

LGA conference September 30<sup>th</sup> 2019

# **Unconscious bias training – is it working?**

**Roger Kline**

**Research Fellow, Middlesex University Business School**

**@rogerkline**



# What is the problem we are trying to solve?

## Employment bias in:

- Recruitment, development opportunities, and promotion
- Inclusion within teams and organisations
- Feedback, appraisal, performance management and difficult conversations
- Discipline and regulatory referrals and lack of respect

## Consequences include:

- Recruitment, development, promotion and retention influenced by whether staff “fit”, are “one of us” etc
- Cognitive diversity, psychological safety and inclusion impacted with consequences for staff, employers and outcomes
- Specific impact if blame culture exists for differential entry into disciplinary processes and regulator referrals

# The nature and origins of bias

- Views and opinions we are unaware of, yet are automatically activated and frequently affect our everyday behaviour and decision making - cognitive reflexes
- Our unconscious biases are influenced by our background, culture, context and personal experiences.
- We are hard wired to use lenses or filters we use to view the world
- They have evolved from fight vs flight survival responses
- Stereotypes allow us to “make sense” of vast amounts of information
- We need to focus on **conscious decision-making** that relies less on assumptions

# The impact of bias on investigations and discipline

- **Affinity bias** and the “**halo**” **effect** can affect recruitment, development and promotion at every stage
- The “**horns**” **effect** can have the opposite effect to affinity bias and the halo impact by allowing something about an individual to cloud our overall judgement about them and their evidence e.g. hesitation, reputation, body language, appearance, ethnicity
- **Confirmation bias** prompts us to look for evidence that confirms an opinion already reached – and ignore contrary explanations or evidence
- **Conformity bias** is caused by peer pressure and is a real risk at shortlisting for those conducting investigations and acting on their findings
- **Protective hesitancy** in feedback and appraisals can compound such bias

# UBT interventions may include :

- An unconscious bias 'test' (a reaction-time measure of how quickly a participant can link positive and negative stimuli to labels such as 'male' or 'female'; the most common example is the IAT) and debrief (an explanation of the participants' unconscious bias 'test' results).
- Education on unconscious bias theory.
- Information on the impact of unconscious bias (via statistics/illustrative examples).
- Bias reduction strategies, such as exposing participants to counter-stereotypic exemplars, may reduce the level of unconscious bias
- Bias mitigation strategies on specific challenges e.g. recruitment or discipline may reduce the impact of unconscious bias. (Goldin and Rouse (2000)
- (Atewologun, Cornish & Tresh, 2018)

# A flawed HR paradigm?

- “In sum, while policies and training are doubtless essential components of effective strategies for addressing bullying in the workplace, there are significant obstacles to resolution at every stage of the process that such policies typically provide. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that research has generated no evidence that, in isolation, this approach can work to reduce the overall incidence of bullying in Britain’s workplaces”.

Seeking better solutions: tackling bullying and ill-treatment in Britain’s workplaces. Justine Evesson Sarah Oxenbridge, David Taylor (Acas)

“attempts to reduce managerial bias through diversity training and diversity evaluations were the **least** effective methods of increasing the proportion of women in management..... programmes which targeted managerial stereotyping through education and feedback (i.e., diversity training and diversity evaluations) were not followed by increases in diversity.”

Kalev A, Dobbin F, Kelly E. Best practices or best guesses? assessing the efficacy of corporate affirmative action and diversity policies. Am Soc Rev 2006;71:589-617.

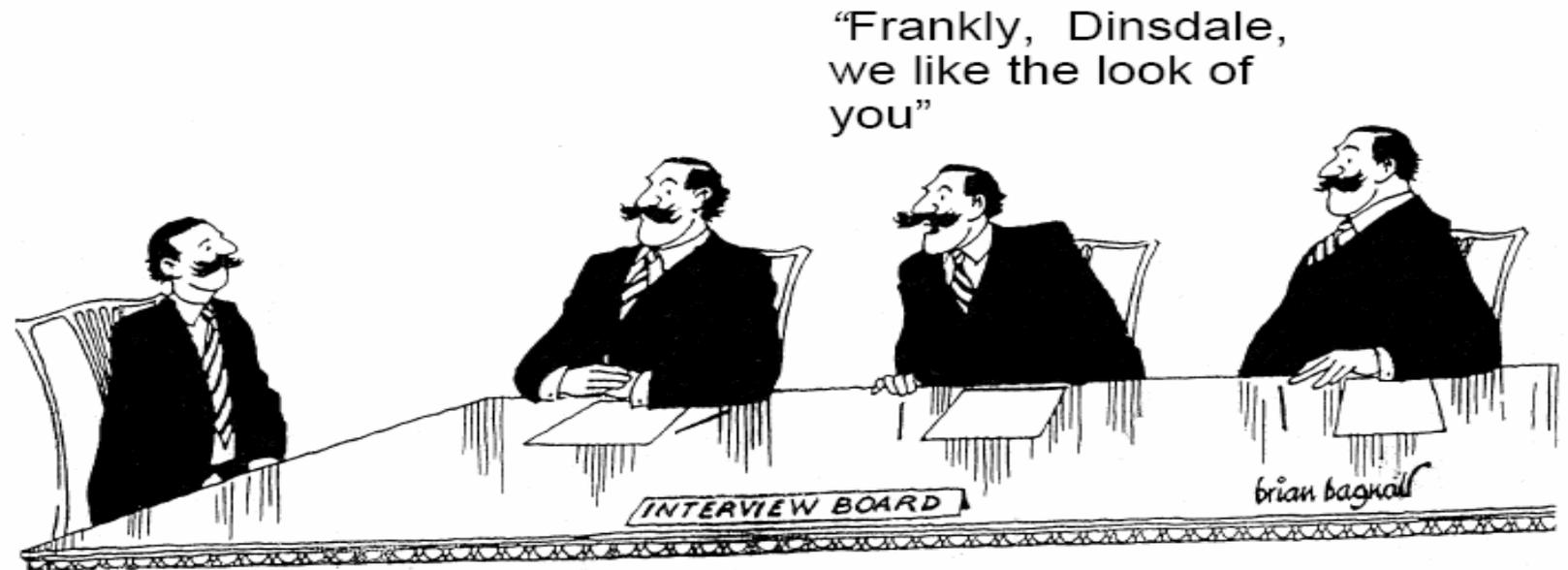
# Unconscious bias training: the evidence so far

- *Atewologun et al, EHRC (2017):*
- “Using the IAT and educating participants on unconscious bias theory is likely to increase awareness of and reduce implicit bias.
- “The evidence for UBT’s ability effectively to change behaviour is limited. Most of the evidence reviewed did not use valid measures of behaviour change.
- “There is potential for back-firing effects when UBT participants are exposed to information that suggests stereotypes and biases are unchangeable.
- *Duguid MM, Thomas-Hunt MC (2014)*“(it) can legitimise bias by presenting it as the norm”.
- *King EB, Gulick L, Avery D (2010):* “its impact is primarily on those who are already striving to be egalitarian.”
- *Devine et al. (2012).* “(it) has limited impact and may even be counterproductive, if those taking part don’t want to reduce their bias”.

# No comment

“I will look at any additional evidence to confirm the opinion to which I have already come”.

Lord Molson



# Bias creeps in at every stage of recruitment

- Both men and women managers favour men over women (Koch et al 2015)
- BME name CVs less successful Bertrand et al 2003)
- Men will apply for jobs they cant do, women wont (Mohr 2014)
- “Desirable criteria” prone to bias Rivera 2012)
- Macho ads deter women (Gaucher 2011)
- Social influences on shortlisting and recruitment(Ashley 2015; Goldin 1997; Bohnet 2012)
- Conformity bias within panels – hence Google exclude hiring manager (Bock 2015)
- Selection tests prone to bias esp. testing past opportunities to learn not future potential
- Some types of interview (unstructured, just competency) more prone to bias than others (HEE 2016)
- Increased risk of cognitive shortcuts leading to bias under stress, influenced by running order or immediate impression (Frieda 2015)
- Unintended behaviour signals by panels (Word 2004)
- How references written or read likely to be biased
- Scoring bias (Macan 2009; Kahneman 2011) and confusing confidence and competence (Chamorro Premuzic 2013)
- Feedback (Thomas 2006)
- Access to developmental opportunities not understood or biased

# The example of interviews

## Triggers

- When we are hurrying to make a decision
- When we are under pressure
- When we need to access/surmise information quickly
- When we are overloaded or tired
- When we are nervous, unsure, lack confidence
- When we see or hear specific characteristics or behaviours that confirms what we already 'know' to be true

## Responses

- Constant reminders about the multiple and subtle ways bias intrudes are important if learning is to be applied in assessment context
- Participants are expected to challenge behaviours that permit or enable bias
- Assessor panels must avoid deference to any one person whether based on seniority or any other attribute
- Assessors must bear in mind how the slightest signals (e.g. inappropriate body language) send a message

# What does work?

- A relevant narrative or business case with safe space to discuss it
- Do not rely on individuals raising grievances - use local data and lived experience of staff to drive accountability – be proactive and preventative
- Granular evidenced mitigation of bias at every stage - if you don't know whether an intervention might work, why do it?
- Leadership is decisive in modelling behaviours and accountability
- MacGregor Smith (2017) proposal for on line UBT to reduce racial bias is unevidenced but UBT may be useful though evidence of substantial changes to decision making does not yet exist.