



Institute of Coaching

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Biases worsen when we are busy, distracted, stressed, over-influenced by a social media echo chamber, when our self-esteem suffers a setback, or our individual or social identities are questioned. In these circumstances, stereotyping and identity bias surges, fueling defensiveness or more biased reactions.

Today's dose expands on our [recent dose](#) on the topic of bias, expanding on the work of American scientist [Jennifer Eberhardt](#), to add the work of

the UK scientist - Pragma Agarwal, explored in her June 2020 book titled: **Sway**.

The integration of scientific findings by both scientists into a better understanding of the nature of bias is profound. Their scientific translations inspire us all to develop more awareness of our biases, and set our biases aside in order to treat every person as unique and valuable. Let's start with awareness and understanding of five universal features of bias.

1. Without interaction, the brain doesn't distinguish among individual faces of other races

We learned from Eberhardt's experience and research that significant exposure to faces of one or more racial categories generates the ability to distinguish among faces of those races. An absence of contact with a particular race, e.g. Asian, Black, White, etc. leads to a lack of ability to recognize one face over another, to perceive individual differences. This phenomenon is biological evidence for the statement – they all look alike. It isn't surprising then to feel discomfort, even fear, in the presence of a face of an unfamiliar race.

Taking it much further, studies show that White people are often unable to correctly read emotions in Black faces, including distinguishing fear from anger, which creates life and death consequences.

2. The brain evolved to categorize

Without conscious control, the brain groups like things together in order to simplify and make sense of a complex world. At six months old, infants are able to categorize both gender and race. Social categories (people) become stereotypes, generalized and homogenized on a small number of characteristics.

These characteristics, which can have some empirical reality, are not a complete picture, don't reflect individual variation, and are applied in a broad-brush manner as simplistic labels – thereby overestimated and exaggerated. Categories and stereotypes are evoked as reflexes - rapidly, automatically, unconsciously and unquestioned. Stereotypes become rigid and hard to sway.

They are easier to maintain than change, especially when mindsets are

resistant to change. They are reinforced by families, social environments, and media representations.

3. The category of identity

Early on, the mind focuses on creating and preserving an individual identity which supports self-esteem and self-protection (I have value and I am safe). Individual identity, a sense of self, is based on individual traits and a comparative ranking – how one's traits compare and contrast with others' traits.

What also contributes to a sense of self is identifying with a social identity or group. This leads to an identity bias, where we assign positive qualities and favor people who are alike (in-groups) over other groups (out-groups) in order to preserve and enhance self-esteem. We feel and act differently toward in-groups than out-groups, called "othering:"

- US - We prefer our in-group (affinity bias). We feel safe and comfortable with our in-group. We have empathy for people in our in-group. We are interested in exploring the individual differences of people in our in-groups.
- THEM - We feel unsafe and uncomfortable with different and unfamiliar out-groups. Our discomfort blocks the ability to feel empathy for out-groups. We see out-groups as more homogeneous than our in-groups. We are not curious about and interested in individual differences of people in out-groups. We focus more on what's wrong with out-groups than what's good about the in-groups.

Along comes another bias – confirmation bias – where we narrow our attention to what confirms our identities and social groups, reducing inputs and objectivity. Confirmation bias is like an addictive drug – it feels like riding a wave. Our identities prefer reassurance over curiosity and inquiry.

Our identities seek evidence for superiority of our in-groups over other groups. This sense of superiority generates prejudice and then spawns subtle and overt macro-aggressions (bullying or worse) and **micro-aggressions**, subtle or hostile slights and insults toward out-groups. Biases worsen when we are busy, distracted, stressed, over-influenced by a social media echo chamber, when our self-esteem suffers a setback, or our individual or social identities are questioned. In these circumstances,

stereotyping and identity bias surges, fueling defensiveness or more biased reactions. These are reflexive reactions, not reflective responses.

4. The most extreme type of identity bias

There is a very long list of common types of stereotypes and identity biases, including age, socioeconomic or workforce status, attractiveness, height, weight, accent, ethnicity, intelligence, disability, mental health, religion and political affiliation. The two most extreme types of identity bias are gender and race. Regarding gender, studies show that women are objectified by their body parts (including by women), while men are perceived as whole humans, greater than the sum of their parts.

The most extreme identity bias is based on race - the White identity is biased toward the Black identity, reinforced by societal dominance and privilege of the White race in many countries. This is a dehumanizing bias (e.g. Blacks associated with apes) as shown in the current design of the widely used [Implicit Association Test](#) on race. The test measures one's implicit association of White and Black people to either animal (not-human) or human categories.

5. The terrible harm caused by stereotypes and identity bias

The negative consequences suffered by out-groups over the span of human history have been well documented by countless authors who witnessed or experienced the traumas directly or brought them to life through their research. The legacies of earlier tragedies and traumas are far from complete healing, recovery and growth, processes that need love, respect, and support. The harms of bias, prejudice, macro and micro-aggressions continue unabated. Out-group members face big inequities (e.g. opportunities, job, geographical segregation, access to resources including healthcare) and carry a big physical and mental health burden:

- Being slighted – feeling invisible, not treated respectfully as individuals, being quickly judged and categorized.
- Lacking a sense of belonging and inclusion, reducing self-esteem and connection.
- Fearing discrimination, which leads to stress, anxiety and self-consciousness.
- Impaired cognitive processing and performance caused by stress, reducing competence and confidence.

- Inflammation and chronic disease – both physical and mental illness – brought on by chronic stress, causing physical suffering and shorter lifespans
- Internalizing bias, so that it becomes self-fulfilling

Summary

It is vital to recognize that bias is generated reflexively by the brain, and masquerades as reality. As a distortion, bias blocks our access to the present reality. When our biases are in charge, we are on automatic pilot and unaware of the uniqueness of the present moment and other people. The good news? Bias is not innate; it is a social construct, developed and maintained through social experience and social structures.

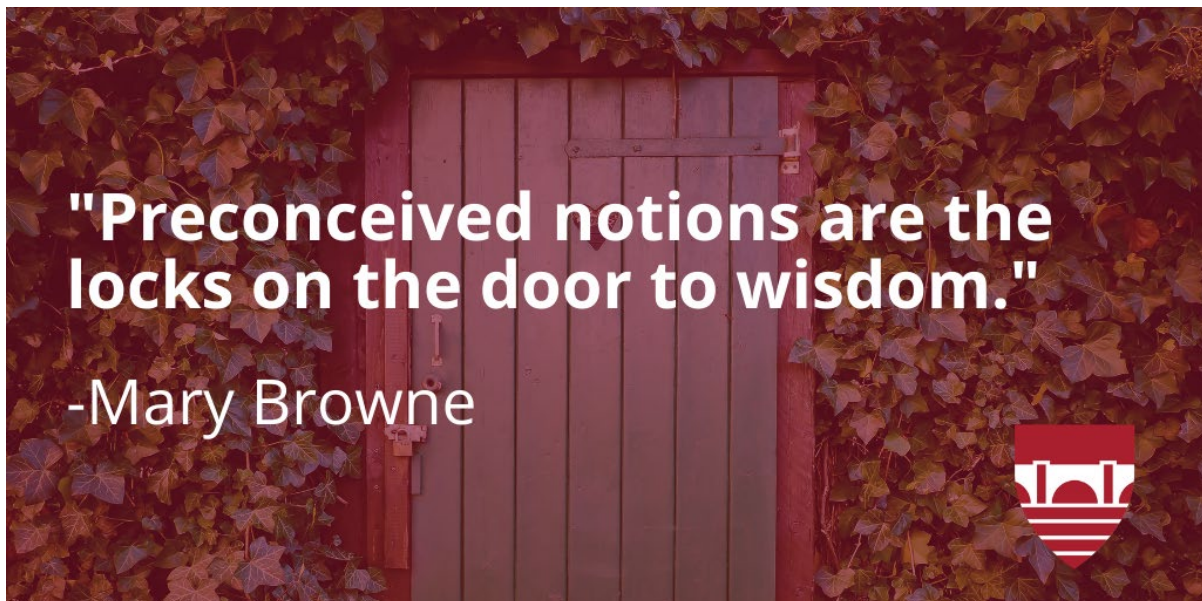
Bias can then be deconstructed over time through new social experiences: positive examples and role models, and positive experiences and relationships with out-group members. Even better is deep collaboration among groups to help repair the past and create a new future of less bias, and more humanity, equity, and realized potential. What to do about our biases? Coaches are called to first address our own biases:

1. Notice and pause the brain's reflexive and biased activity of categorizing, generalizing, preferring, affiliating, judging, criticizing, or fearing others who are in out-groups.
2. Reflect on self-bias, manifesting in our identities – what we favor, prefer, and identify with. Self-bias limits our potential.
3. Set aside preconceptions and become fully present to others, including clients.
4. Deepen our coach approach:
 - be open, curious, and attune with each person as a unique individual in the present moment.
 - cultivate cognitive and emotional empathy for those unlike you.
5. Be welcoming, accepting and non-defensive when bias is pointed out.
6. Be responsible for harm caused, often unintentionally, of one's stereotypes and implicit biases.

Takeaways for coaches

How we can support our clients:

1. Be a role model for actively reducing our biases in our coaching communications.
2. Offer clients an opportunity to explore the presence and impact of reflexive generalizing and categorizing of self and others.
3. Share science-based resources on bias, including the two books featured in this dose.



From the IOC Team.

Coaching ourselves with science in mind.

Citations

Eberhardt, J. L. (2020). *Biased: Uncovering the hidden prejudice that shapes what we see, think, and do*. Penguin Books.

Agarwal, P (2020). *Sway: Unraveling Unconscious Bias*. Bloomsbury Sigma.

PowerPoint Outlines of Books

Biased

Sway
