Module 3: Making Unconscious Bias Conscious

Our brains are processing high volumes of information in every instant, much more than what our conscious minds can handle. Our brains use visual, verbal, and behavioral clues to rapidly categorize others, for instance, by age, gender, ethnicity or race, sexual orientation, religion, or education. These clues can be useful as we navigate the world; our unconscious minds are working on our behalf, making decisions all the time to keep us safe. The challenge to this rapid categorization is that our brains often misread the clues of our unconscious judgments, moving us to social labeling and stereotyping that manifest in the form of prejudice and discrimination.

A bias is a preference for or against a person or a group of people (Hockett, 2017), influenced by our socialization, personal experiences, and the media. Please take a moment to watch this video (3:20 min) to learn more about unconscious bias developed by the employers network for equality and inclusion.

Both conscious and unconscious biases impact our lives at all levels – personal, interpersonal, organizational, and professional. What does unconscious bias look like in the context of evaluation? Please take some time to read this article (approximately 15 min) about bias in evaluation.

Given that most of us spend most of our time on the frontlines, we encounter biases, or we act from our preferences in these situations. Decoding Diversity: Unconscious Bias At Work (37 min) delves into the manners in which unconscious bias shows up in work environments and what to do about it. Consider taking this implicit association test developed by Harvard University. There are multiple tests. Choose what suits your learning needs or curiosities.

Addressing our own bias is different from being "neutral" or "objective." It is about being conscious of our subjectivity and creating spaces for intersubjectivity through authentic dialogue.

Ways to Mitigate Unconscious Bias in Evaluation

- **Acknowledge** that we all have unconscious bias, and create a space where people can talk openly about them.

- **Engage diversity:**
    o Build a diverse team in your work who will see things you may not.
    o Work with a diverse group of peer reviewers.

- **Collaborate** with people from the community you're working with (if different from yours).

- **Check your assumptions**. (Don't trust everything you think). Develop a self-reflective practice – be curious about your thoughts.

- **Check for bias in your questions**. What assumptions underlie your questions? Are they true? What are you using as evidence to develop your questions?

- **Share** your evaluation outcomes with the stakeholders most affected by the evaluation to check for biases. What are the different experiences of your evaluation outcomes across different demographics?

- **Slow down** your process.

- **Notice your body data**. How your body reacts in interviews, when reviewing data, etc. and when it is more open/relaxed and closed/tight. Find ways to calm your nervous system – breathing, humming, shaking – if you find yourself tightening.

- **Practice** putting yourself in situations that invite you to stretch, be uncomfortable with groups of people who are different from you, and with whom you have less exposure.

- When it comes to **hiring:**

  - **Describe the role** you're hiring for and what success in the role would look like (before hiring)

  - **Describe interview questions** to test against the position you're hiring, use the same questions for all and use a grading rubric to collect answers

  - **Clearly state your interest** in encouraging applicants who identify as racialized, woman, disabled, Indigenous, 2SLGBTQIA+, etc. with lived experience that speaks to the perspectives you are seeking to include

- If you think you may be influenced by bias - justify the decision you're making to someone else.

- **Develop a checklist of biases** and give instructions to your team to identify them out when they happen.

As this is a growing body of knowledge, we invite you as an evaluator, to please share your experiences, ideas, and tools for mitigating unconscious bias in evaluation in this form.

Now it's time to reflect on these **personal reflection questions**:

- What did you notice from the implicit association test?

- What are the decisions we're making every day, and how can we unbias them? Think of a time when you may have been influenced by unconscious bias in your work as an evaluator. What happened?

- From where do you think that bias came?

- Find your trigger: list the situations that make you more likely to be driven by unconscious bias.

- What practices could you commit to applying to your work to lower the risks of bias in your evaluation?

- How will you hold yourself accountable?

- Any other reflections?

References

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