



**ANZCA**  
FPM

# Gender equity: Unconscious bias and interview panels toolkit

Australian and New Zealand  
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At work, fellows are more than clinicians. They are teachers; mentors; researchers; and, from time to time, interviewers. Many fellows routinely participate in interview panels to recruit for various roles.

The Gender Equity Sub-Committee (GESC) has identified the recruitment process as an area that can be negatively influenced by gender bias. Gender bias can be subtle yet harmful and is not always controlled by our conscious mind.

Interviews can be stressful for both the candidate and the interviewer; understanding more about ourselves can help make this process a little easier. The following toolkit, developed by the GESC, provides an introduction to unconscious bias and how this might impact decision making in the context of participation in an interview panel. Having a clear understanding of unconscious bias is also vital to many other aspects of a doctor's clinical and non-clinical practice.

This toolkit also provides useful and practical guidance on best practice for facilitating an interview, and provides resources and links to training and further education.

**Key points:**

- Unconscious biases can result in prejudiced behaviour that counteracts our conscious beliefs.
- We all have unconscious biases. These influence our decision making, whether we are aware of it or not.
- We all can assess our unconscious biases and then take action to minimise their negative effects.



## What is unconscious bias?

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Bias is a tendency to favour one group over another<sup>1</sup>. Unconscious (or implicit) bias is unintentional. It occurs outside of our conscious awareness. It is a result of learned stereotypes that are products of our childhood, social structures and community beliefs.

Stereotyping is intrinsic to human nature. It helps the brain to make shortcuts when processing the overwhelming volumes of information it receives. For example, stereotyping allows us to rapidly differentiate a dangerous animal from a harmless one.

Medical staff are trained to avoid conscious bias. However, in spite of our best intentions, unconscious bias can significantly affect our behaviour, interpersonal relationships, and workplace culture.

## Why does unconscious bias matter when participating on an interview panel?

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Unconscious bias can impair an interviewer's ability to make a fair, objective assessment of a candidate's skillset and their potential to meet performance criteria. When interviewing, you will likely be unaware of this effect.

Our personal biases are largely responsible for the "first impressions" we form of prospective employees.

## Benefits of creating a diverse and inclusive workforce include:

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- Expanded talent pool from which an employer can hire.
- A workplace that is more likely to identify and meet patient and client needs.
- Improved creativity and productivity of an organisation.
- Stronger employee commitment profiles.

## How can panel members assess our bias?

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Harvard University have a free online [Implicit Association Test](#), where individuals can measure their implicit or unconscious biases towards gender, ethnicity and other parameters. This is easy, confidential and takes about ten minutes. For an insight into what unconscious bias you may have, take the confidential test before getting involved in employee selection.

The Avoiding Unconscious Bias [e-Learning package and guide](#) created by the Royal College of Surgeons UK includes activities which guide self-assessment of unconscious bias. It provides plenty of information and tips on how to address unconscious bias in the healthcare setting.

## What are some types of bias that may affect interviewers?

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It's useful to be aware of the following types and sources of bias and how they may influence you:

- *Affinity bias*: a tendency to prefer people who are similar to you or people you know.
- *Halo effect*: the tendency to think more positively about someone who you already find likeable. (Horns effect is the opposite)
- *Perception bias*: the tendency to judge an individual based upon a stereotype of a group to which they belong
- *Confirmation bias*: the tendency to seek out information that correlates with a pre-formed view of a person.
- *Group-think*: when people allow their opinions or ideas to merge to fit in with the culture or the group around them, at the expense of diversity and innovation.
- *Maternal bias*: negative assumptions made about women's performance, commitment or ability based upon their status as a parent, or as a potential parent.

## What can interviewers do about it?

Many benefits can be achieved when unconscious bias is addressed by both an individual and organization.

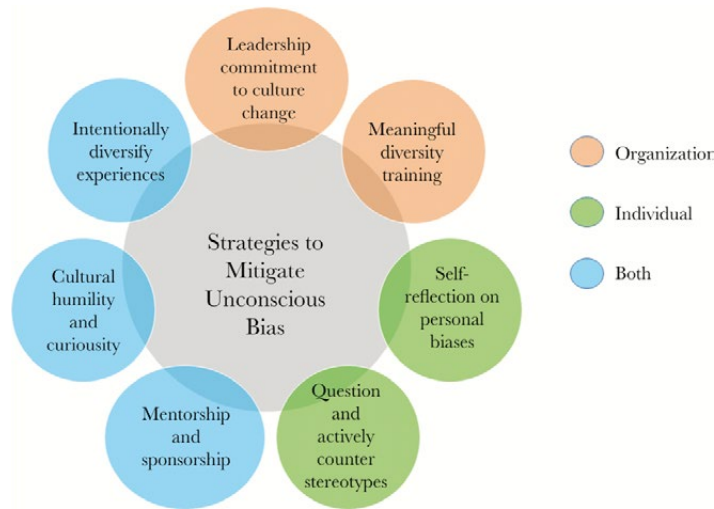


Image authority to reprint: Marcelin JR, Siraj DS. The impact of unconscious bias in healthcare: how to recognize and mitigate it. *The Journal of Infectious Diseases* 2019; 220(1 Suppl. 2): S62-S73. Figure 2 by permission of Oxford University Press

Here are some actions you can take as an interviewer:

### 1. Assess your own bias and learn more

As mentioned above you can assess your bias by taking an [Implicit Association Test](#) or completing the RCS [Avoiding Unconscious Bias e-Learning package](#). Developing self-awareness of your biases will help you to take conscious steps to avoid them affecting your decision-making.

There are various other unconscious bias training sessions available online. Some of these have been produced by leading multinational companies, who have acknowledged the performance benefit of building a diverse workforce.

#### Additional resources:

Learning videos produced by Facebook "[Managing unconscious bias](#)" with [accompanying slides](#).

Microsoft eLesson: [Unconscious Bias](#)

### 2. Reflect upon and modify personal behaviour

*Substitution:* Reflect on an impression or interaction you had with a prospective employee during an interview. Consider if it would have been the same if they were of a different gender.

*Reflection:* Challenge yourself to recognise which of a job candidate/new colleague's qualities contributed to your first impression of them.

*Individuation:* View others as individuals rather than stereotyping them. Consciously avoid forming assumptions about them.

*Vigilance:* Notice situations and language in everyday life, work and entertainment which perpetuate

gender biases. Point them out to others when they occur.

*Support:* Validate others when they point out unconscious bias, especially if it is your own.

*Mindfulness:* Practicing mindfulness can assist us in being more conscious of our own biases when they occur.

*Diversification:* Seek a basic understanding of cultures other than your own. Expand your network of contacts, friends and colleagues from diverse backgrounds.

*Recognition:* Be aware of situations that may amplify unconscious bias. These include overtiredness, rushing and groupthink.

#### Further Reading:

[www.ihl.org/communities/blogs/how-to-reduce-implicit-bias](http://www.ihl.org/communities/blogs/how-to-reduce-implicit-bias)

### 3. Seek assistance

Your institution's people and culture or human resources department are specialists in eliminating the influence of bias throughout the hiring process.

### 4. Implement interview practices which minimise bias

See section below.

### 5. Assess and address your institution's bias

When considering bias at an institutional level, [ANZCA's Gender Equity Self-Assessment Quiz](#) and [Gender Equity Resource Kit](#) are useful starting points.

## What are some interview practices which minimise bias?

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### Panel formation and preparation:

- Create an interview panel that represents internal and external stakeholders of varying positions relating to the role being recruited.
- Ensure at least one member of the panel is familiar with the work environment of the position and the knowledge and skills required to perform the role.
- Discuss the potential for interviewer bias. Encourage panel members to undergo Implicit Association Test for gender bias, and complete an unconscious bias training module such as those listed above.
- Remind panel members of:
  - The inclusion and diversity policies and recruitment guidelines of your institution.
  - Federal and state discrimination and equal opportunity laws. These include the Fair Work Act of 2009. This prohibits discrimination based upon the candidate's race; colour; gender; sexual orientation; age; physical or mental disability; marital status; family or carer's responsibilities; pregnancy; religion; political opinion; national extraction; or social origin.

### Writing a job description

- Consider your personal biases when writing selection criteria.
- At all times, use gender neutral language e.g. "parental leave" instead of "maternity leave", "they/them/their" in place of "his or her".
- Avoid using language that could be interpreted as discriminatory or favourable to a particular gender or ethnicity. For example, "a cohesive team member" may read in a more inclusive way than "a strong team member".
- Have colleagues from diverse backgrounds review the description to minimise risk of unintentional bias occurring.
- Consider incorporating a diversity statement to welcome those from diverse backgrounds to apply.

### Short-listing and interviewing applicants

- Consider de-identifying job applications when screening them.
- Be consistent.
- Clearly document your reasoning.
- Evaluate applicants using your pre-defined selection criteria. Take care not to fall into the merit trap (read more about this [here](#)).
- Undergo a pre-interview meeting to ensure all panel members understand their role in the interview and who will ask each question.
- Base interview questions upon the selection criteria for the role. Ensure all candidates are asked the same questions.
- Remember that supplementary questions are almost certainly inappropriate if you'd only ask them to people of a specific gender.

### Post interview

- Referee checks should once again be based upon the selection criteria. Do not ask personal questions about an applicant e.g. marital/family status.
- A post interview meeting should also be facilitated, during this time the panel members can debrief and compare interview notes where they can reach a consensus on who is the best suited candidate for the role.

## Where can I find more information on this topic?

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- [Australian Government Workplace Gender Equity Agency](#), where you'll find a comprehensive, evidence-based rundown on the effect of gender bias on recruitment, interview outcomes and promotion for women.
- [Further reading](#) on best practise for hiring and recruitment.
- [Overview of unconscious bias and its effect on the workplace](#) from the Queensland Government.
- An excellent [literature review](#) of current scientific understanding of unconscious bias.
- [Avoiding unconscious bias a guide for surgeons](#) (Royal College of Surgeons UK).
- An excellent unconscious bias [educational video](#) developed by Facebook.
- Microsoft eLesson: [Unconscious Bias](#).

**For further information please visit the [Gender Equity webpage](#) or contact the [Gender Equity Sub-Committee](#).**

### References:

1. Marcelin J, Dawd S, Victor R, Kotadia S, Maldonado Y. The Impact of Unconscious Bias in Healthcare: How to Recognize and Mitigate It. *The Journal of Infectious Diseases* 2019;220(S2):S62–73 Accessed online at (could also link as PDF instead): [https://academic.oup.com/jid/article/220/Supplement\\_2/S62/5552356](https://academic.oup.com/jid/article/220/Supplement_2/S62/5552356)