



Unconscious Bias

Examples and How to Avoid Them ⚡



What is unconscious bias?

An unconscious bias is a stereotype that individuals hold about certain groups of people that they aren't consciously aware of having. These biases can exist toward people that play different sports than you, have different academic backgrounds, or are of different races, gender and/or sexual identities, and more...!

Watch this 1-minute long video to learn more about why our brains work this way:





Oooh interesting, tell me more.

Research has shown that unconscious bias, also known as implicit bias, influences the way we see and treat others. We've also learned that:

- Every single person has unconscious biases.
- These unconscious biases are sometimes incompatible with our conscious values, and
- Certain scenarios, such as multitasking and working under time constraints can activate these biases.*

It's difficult to know and understand our own unconscious biases because they are... well... unconscious. Luckily, we now have Implicit Association Tests to help us learn more about ourselves!

*<https://diversity.ucsf.edu/programs-resources/training/unconscious-bias-training#item-90>



Implicit Association Tests (IAT)

Project Implicit is a non-profit organization founded in 1998 by a group of professors from different universities in the United States. The [organization's mission](#) is to “educate the public about bias and to provide a ‘virtual laboratory’ for collecting data on the internet. Project Implicit scientists produce high-impact research that forms the basis of our scientific knowledge about bias and disparities.”

[The Implicit Association Tests](#), developed by Project Implicit, measure the strength of associations between concepts (e.g., black people, gay people) and evaluations (e.g., good, bad) or stereotypes (e.g., athletic, clumsy).



??? Take a Test!

Are you curious to learn about your possible unconscious biases? [Take some IATs!](#)

Each test only takes two minutes to complete and there are currently 15+ tests available.

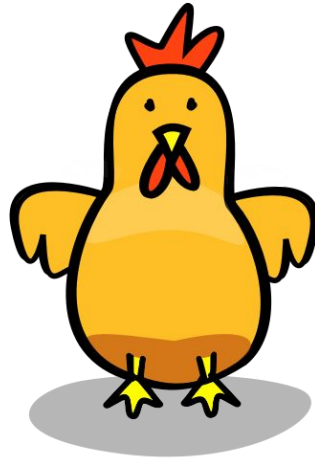
(As a heads up, you will find an American bias in the description of these tests, as the research was completed at universities in the United States. Many of these identities span nationalities, but you will see two or three geared specifically for American populations.)

No need to share your results with anyone else, but take a moment to sit with what you've learned about the way you see the world. Then, give yourself permission to be human and recognize the limits of your own understanding. You've just taken an amazing first step at combating your own biases 💪



Types of unconscious biases we see at work:

I have isolated some biases that we commonly see at work, in addition to the biases addressed by the IAT. On each slide, I'll show a description of the bias and then some tips for how to avoid them!



(Cartoon of chicken to fill up blank slide space.)



Affinity Bias (aka similarity bias)

When I first started at Hugging Face, I immediately connected with Sasha. Why? Not because she's [fire at research](#). Not because she's obsessed with [raccoons in trenchcoats](#). Not because she lives in [Canada](#). It's because she loves plants and [gardening](#).

And I love plants and gardening!! This is affinity bias. It's the tendency humans have to connect with other humans who share similar interests and have similar backgrounds. We like people who are like us!

When interviewing, be careful when talking about “culture fit” because sometimes that just means the person you are interviewing is similar to current Hugging Face employees and will not help your team to grow and diversify. After chatting with a candidate, think actively about your similarities so that you can differentiate between affinity bias and the unique skills and qualities that would contribute positively to your team.



??? Affinity Bias Activity

Go read a performance review that you wrote about someone else or notes from an interview that you conducted recently. How often does it sound like you are talking about yourself?

Relying too heavily on culture fit and affinity bias can lead to a workplace that doesn't feel inclusive to those who don't share similar experiences, backgrounds, or interests.



Anchoring Bias

“[Anchoring bias](#) causes us to rely too heavily on the first piece of information we are given about a topic... We interpret newer information from the reference point of our anchor, instead of seeing it objectively. This can skew our judgment and prevent us from updating our plans as much as we should.”

[Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky](#) theorized about Anchoring Bias in an experiment where they divided people into two groups:

The first group was asked: “Is the height of the tallest redwood more or less than 1,200 feet?”

The second group was asked: “Is the height of the tallest redwood more or less than 180 feet?”

The first group’s average answers was 844 feet while the second group averaged 282 feet 🤯



Anchoring Bias

We watch out for anchoring bias at work, because the act of anchoring can limit creativity. We often focus on the first idea presented, even if we don't fully understand the context, and discount other ideas.

Anchors can also perpetuate the status quo and hold us back from innovation. When we feel anchored to existing practices, we might resist new ideas and can be slower to adapt and improve.

??? When we communicate in slack, it's easy to respond too quickly and without much thought. When we simply react without thinking, we are more likely to introduce bias into conversations. When you are sharing an opinion, take 60 seconds to truly consider other points of view and be sure you aren't anchored to one idea.

PS Does anyone know the height of the tallest redwood?!



Attribution Bias

As a human, it's easier to make sense of others' behavior based on early interactions with them. We love love love making early judgements about people!

This can be particularly nefarious when hiring. For example, we may assume something about a candidate based on where they went to school or a gap in their resume.

I once interviewed a candidate (at a previous job) who chatted with me for 30 minutes with their lights off. At first, I found it a bit rude and wanted to see their face, but at the end of the call, the candidate disclosed to me that they are neurodiverse and bright lights cause them severe discomfort. This experience made me think a lot about how to conduct inclusive interviews!

Remember to give folks a chance and learn as much as possible to avoid attribution bias!



Authority Bias

Authority Bias refers to a situation where an idea or opinion is given more attention or credence simply because it was spoken by a leader. Even though we have a fairly flat organizational structure, when humans are involved there are always power dynamics at play.

If folks feel that their ideas or suggestions are less valued simply because they don't have authority at Hugging Face, they are much less likely to contribute to discussions.

One of your colleagues may try two or three times to contribute an idea to a project, only to be ignored and outvoted each time someone who is perceived to have more authority presents a different idea. Without support, your colleague has now been discouraged from expressing ideas or providing input, which stifles their impact, engagement, and professional growth.



Authority Bias

One way to challenge authority bias is to search out someone to amplify your voice, or, if you are already in a position of power, look out for those who need [amplification](#).

Many of our colleagues who identify as women are already familiar with the practice of amplification. Since women, people of color, and other minority groups are often spoken over and their ideas are frequently overlooked, we look for allies at work who can repeat our ideas or have our backs during difficult conversations.

Amplification can help folks gain confidence and bring new, creative ideas to fruition.

??? Have you ever helped to amplify someone's ideas at work? How did it go?



Beauty Bias

Even though beauty standards are different across the globe, we can all fall victim to the Beauty Bias, where we assume that because someone is attractive, they are also more intelligent, successful, competent, and qualified.

We even believe that beautiful people are [more productive at work](#) and are in [better physical health](#)! This can lead to attractive people seeing more support from their team leads and [faster career advancement](#).

We can work combat this bias in hiring by doing a first round phone screen as opposed to a zoom call and by turning off photos in workable, an individual setting available to all of us.



Gender Bias

Gender bias is simply the tendency to prefer one gender over another gender.

[As an example](#), when giving feedback, reviewers tend to focus more on the personality and attitudes of women, and feminine-presenting individuals and they focus more on the behaviors and accomplishments of men and masculine-presenting individuals. For example, “Nick should gain more technical expertise in nonparametric ML models” vs “Sue is a great team player and very easy to work with.”

Gender biases can exacerbate differences in pay equity and growth opportunities for employees who do not identify as men.



Gender Bias

We actively fight against gender bias in a few ways at Hugging Face:

- Emily completes a pay equity audit every six months to ensure that are compensating equitably across genders
- Team leads meet asynchronously whenever necessary to discuss raises and the growth of high performing team members
- Encouraging team members to complete a gender IAT so that we can all be aware of our unconscious biases.
- We have a strong community of folks involved with #huggingpeople-women, which serves as a way to amplify voices and as a safe space to report any issues.

Other ways to combat gender bias is to conduct anonymous resume reviews for hiring whenever possible. We also do lots of outreach and ask cool people to come work for us, remember to aim for equity in your outreach as well!



Halo or Horns Effect

The Halo Effect is the tendency to allow one good trait to overshadow others, and the Horns Effect is the tendency to do the same with a bad trait.

At Hugging Face, we see this effect on full display when we use open source experience as a requirement when viewing resumes for open roles. The open source community can be a [toxic place](#) and many folks from marginalized groups choose to not engage in open source projects and/or discussions. It's easy to think that because someone doesn't have previous open source experience, they won't be a great Hugging Face employee, but there are many other factors that we can consider to gauge interest and expertise.

Also, to avoid these effects while doing Impact Reviews, be sure to assess at least 2-3 different aspects of performance so that one awesome or awful trait or skill doesn't overshadow everything else!



Nonverbal Bias

Nonverbal bias is analyzing nonverbal communication attributes such as body language and letting it affect a decision or opinion. The way someone stands or holds their hands may shape our perception of their confidence level or even their likeability.

Remember that everyone is different — this includes their mannerisms and ways of communicating physically. For example, if a candidate keeps their arms crossed in an interview, perhaps it's simply a nervous response. Also, the fact that we are global matters here quite a bit! For example, certain cultural norms regarding eye contact, personal space, or gesturing may not align with the cultural norms that you are used to. Remember to keep an open mind and judgements about nonverbal behaviors to a minimum.



Feedback for Emily!

What biases are missing from this presentation?

Should I include slides for all the major bias categories covered by the IAT like race, religion, sexuality, disability etc etc? I wanted to focus on some lesser known biases, but understand why we'd want to include these as well!