AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT | **FACTSHEET**

UNCONSCIOUS BIAS

What is 'unconscious bias'?

'Unconscious bias' happens when people make decisions that aren't controlled by their conscious mind. These judgements happen quickly and are influenced by people's cultural environment and personal experiences.

Why it's so important

Unconscious bias is a powerful force in society and it affects most people. It has been proven to affect most decisions, including those relating to hiring, promotion and even medical care. Common forms of unconscious bias include:

- **Gender** bias
- **Racial** bias
- **Sexuality** bias
- **Age** bias
- **Religious** bias
- **Body weight** bias.

When collecting and publishing stories relating to your organisation's work, it can be helpful to explore your unconscious biases. These biases will impact the way you interact with contributors (people sharing their stories with you) and how you choose to frame their stories in the publishing process.

Unconscious Bias Tool

One way to explore your unconscious biases is to use our Unconscious Bias Tool. You can follow the steps in the Unconscious Bias Tool by yourself or as part of a team. Following these steps will require you to reflect on some personal and potentially sensitive parts of yourself, so it's important to ensure you choose the most appropriate way to share (or keep private) your findings.

You don't need to use all the steps, all the time. It's valuable to use all the steps at ethically important moments, like before a story-gathering trip or before publishing an important piece of work. However, you may also find it's helpful to use *some* of the steps regularly. As you use the tool more, you'll find how they work best for you.

Here are the key steps in the Unconscious Bias Tool:

STEP 1 — Reflect on the personal identifiers of the people you'll meet and interview (or publish the stories of), including their gender, age, cultural background, language/s, religion, sexuality, marital status, disability status, socioeconomic status, level of education and profession.

STEP 2 — Now reflect on your personal identifiers, including your gender, age, cultural background, language/s, religion, sexuality, marital status, disability status, socioeconomic status, level of education, profession and notable physical attributes (if meeting in person).

STEP 3 Consider what you have in common with the people you'll meet (or publish the stories of). Consider your differences.

STEP 4 Consider how these identifiers and experiences might affect how you interact with contributors and influence how they react to you (or affect the way you portray them in stories you publish).

STEP 5 Ask yourself – What are my unconscious biases? How will they affect this project? What do I need to learn to best respect and protect the people I'll meet (or publish the stories of)?

Unconscious bias and vicarious trauma

Vicarious trauma, also known as secondary trauma, can be described as indirect exposure to a traumatic event through first-hand account or narrative of that event.[1] People who work in high-risk contexts can experience events and be exposed to information that may lead to vicarious trauma. Even staff who are not 'on the ground' can be affected by vicarious trauma when dealing with stories from the field.

Pre-existing traumas or vicarious trauma can contribute to unconscious biases and may affect the way individuals work. Here are a further four steps to add to the Unconscious Bias Tool if you wish to further explore the effect of trauma on your decision-making.

STEP 6 Reflect on the contributor's exposure to traumatic experiences.

STEP 7 Reflect on your exposure to traumatic experiences.

STEP 8 Ask yourself – What am I afraid of? What do I find confronting? Why am I afraid? Why do I feel confronted?

STEP 9 Ask yourself – What should I be careful of for my own wellbeing? Will I need to do some self-care? What would that look like?

Learn more

- Harvard University's Implicit Association Test (IAT) measures your level of bias across a range of areas.
- Australian Public Service Commission's *Human Capital Matters* July 2016 newsletter explains unconscious bias.
- Mandala Staff Support's Aid Worker Wellbeing website includes resource on psychosocial support for development workers.
- Good Therapy's Vicarious Trauma explains vicarious trauma and suggests ways to manage it.
- Australian Government Australian Institute of Family Studies' "Feeling heavy" Vicarious trauma and other issues facing those who work in the sexual assault field includes a good overview of vicarious trauma and explains how it affects people working in the sexual assault field.
- Storytelling Risks factsheet
- Learn more about EDMFs

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1 https://www.goodtherapy.org/blog/psychpedia/vicarious-trauma