

Unconscious bias training: Hand-out 5

## Categorisation

One function of our brain is to rapidly categorise things and people in order to understand and interpret them quickly and efficiently. However that apparent efficiency can lead to mistakes. Our brain makes assumption based on the limited information we have about a person.

We process a person’s ethnicity, gender, age and disability before we even know we’ve done it. At the same time we also link that person to all the supposed ‘knowledge’ we have of the category with which have labelled them. The stereotypes and societal assumptions and personal experiences that have framed the category become linked to the individual.

## In-groups and out-groups

As well as categorising other people we also place ourselves within certain groups and categories.

‘The term in-group means a group to which someone belongs, and the term out-group means a group to which someone does not belong. This difference in affiliation has profound and robust effects on people’s evaluations of members of the different groups. In-groups appear to have an inherent, and automatic, positivity associated with them, whereas out-groups have an inherent negativity. In other words, people appear to think of their own group in positive terms and of the other group in negative terms, at even preconscious levels (ie without even realizing it).’

(Crisp and Nicel, 2004: p247)

We all have natural tendencies towards some people over others. They can be based on many things which may change over the course of our lives and vary depending on where we are, who we are with and what we are doing. Factors of influence might be:

* shared interests and hobbies (for example, sport, music, gardening)
* similar lifestyle (for example, having children, caring responsibilities or pets)
* physical characteristics (for example, age, gender, race)
* similar background (for example, being from the same place, having a similar family background, having studied at the same institution)

Our in-groups are people who we feel safe with and towards whom we have unconsciously warm feelings. Our out-groups are people towards whom we feel less safe and who we can be distrustful and even dismissive or disdainful towards, without even realising.

(for more information see Social Categorisation Theory and Muzafer Sherif’s Robbers Cave experiment).

## Impact on behaviour and decisions

If we naturally feel warmer towards our in-group members and more cautious towards out out-groups it can impact on our behaviour in various situations. For example:

* Our body language towards different candidates in job/admissions interviews
* Who we sit next to in meetings and at conferences
* Which students we encourage and focus attention on
* Who we listen to more readily and whose judgement me value most highly
* Who we make time for and who we show an interest in