

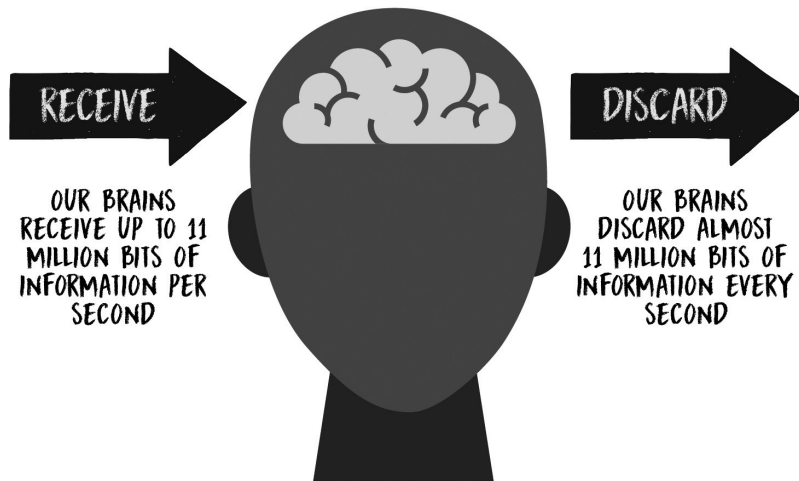
# A Mini Guide to UNCONSCIOUS BIAS

From *How To Build Your Antiracist  
Classroom* by Orlene Badu

 Sage | CORWIN

# The limitations of our brain

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**THE LIMITATIONS OF OUR BRAINS**  
WE CAN ONLY PROCESS APPROXIMATELY  
40 BITS OF INFORMATION PER SECOND

Our brains are intricate systems, powerful and able to process large amounts of information, with research citing our brains being able to receive up to 11,000,000 bits of information every second (as cited by Wu et al., 2016).

And yet, our conscious minds can only process up to 40 bits of information per second to ensure understanding (see Figure 2.2). That means we discard almost 11,000,000 bits of information every second. And that process of discarding is important to understanding bias and racism as we try to unpick what are the key pieces of information that we discard every second to ensure we can process information as quickly and as efficiently as possible.

# What is unconscious bias?

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Unconscious bias is a term that describes the associations we hold outside of our conscious awareness and control. Our unconscious biases are triggered by our brain making very rapid and implicit judgements continually.

This is a clear definition and yet unconscious bias is not easily understood and identified by us. It is not something we are all aware of at the time, all of the time and therefore we can fall prey to the impact of our unconscious biases, often unwittingly. There are many that dispute the term unconscious bias and feel that it gives others the blueprint to be biased or racist. But it really is not that. It is an innate habit that can motivate actions and beliefs long before we have had a chance to reflect and understand. Whilst it is unconscious, our understanding of it will ensure that we are all aware we have it and if left 'unchecked' it can have devastating consequences.

Unconscious biases are the societal stereotypes about certain groups of people that we form outside of our own conscious awareness. They are borne of our personal experiences, the societal stereotypes that surrounded us as we grew up and matured, the cultural context we lived within and our backgrounds – all without us realising. They are ever present in the implicit, rapid judgements and assessments we all make about people and situations all of the time.

Humans spent much of their evolutionary history in small tribes in competition for scarce resources, hence having a natural tendency to view 'out-group' members with distrust and hostility (Balliet et al., 2014). We still have this innate tendency within us to view those in out-groups with distrust and hostility. It also means



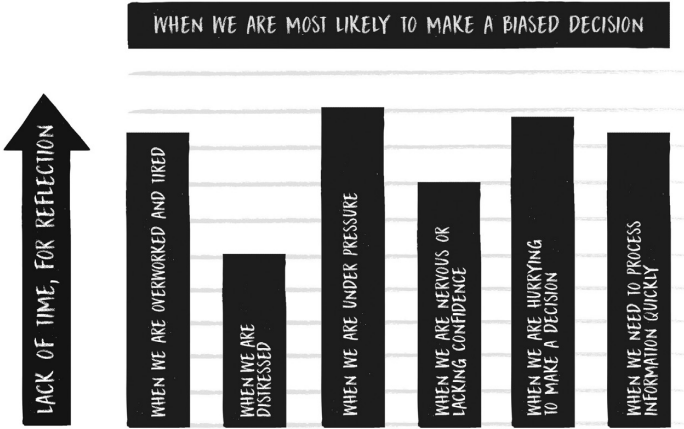
that we view those within our own groups as familiar, trusted and able. So now that we know it is an innate tendency, the 'what' we do to mitigate against its negative impact is vital.

Santos and Rosati (2015) identified that biases operate quickly, effortlessly and outside of our awareness – which can mean that merely recognising that we have a bias does not always make that bias go away. This is absolutely the point. Knowing we have bias alone does not make it go away. The subconscious way it is enacted means that we are not conscious of it at all times and need to build systems and structures both within ourselves and our institutions to limit its impact.

**SO TO BE CLEAR, WE ALL HAVE UNCONSCIOUS BIAS? YES, WE DO!**

## When are we most likely to be driven by our biases?

They are a main way that we can convey our biases about people or situations. They have such great importance in the interactions we have every day, and yet we are often completely unaware of them. Of course, some micro-aggressions are consciously done; but there are many that we exhibit all of the time without realising it, or thinking it is acceptable as we are never challenged about it.



# Micro-behaviours

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Micro-behaviours are brief and commonplace gestures, facial expressions, words, tone of voice used or assumptions that we are all capable of transmitting about people and to people all of the time. They openly expose the assumptions we make about others based on our biases. Be AWARE, if you have an assumption about someone, they DO KNOW through your micro behaviours.

# Strategies to reduce micro-aggressions

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Begin to think about the impact of our words on others.

Begin to understand that we all have bias, that we all think we know what/ who people are and that it is really important to explore these biases – give young people the language!

Talk about what you should say if someone says something that is biased – give them the language to use if they come up against a micro-aggression:

- *Why would you think that?*
- *Who taught you that?*
- *Where does that idea come from?*
- *It is ok to say sorry...*
- *I find that quite hurtful/harmful because...*
- *Have you thought about the impact of your words?*
- *Is there a better way you could have said that?*
- *Why is where I am from important?*
- *Thank you for making the effort to engage with me but I would like you to use my name...*



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