



Unconscious Bias

26 April 2022

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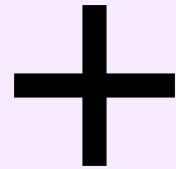
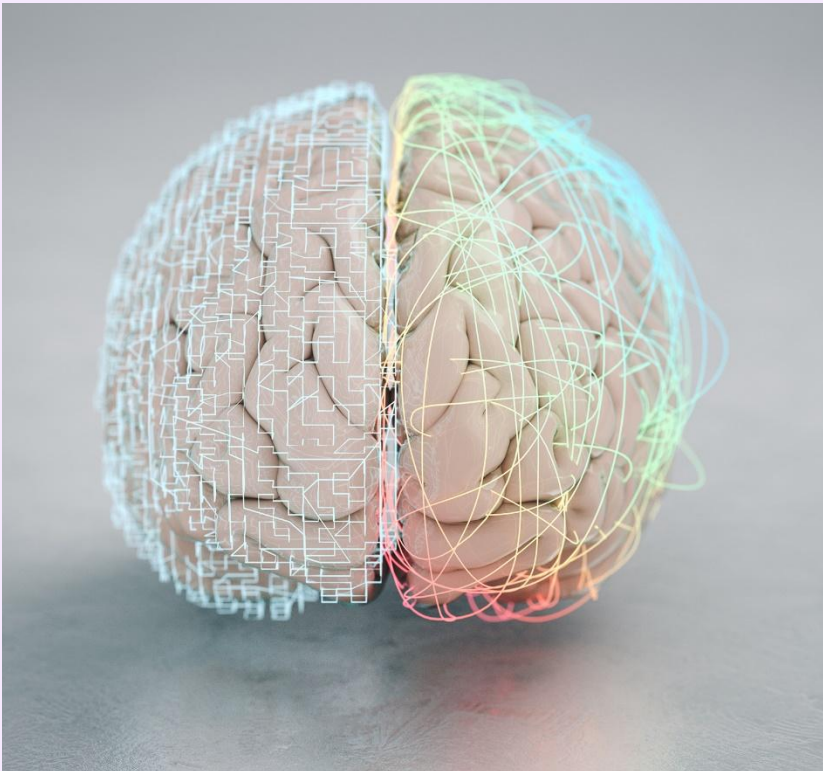
A photograph of three raised fists, one in sharp focus in the foreground and two blurred in the background, set against a light blue background. The fists are raised high, symbolizing solidarity and protest.

Social worker's mandate

“As a profession with an ethical mandate to engage in social justice reform efforts, social work is well positioned to lead systems towards anti-racism, anti-bias, and equity practices through consciousness-raising efforts.”

Busseya, Thompson and Poliandro (2019)

Recipe for bias



Bias

CONSCIOUS

EXPLICIT

KNOWN

UNCONSCIOUS

IMPLICIT

HIDDEN

‘Unconscious’ bias



What we call
‘unconscious’ bias
is rooted in the
recognition that the
human brain evolved
to help species
survive

No-one is exempt

WE ALL HAVE BIASES

They can be life-saving.
(May have saved yours already!)
It's all of us.

Biases stem from one's tendency to organise social worlds by categorising.

In our every day lives, such associations assist us in making **rapid decisions**, but in a professional context they can be a systematic cause of error.

Brains work HARD



Literature insights

We consciously "and unconsciously" store experiences in our brains and those experiences (memories) later influence **instantaneous, automatic decision-making**, which is critical to cognitive functioning and "cannot be turned off".

(Gershenson, 2017)



Literature insights

The evidence from unconscious bias theorists is plentiful; we all form stereotypical associations and make inaccurate judgements about people and things (positive or negative), **without explicitly being aware** that we are doing so.

(Greenwald and Krieger, 2006)



Literature insights

“Unconscious biases denotes the social and political **stereotypes created outside of an individual and attributed to a group of people**

(Wu et al., 2019).

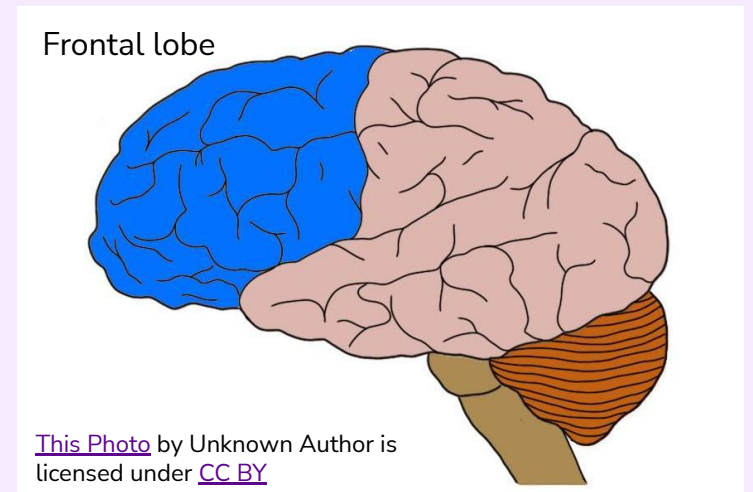
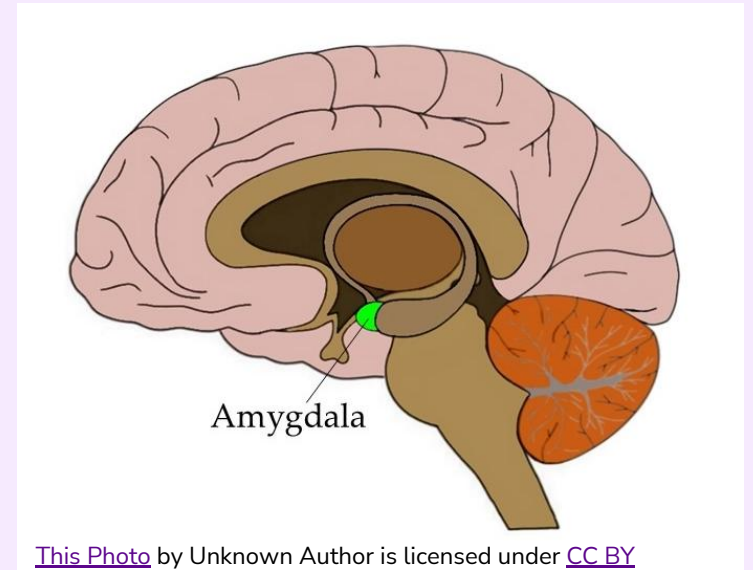
It is expressed as a **preference** (positive or negative) for a social category that operates beyond an individual’s awareness and/or control.”

Busseya, Thompson and Poliandro (2019)

Brain functioning and bias

The amygdala regulates automatic “fast” responses, which are associated with unconscious bias, while the frontal lobe regulates conscious (controlled) responses.

But what does this mean in reality?



What's being expressed?



What is the answer?

$$95 \times 62 = ?$$

What's being expressed?



Frustration

Refusal

Disapproval

Annoyance

Rebellion

Dislike

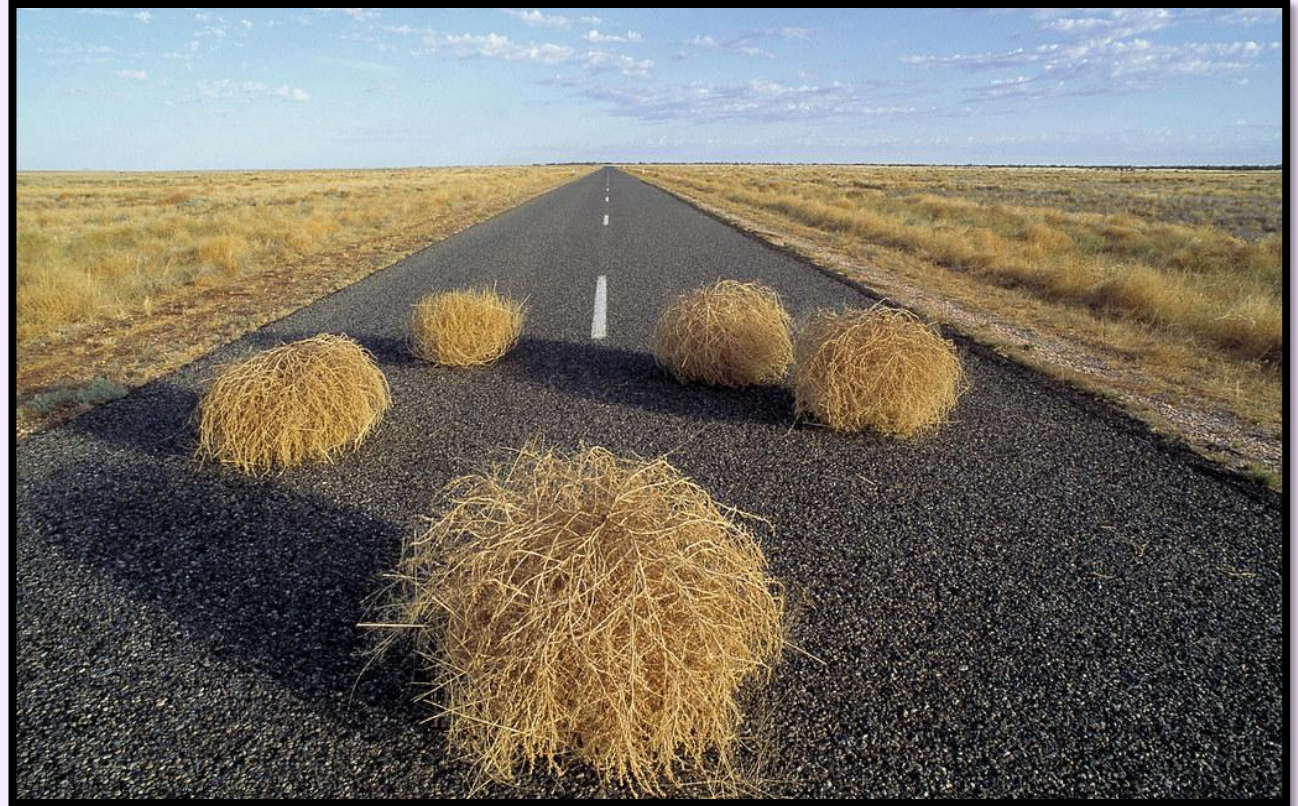
Sadness

Strong minded-ness

And the answer is...

95 x 62

Answer: 5,890

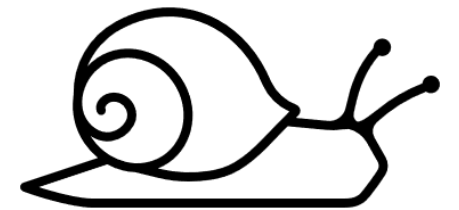


Fast and Slow Thinking

System 1 – effortless ideas and feelings.
Main source of beliefs and choices for
system 2.

Fast. Intuitive. Automatic. Constant.

“Secret author of many of the choices and
judgements you make”

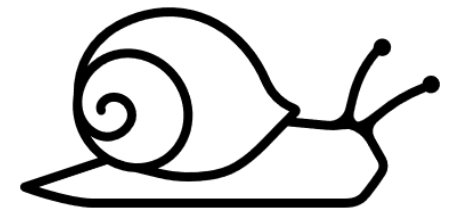


Fast and Slow Thinking

System 2 – Rational and effort driven thoughts and ideas. Informed by system 1.

Slow. Deliberate. Analytical. Conscious.

Requires attention and disrupted when attention is withdrawn.



Danger detector



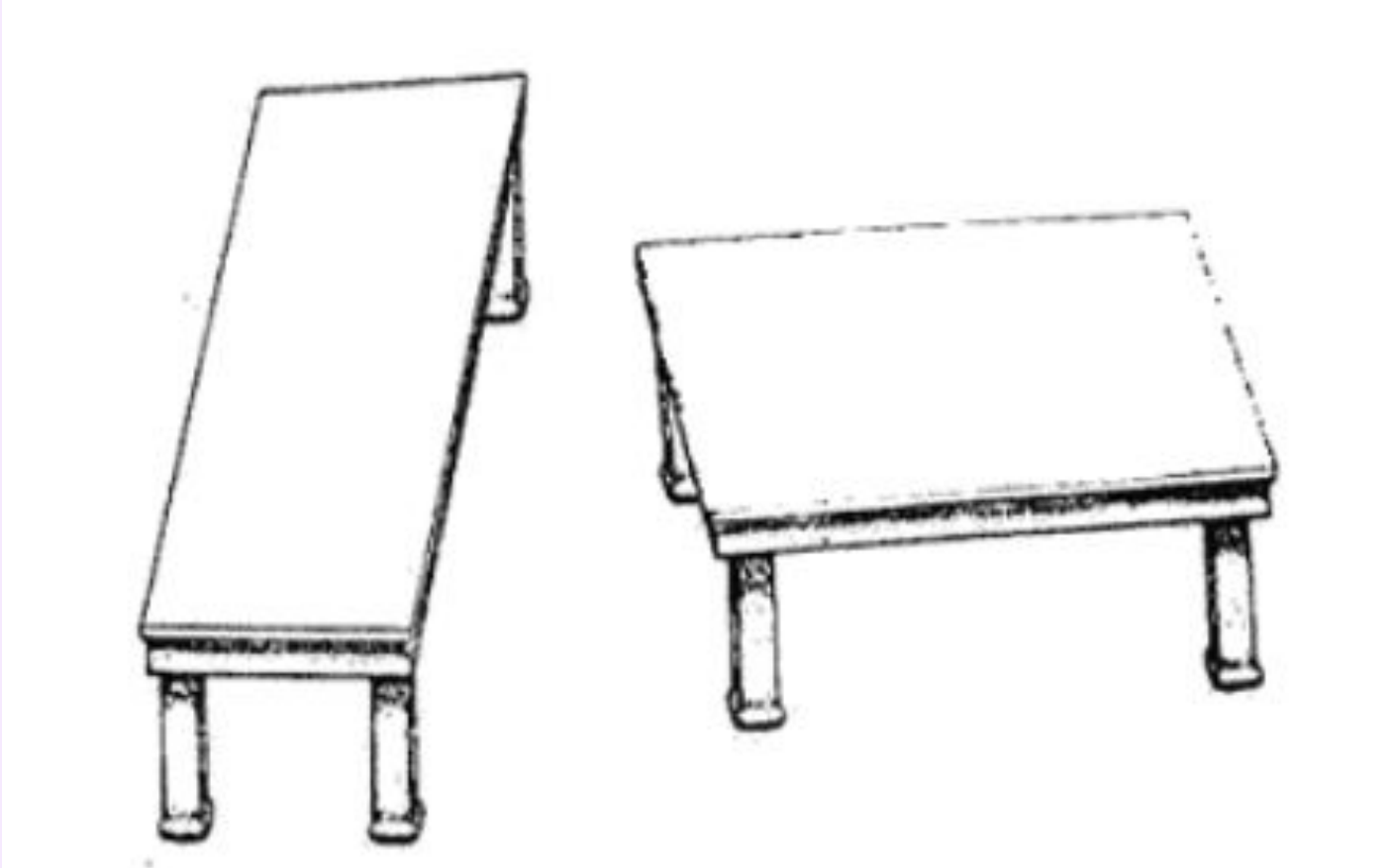
Our brains determine whether or not something or someone is safe before we can even begin to consciously make a determination. When the object, animal, or person is assessed to be dangerous, a **“fight or flight” fear response occurs.**

Joseph LeDoux (1996)

Good/bad person paradigm

- Generally assume that discriminatory behaviours are conscious.
- It is thought that people who do better do the right thing, and those who don't, act out of unconscious bias.
- Has led to a “good person/bad person” paradigm in practice that centres on premised on social justice, anti-oppression and in more recent times including “trauma informed/ aware/ sensitive/ etc”.
- There is a prevailing misconception that good people are not biased, but inclusive, and that bad people are the biased ones.

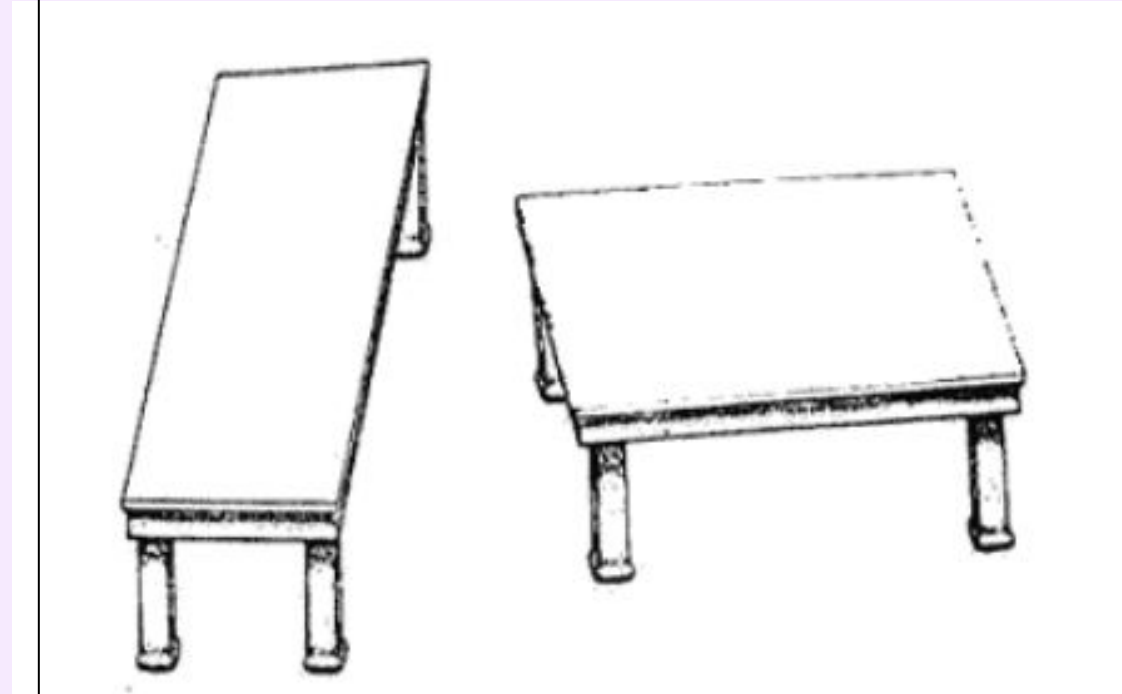
Are these the same?



Roger Shepard (1990)

‘Cognitive illusions’

“Because we are generally unaware that we are imposing a perceptual interpretation on the stimulus, we are generally unaware that our **experience has an illusory aspect**. The illusory aspect may only strike us after we are informed, for example, that the sizes or shapes of lines or areas that appear very unequal are, in fact identical in the picture.”



Perceptual lens



Our fundamental way of looking at and encountering the world is driven by this “hard-wired” pattern of making unconscious decisions about others based on what feels safe, likeable, valuable, and competent.

We develop a perceptual lens that filters things out and lets others in, depending upon perceptions, interpretations, preferences and biases held and adapted throughout life.

Cook Ross, Inc

Working environment

Biases may be more prevalent when multi-tasking or working under time pressure. (Office of Diversity and Outreach, 2018)

There are **four** things in the workplace that commonly trigger unconscious biases:



TASKS

We associate certain jobs with certain types of people.



NUMBERS

When looking at a group, like job applicants, we're most likely to use biases to analyse people in the outlying demographics



CLARITY

When information is lacking, our brains fill in the gaps with what we're expecting.



PERCEIVER

A heightened emotional state can keep the conscious mind distracted

Human brain predisposition



Characteristic brain signature seen when participants were told a member of a “bad” group had done something positive - an observation that is likely to tally with the subjective experience of minorities.

The human brain is predisposed to learn negative stereotypes.
This offers clues as to how prejudice emerges and spreads through society.

The brain responds more strongly to information about groups who are portrayed unfavourably.

“Whenever someone from a really bad group did something nice they were like, ‘Oh, weird,’”
- Spiers

Spiers, Love, Pelley, Gibb & Murphy (2017)



The potential for prejudice is
hard-wired into human
cognition.

Not so unconscious?

Dr Lasana Harris views what many people call 'unconscious bias' as an inevitable result of the associations we learn and the way our brains react to perceived threats.

Rather than something we engage in unconsciously, he argues that it is something we know we are doing but struggle to control.





So tell me...

What are your biggest fears
and/or concerns pertaining
to unconscious bias in your
work?

Unconscious biases develop at an early age:
biases emerge during middle childhood and
appear to develop across childhood.

(Dore, 2014)

Isn't it absurd?

- Choosing a leader because of their height
- Treating the children differently because of their clothing
- Allowing people to endure mortal levels of pain due to their race
- Encouraging children based on their gender



Behaviour vs values



Sexuality

Several research studies highlight 'heterosexist bias' within mental health:

- Counsellors attributing bisexual clients' problems to their sexuality and giving rating their psychosocial functioning lower (Mohr, Israel and Sedlacek, 2001)
- Clinicians with even low levels of homophobia tend to blame client for problems (Hayes and Erkis, 2000)

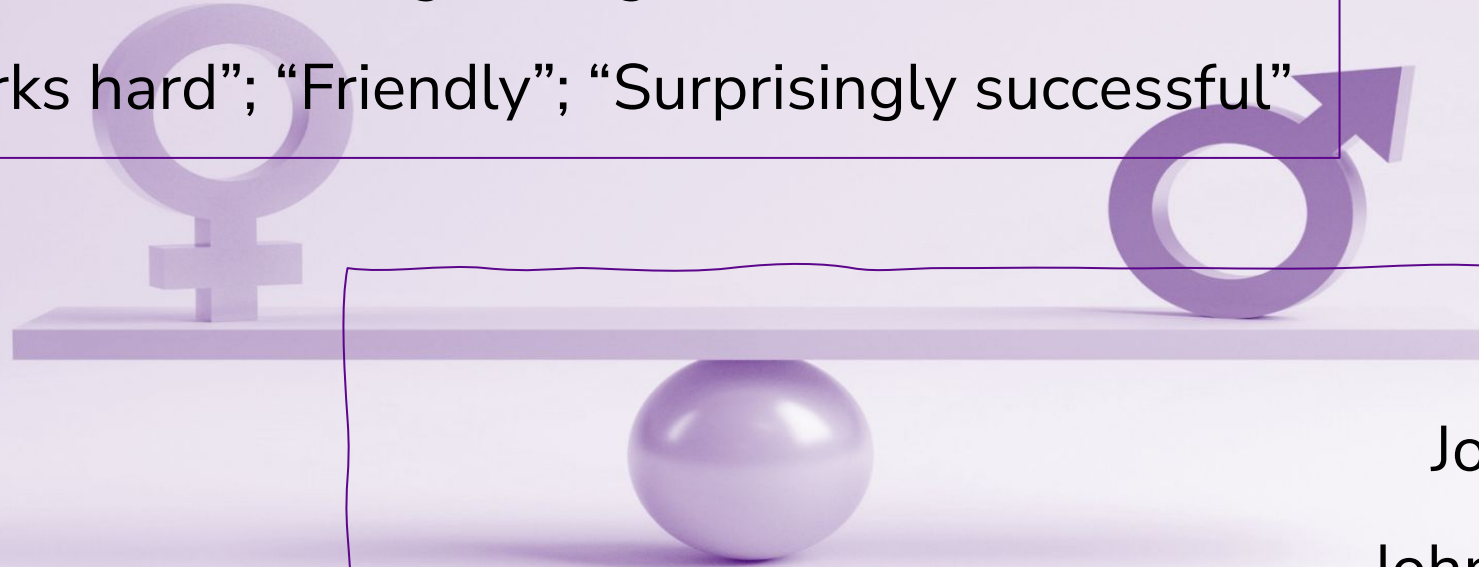


Gender

Letters of reference

Man: “Brilliant”; “Outstanding”; “Original”

Woman: “Works hard”; “Friendly”; “Surprisingly successful”



Hiring

John over Jane

John over Yasser

Parenting reference – helps men, hinders women

Intersectional: Age, race and vulnerability

Adultification

Gaslighting

**Micro(macro)
aggressions**

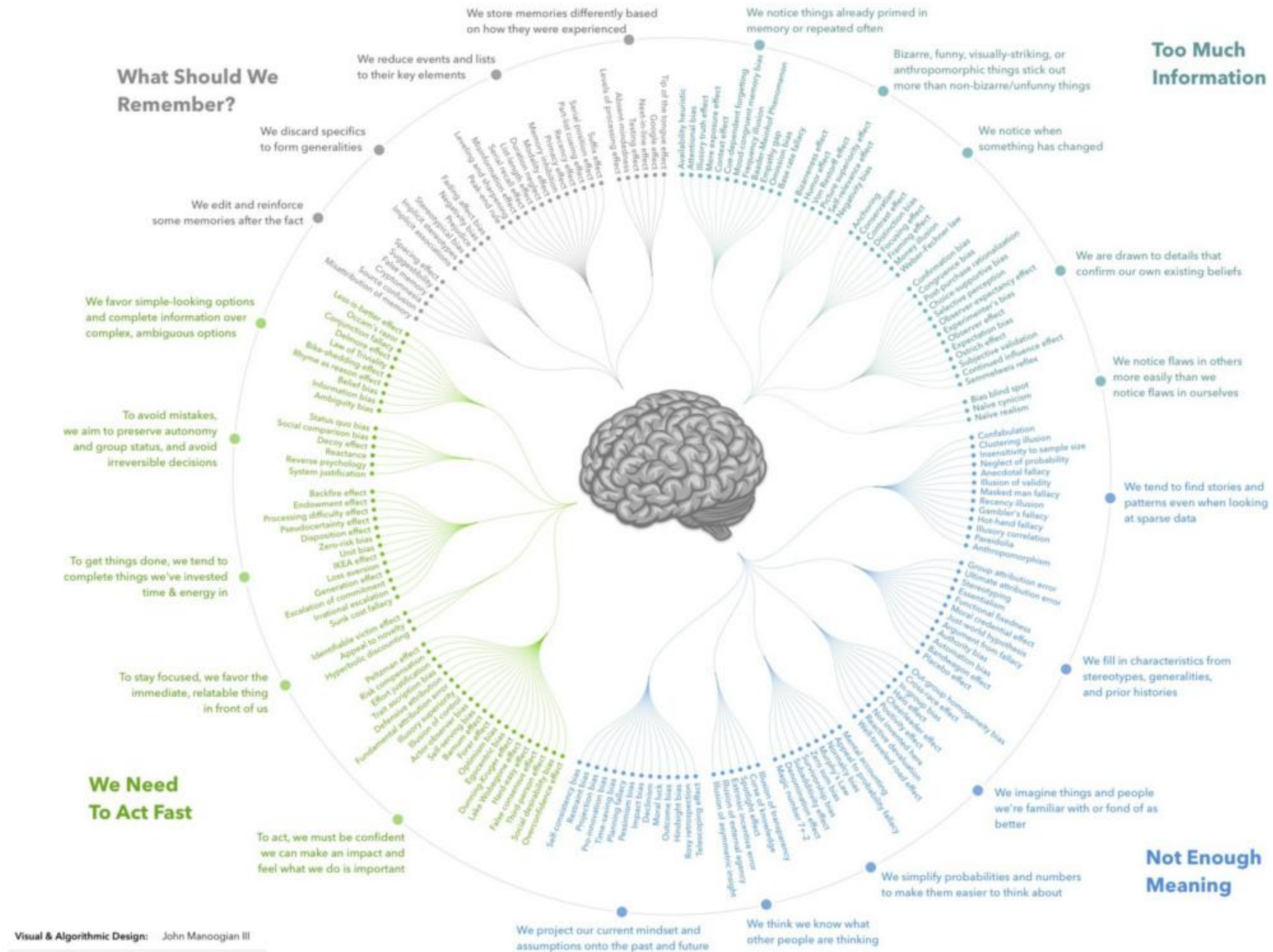


Unmet needs

Pathologised

Trauma

COGNITIVE BIAS CODEX



Visual & Algorithmic Design: John Mandogian III

Concept & Categorization: Buster Benson

List of 188 Cognitive Biases: [Wikipedia](#)

designhacks.co

Thinking about our work...

Affinity bias – we gravitate toward people like ourselves in appearance, beliefs, and background. And we may avoid or even dislike people who are different from us.

Confirmation bias - tendency to search for, interpret, favour, and recall information in a way that confirms or supports one's prior beliefs or values.

Congruence bias – the preference to only test against our initial hypothesis, neglecting to explore alternative outcomes.

Subjective validation – considering a statement or another piece of information to be correct if it has any personal meaning or significance to you.

Anecdotal fallacy - a recent memory, a striking anecdote, or a news story of an unusual event leads one to overestimate the probability of that type of event, especially when one has access to better evidence.

Thinking about our work...

Just world hypothesis - belief that the world is fair, and consequently, that the moral standings of our actions will determine our outcomes'

Authority bias - the tendency to attribute greater accuracy to the opinion of an authority figure (unrelated to its content) and be more influenced by that opinion'

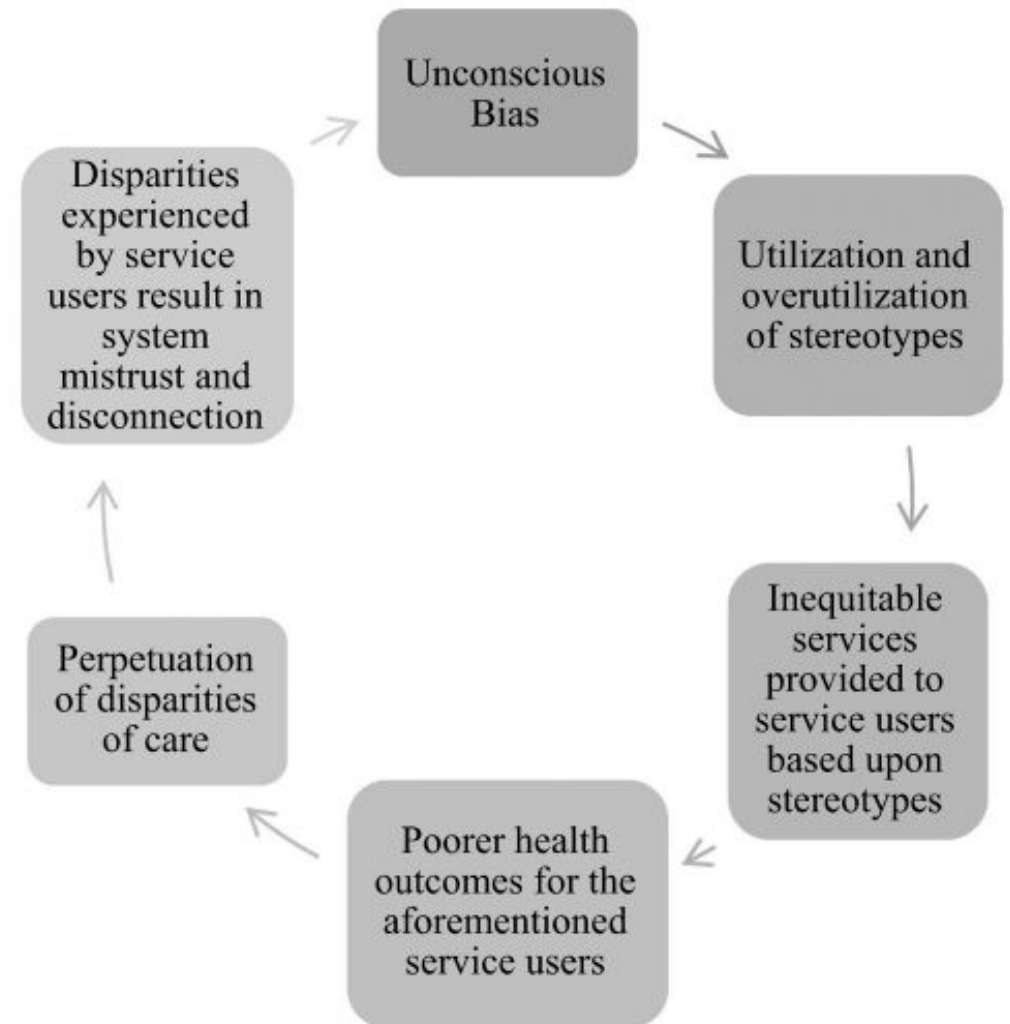
Bandwagon effect - the tendency for people to adopt certain behaviours, styles, or attitudes simply because others are doing it'

Halo effect - the tendency for positive impressions of a person, company, brand or product in one area to positively influence one's opinion or feelings in other area.

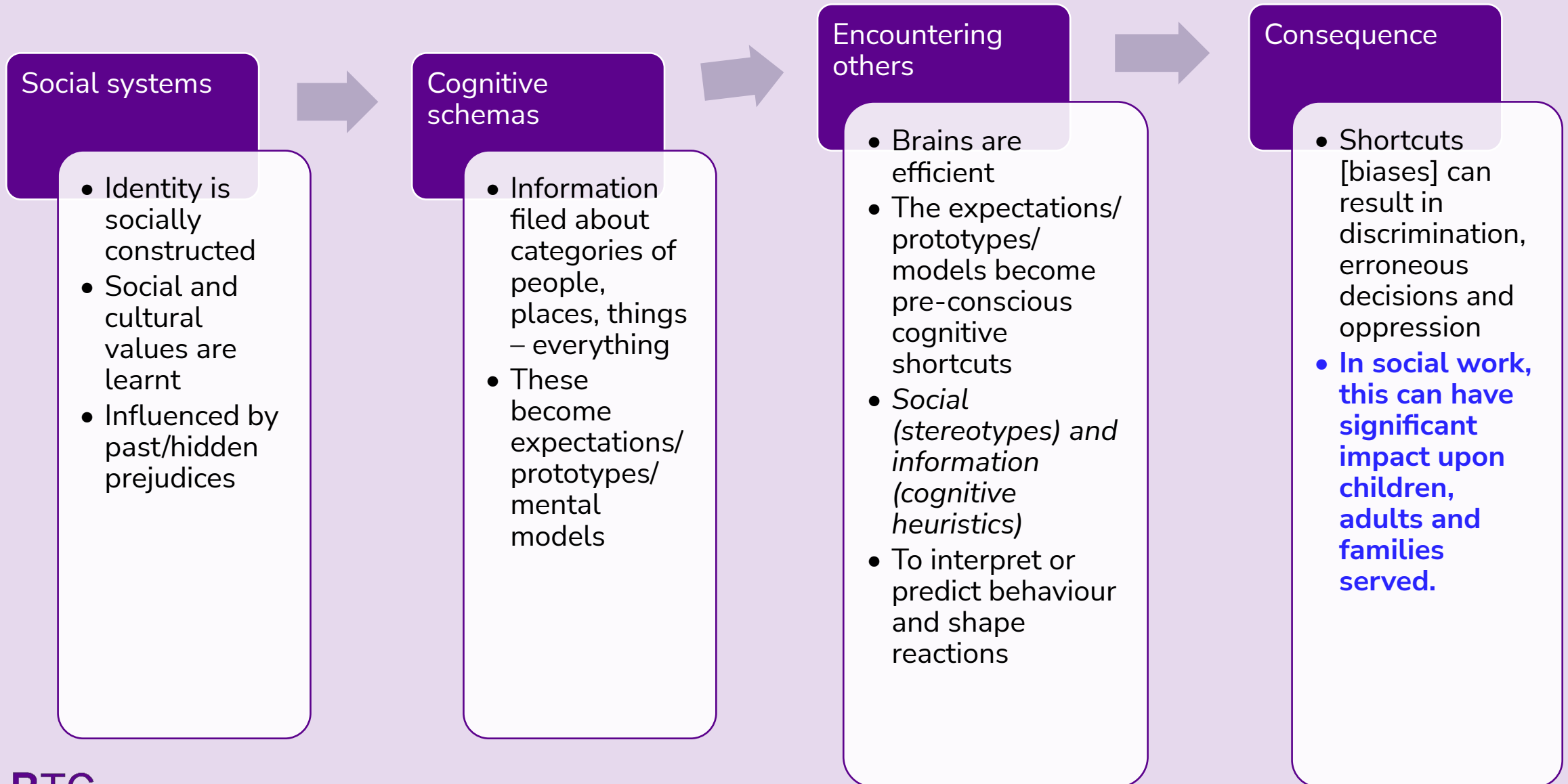
Bias in practice

The way in which our personal biases manifest within services directly impacts the level and quality of practice provided to those in need.

Table 5. Cycle of unconscious bias in social work service delivery.



Social categorisation



Expressing bias

	Overt expression	Covert expression
Interpersonal	<p><i>Prejudice in action</i></p> <p>Social workers recording “non-compliant” or “choosing” not to follow a simple plan of action in case notes.</p>	<p><i>Attitudes and beliefs</i></p> <p>Social workers who avoid engaging with disabled colleagues or those from practising religious backgrounds.</p>
Intrapersonal	<p><i>Internalized oppression - An oppressed individual/group using methods of oppressing individual/group against themselves and members of their oppressed group due to a desire to be like a group/individual perceived to be more highly valued.</i></p> <p>Social workers appearing less supportive, empathetic and/or flexible with children and adults of the same sexual orientation.</p>	<p><i>Stereotype threat - Hyper-vigilance and stress caused by threat of confirming negative stereotypes about a group an individual belongs to.</i></p> <p>Social workers feeling anxious that they may perform badly in a job interview which may confirm people’s negative beliefs about the capability of their age group.</p>

Social identity

Ideas about in-group and out-groups form the basis of a psychological theory first developed by the psychologists Henri Tajfel and John Turner (1979).

The theory argues that our response to joining groups (in-groups) involve three keys stages:

Social categorisation

Here we put ourselves and others into categories, for example, 'previously worked together in other organisations'.

Social identification

As soon as we are identified as belonging to one group rather than another, we take up that identity in our own and others' eyes. We become defined in a way that also has some emotional value or significance.

Social comparison

As members of a group, we then compare our group with others. In the process, we will define our group in positive terms, thereby reinforcing our own positive view of ourselves.

Out-groups are seen in negative terms, and perhaps even actively discriminated against

Racial biases

“Thus it is clear that the racial/ethnic minorities are very tuned in to nonverbals. For the social worker who has not adequately dealt with his or her own racism, the minority client will be quick to assess such biases.

In many cases, the **minority client may believe that the biases are too great to be overcome and will simply not continue.** This is despite good intentions of the white caseworker who is **not in touch with his or her own biases and assumptions** about human behaviour.”

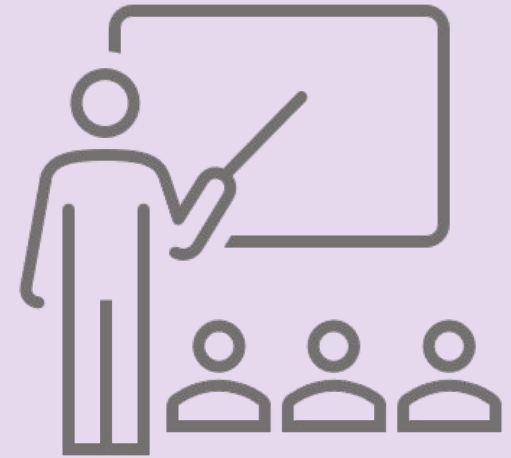
Wing Sue, 2006



Barrier to anti-oppressive practice

“Misinformation related to culturally diverse groups is not acquired by our free choice but rather is **imposed through a painful process of social conditioning; all of us were taught to hate and fear others who are different in some way** (Sue, 2003). Likewise, because all of us live, play, and work within organizations, those **policies, practices, and structures that may be less than fair to minority groups are invisible in controlling our lives...**

The power of racism, sexism, and homophobia is related to the **invisibility of the powerful forces that control and dictate our lives**. In a strange sort of way, we are all victims. Minority groups are victims of oppression. Majority group members are...unwittingly socialized into the role of oppressor.”



Sue & Sue (2012)

Dimensions of inequality

Structural

A system in which public policies, institutional practices, cultural representations, and other norms work in various, often reinforcing ways to perpetuate inequality. It identifies dimensions of history and culture that have allowed privileges associated with dominant groups and disadvantages associated with minoritised and marginalised groups to endure and adapt over time.

Institutional

Institutional inequality refers to the policies and practices within and across institutions that, intentionally or not, produce outcomes that chronically favour, or put a minoritised/marginalised group at a disadvantage

Interpersonal

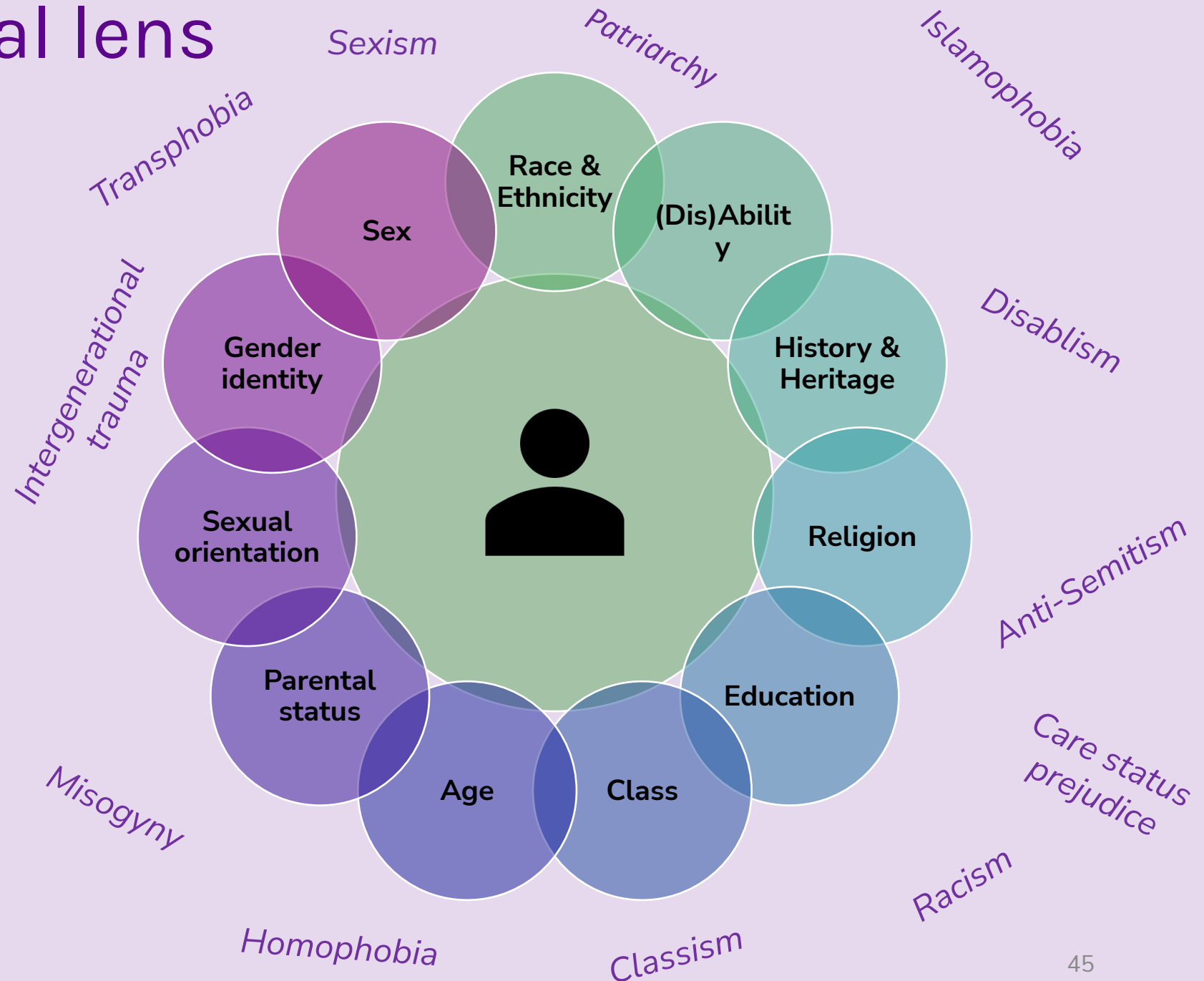
Discriminatory / oppressive acts, whether overt or covert, unintentional or intentional, from one individual to another.

Intrapersonal

Internalising of covert and overt inequitable messages, beliefs, bias and oppression, expressed through values, attitudes and behaviour, such as stereotype threat and embodiment of oppressive narratives.

The intersectional lens

Recognising and understanding the overlapping or intersecting **social identities** and related systems of oppression, domination, or discrimination experienced by everyone.



Equality vs Equity

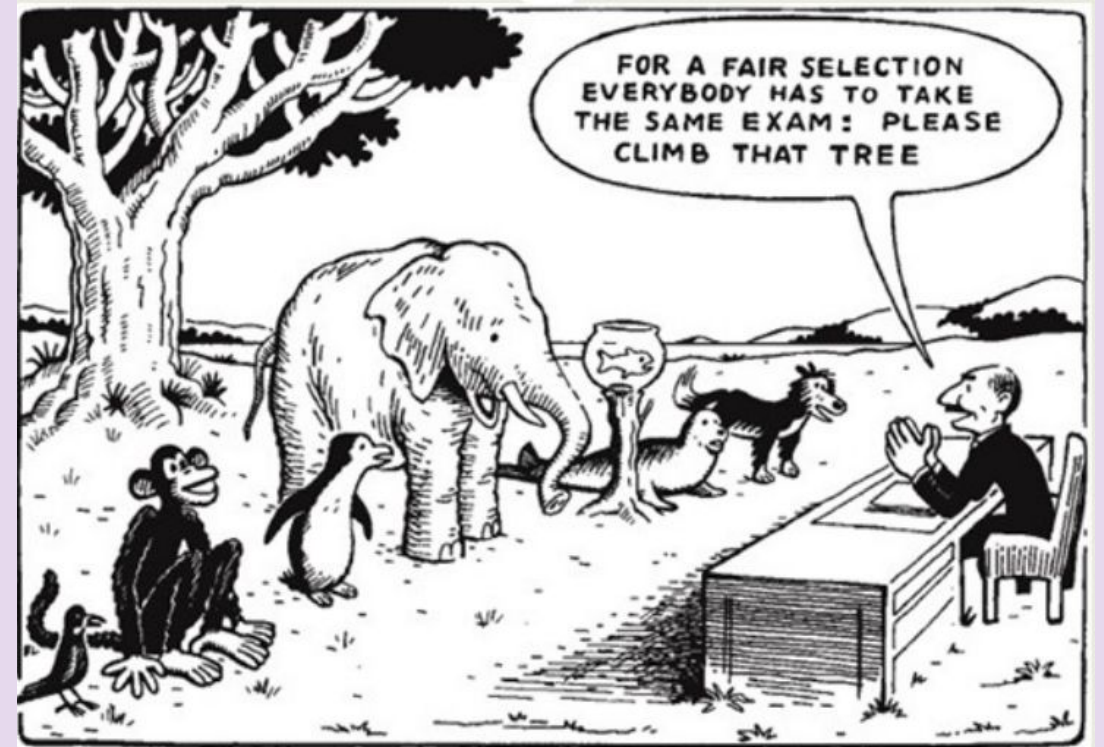
Equality

Ensuring that every individual has an equal opportunity to make the most of their lives and talents.

Equality and Human Rights Commission

Equity

Ensuring that every individual is treated fairly based on their respective needs.



Role and impact of language

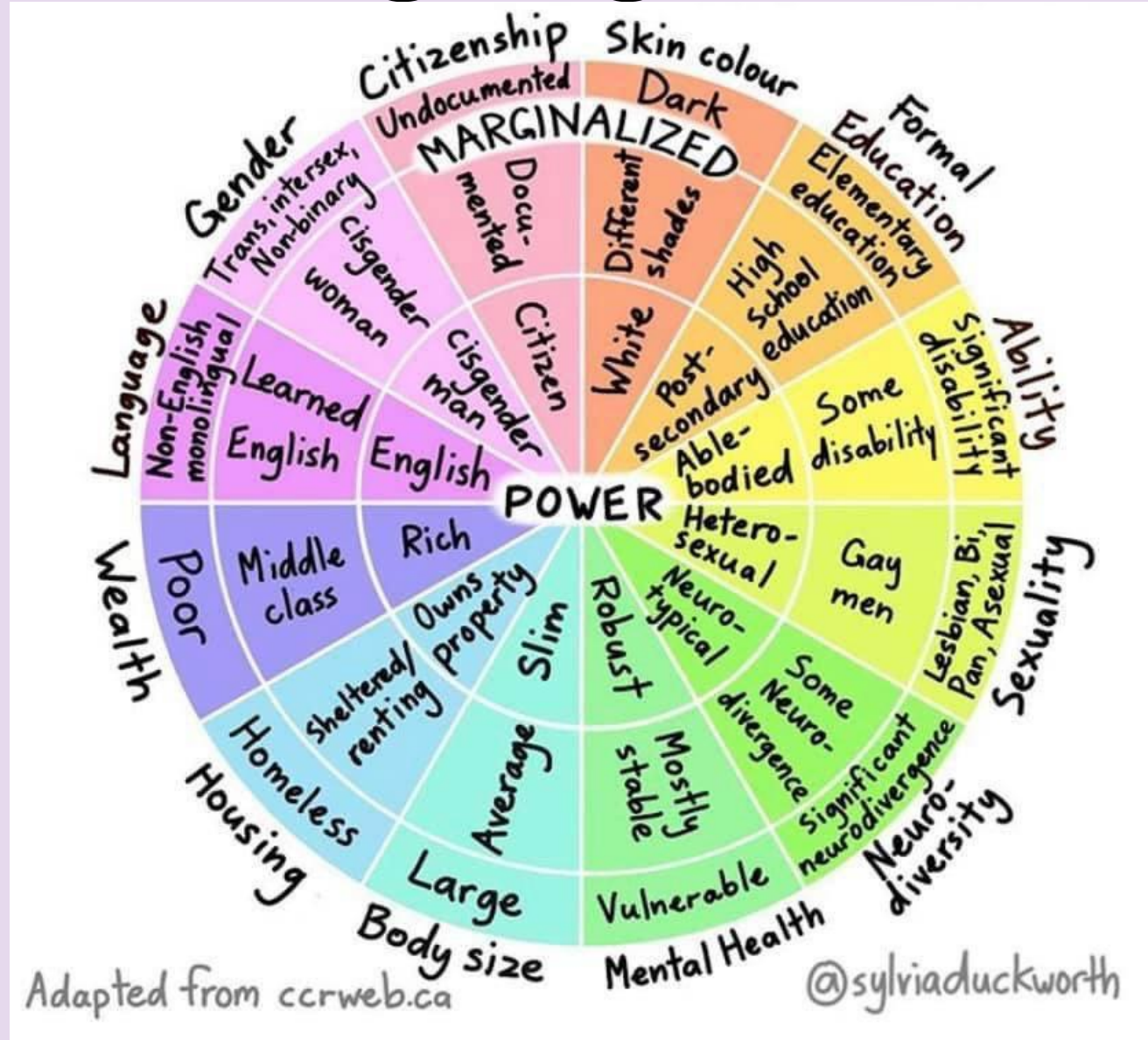
Further

Minoritizing
Marginalising
Reinforcing

Language reflects our assumptions and biases.

They are shaped and informed by societal norms and values.

They can reinforce power and privilege, even if we ourselves do not possess either.



[Able bodied] privilege

The way people and social institutions grant social privileges that benefit **[able bodied]** people beyond what is commonly experienced by **[disabled]** individuals under the same social, political, or economic circumstances.

[Able bodied] privilege is not something **[able bodied]** people necessarily do, create, or enjoy on purpose. It refers to social systems awarding preference based on the presumption of **[able bodied]** as the norm.



[White] Fragility

The defensiveness and avoidance that arise for white people when facing even a minimum amount of racial stress.

The feelings can be so uncomfortable that white people distance themselves from engaging or actively shut down conversations about race.

It may surface as the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviours such as **argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation.**

- Robin Di Angelo

Micro (Macro) aggressions

***“You’re pretty,
normal looking”***

***“I would never
have guessed
you’re gay”***

***“You look really
good for a trans
woman”***

***“But, you can
spell really well”***

***“So you must
have a good
fashion sense?”***

***“You don’t act
disabled”***

Masking

When an individual changes or "masks" their natural personality to conform to social pressures, abuse or harassment.



Trauma

Recognition Trauma

“A psychologically distressing event that is outside the range of human experience, often involving a sense of intense fear, terror and helplessness”

(Perry, 2006)

“The wound is often invisible, internal; no X rays define the damage”

(Mahon, 1993)

The process that both black and white people go through when emerging from being silenced about racism.

It describes the awakening of hurtful experiences, which sometimes evokes feelings of guilt, shame, hurt and anger.

Mckenzie-Mavinga (2011)

Social liberators

In the frame of the discussion was an acknowledgement of the **social progress that occurred as a result of social work**, coupled with the dissonance that since its inception, social work has vacillated between being a function of social control and **social liberation**.

(Bowles & Hopes, 2014; Ehrenreich, 1985).



Unconscious Bias training...

ANTI-OPPRESSIVE PRACTICE:

CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF POWER IMBALANCES INHERENT IN SOCIETY AND ORGANISATIONS

Reduce power differentials and eliminate injustice and oppression

Prof Edward Chang at Harvard Business School has led **one of the most rigorous trials**, delivering

of employees at an intervention like the IAT, the training stereotypes and their own attitudes. The participants own bias after the course than people who had not and "active listening"

Unfortunately, this did not meet expectations. Three people who had taken the training were nominated as female mentee. Six people who had not taken the training were nominated as female mentee.

"excellence". It could have been the perfect foundation upon which other interventions can build. However, the people who had taken the diversity training were more likely to nominate a female colleague than the control group.

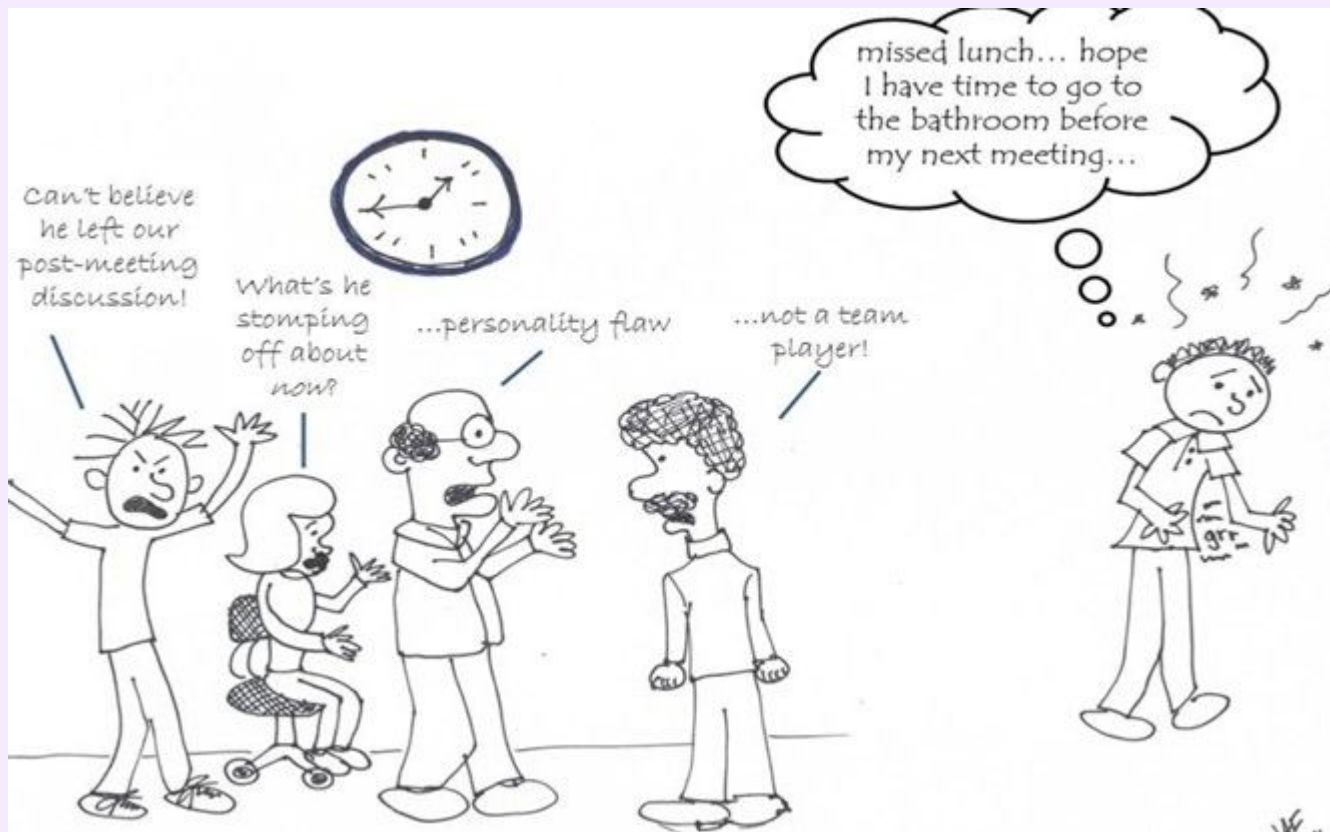
Chang's results chime with the broader conclusions of **a recent report by Britain's Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC)**, which examined 18 papers on unconscious bias training programmes. Overall, the authors

...ness of bias, but the ...
...ged other public-
...nt drew on damning
...that advises the UK
...training had little
...training had had little

...ows that
...y decided to
...ites that
...atural change,

...training can be re-thought of as a

Malleability of biases



Although the dynamics of implicit bias are robust and pervasive, once uncovered, they are also malleable. Social scientists have shown that **implicit bias can be overcome with rational deliberation and concentrated efforts.**

Blair (2002), Dasgupta & Greenwald (2001)

Opportunities for change

Practice strategies

- Practitioner **reflexivity**
- Critical **self-examination** around identity, history, and one's relationship to systems of oppression
- **Psychoeducation** about history and its impact on current systems of oppression
- **Challenge** reductionism of the human experience, **disrupt** biased descriptions of individuals and groups & **promote** person-centred practice

Bussey, Thompson and Poliandro, 2021

Utilise mitigating tools

- Social Graces
- Action Learning Sets
- Group reflective supervision with diverse individuals
- Groups and forums e.g. privilege cafés, practitioner networks etc.
- Feedback mechanisms from colleagues e.g. 360 appraisal
- Tools to encourage consistency e.g. Intra-familial child sexual abuse: Risk factors, indicators and protective factors: Practice Tool (2018)

Learning and development

- **Unlearning** - Get to know biases and schemas including earliest stories told in childhood, identify how they uphold norms and lift you up and keep others down, familiarise yourself with your in-groups and out-groups
- **Relearning** - Reflect on the role you should and do play in shaping the present and future, identify the opportunities that exist and align with your values, and engage closely with the diverse people you serve to understand what needs to change
- **Ongoing** – prioritise and commit to ongoing learning and development about matters of EDI

Recap



We all have unconscious biases – they are automatic, rapid and shaped by all we exposed to and influenced by in our lives.



They have real world affects – such as how we approach practice with minoritised and marginalised children and adults and interact with colleagues.



There are a range of concepts and experiences stemming from and connected to bias, rooted in the manifestation of power and privilege in society.



It is possible to shape and change our unconscious biases and have greater awareness of their existence and impact to ensure social justice remains at the heart of our work.

Questions and Reflections

Spread the word!

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for children and young people*