



Tackling unconscious bias in recruitment, selection and promotion processes

A rapid evidence assessment: Executive summary

This rapid evidence assessment (REA) aimed to identify interventions that might reduce unconscious bias in organisations, specifically in relation to recruitment, retention and career progression of under-represented groups. Although there were few studies found that examined impact on behaviour change, there was some evidence, from both laboratory and field studies, of approaches that may be promising. Positive reinforcement of black and minority ethnic (BME) candidates, through priming in pre-test communications, increased their pass rate in online tests. More generally, using interactive sessions to educate participants about unconscious bias along with practical training on techniques to tackle it, were found, in laboratory settings to have a sustained positive impact on levels of concern about discrimination and levels of implicit bias. There is scope for further testing given many of the studies were conducted in simulated environments, with non-police personnel, using different types of interventions. There may be some simple steps that organisations can take to reduce unconscious bias, for example, anonymising the application process, which would benefit from testing.

Introduction

In support of its **BME Progression 2018 programme**, the College of Policing commissioned a review of the research literature to identify interventions that might reduce unconscious bias in organisations' recruitment, retention and progression processes. Unconscious bias has been defined as a process by which a person makes sense of the world around them by making assumptions and associations about people's characteristics, without being consciously aware of this process (Jones and Cornish, 2013). Such 'mental shortcuts' may be a factor linked to ongoing discrimination in organisations.

The REA is based on eight studies published since 1995. Included studies were selected on the basis of specified inclusion criteria that related to the focus of the research on tackling unconscious or implicit bias in a workplace setting. The review used a clear protocol to search for, sift and bring together the most relevant research papers. Overall the literature fell into two broad categories: psychological laboratory experiments and field experiments. The applicability of the findings from the laboratory experiments to real world processes is unknown.

Findings

While the number of evaluated interventions identified through the literature search was fairly small, and sometimes not of the type required to make statements about ‘what works’, the evidence that was identified suggested that there may be some positive steps that organisations can take to reduce unconscious bias.

- Priming – a randomised control trial¹ conducted with candidates applying to join a police force, found that BME candidates who were prompted in the email inviting them to attend a test to reflect on what might make them a good addition to the force, and how that would impact their community, performed better than those who did not receive the prompt.
- Education about unconscious bias – two studies² with pre and post measures found that educating people about the existence and malleability of unconscious bias can lead to its reduction as measured through specially designed tests.
- Training in strategies to tackle unconscious bias – research suggests that training people in how to use strategies that may inhibit stereotypes may also be effective³. Such strategies could include taking the perspective of a person in an underrepresented group or obtaining specific information about a member of an underrepresented group and evaluating this person based on personal attributes in order to challenge potential stereotypes.
- The evidence reviewed suggests that education or training programmes may be more effective when participants are engaged and motivated (eg, they participate willingly) and the intervention is part of a broad diversity strategy that aims to change organisational culture.

Although there are some approaches that may look promising, a number of studies found that some interventions to tackle unconscious bias may have less success and some may even have unintended effects. There is some evidence that suppressing stereotypes may result in individuals reverting back to holding the stereotypic view about an underrepresented group that they were trying to suppress. In addition, some research evidence suggests that it is possible that exposure to highly positive role models as a way of heightening career aspirations can result in individuals doubting their own abilities, in cases where role models are not perceived as genuine.

Footnotes and references

1 Linos, E., Reinhard, J., Ruda, S. (2015) Promoting diversity in the Police [internet]. London: Behavioural Insights Team. Available from <http://www.behaviouralinsights.co.uk/trial-results/behavioural-insights-and-home-affairs/> [Accessed 17 September 2015]

2 Carnes, M. et al (2012) Promoting Institutional Change Through Bias Literacy [internet]. Journal of Diversity in Higher Education vol 5 pp 63-77. Palm Beach: National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education. Available from <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3399596/> [Accessed 17 September 2015];

Hill, M. E., Augoustinos, M. (2001) Stereotype Change and Prejudice Reduction: Short- and Long-Term Evaluation of a Cross-Cultural Awareness Programme [internet]. Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology vol 11.4 pp 243-262. New York: John Wiley & Sons. Available from <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/casp.629/abstract> [Accessed 17 September 2015]

3 Devine, P.G. et al (2012) Long-term reduction in implicit race bias: A prejudice habit-breaking intervention [internet]. Journal of Experimental Social Psychology vol 48 pp 1267-1278. Amsterdam: Elsevier. Available from <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0022103112001369> [Accessed 17 September 2015]

Jones, P., Cornish, T. (2013) Unconscious bias and higher education [internet]. London: ECU/Cornish Consultancy Services. Available from: <http://www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/unconscious-bias-in-higher-education> [Accessed 17 September 2015]

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