This sentence is written in active voice. It is clear who is committing the violence.

Mary was beaten by John.

The sentence has been changed to passive voice, so Mary comes first.

Mary was beaten.

Notice that John is removed from the sentence completely. Our attention is completely focused on Mary.

Mary is a battered woman.

Being a battered woman is now part of Mary's identity. John is not a part of the statement, and he will not be held accountable for his choice to abuse.

The focus has shifted entirely to Mary and is no longer on John, encouraging the audience to focus on the victim instead of the perpetrator's actions.

Anti-biases strategies

1. Counterstereotype imaging = thinking away stereotypes:

- Sometimes people have ideas about how certain groups of people are supposed to be.
- When we think about people who are different from those stereotypes, it can make us less biased.

2. Individuation = focusing on the uniqueness of each person:

- We should not judge someone based on our first impressions or what we think about their group to which they seem to belong.
- It is important to take our time and get to know the person as an individual.
- We can challenge our stereotypes by learning more about the person and seeing their unique qualities.

3. Contact theory = positive contact helps reduce stereotypes:

- When we have positive experiences with people from different groups, it can make us less likely to believe stereotypes.

4. Perspective taking = putting yourself in the other person's shoes:

- It is important to try to understand how someone else might feel or think, and we should imagine how we would feel if we were in their situation.

Examples:

What do I see? What do I read or hear?

A woman with a head veil enters the office.

What do I think? How do I classify?

The woman is a Muslim.

What do I feel? What emotion does the situation trigger in me? How do I judge and decide?

The woman is self-confident. / I feel sorry for the woman. / etc.

5 Steps to counter personal biases

1. Accept that you have biases:

- Sometimes we have certain ways of thinking that might not be fair to everyone.
- It is important to learn more about these ways of thinking and how they can affect our decisions.

2. Identify situations where mistakes can happen:

- There are times when we might not make the best decisions because we are in a hurry or feeling angry.
- It is good to ask friends and colleagues for feedback about us to understand our preferences and patterns.

3. Analyse how you see things:

- When we see something, we have thoughts and feelings about it.
- We can ask ourselves what we see, what we think, and how it makes us feel.

4. Understand where biases come from:

- Our experiences and the culture we grow up in shape how we see and judge things.
- We can think about where our ideas came from and how they might be different from others.

5. Reduce biases and be aware of them:

- If we realise, we have biases, we can work on changing them.
- Learning more about different topics can help us make fairer conclusions.

Training materials to be used for a workshop or for your self-study can be found **here**.