

1.1 Prejudice and labels

Step 1. Think Time: 30 min Individual exercise

Summary

The human brain is amazing - but requires us to simplify in order to manage all the impressions and information we encounter. This is necessary, but is also the basis of prejudices and stereotypes that affect people badly.

What to do:

- Read the text below, including the fact box, and listen to the author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's [TED-talk](#). Individually.
- Think about which "unconscious shortcuts" you sometimes take.

Exercise

The brain as opportunity and trap

Our brains possess a huge capacity when it comes to processing information. This is lucky considering the society we live in, where we meet large amounts of information and impressions every day. 100 billion neurons (nerve cells) help us to at times take in more than 11 million different types of impressions per second. This is an extraordinary ability, but it also requires the brain to simplify and create shortcuts by categorizing and automating as much as possible. We can only manage approximately 40-60 pieces of information per second consciously, the rest is managed subconsciously. We should be thankful for the job our brains do in the background. At the same time, we need to be aware that this also means that the image our brains portray of reality does not always represent the whole truth or the only truth.

Each individual impression cannot always be fully considered or complemented by the full facts – we would never then have the time to make decisions and act on our environment. This means that we are forced to evaluate and respond to impressions on the basis of inadequate and subjective information. To understand these impressions, we subconsciously use stereotypes, experiences (and lack of experience), feelings, wishes, fears, and what we think is important. In other words, our understanding is based on prejudices. That is to say, often based on prejudice.

The word prejudice has negative implications in English and is something that most of us prefer not to recognise or identify with. In practice, however, it is something of a necessary evil based on how our brains function and process information. Not being

aware that this is how we function creates the risk that we believe that we are acting and thinking rationally and open-mindedly - when in fact we are not. The brain's way of working is often good for us, but sometimes assumptions made on inadequate grounds can have unwanted results. It can lead to bad decisions or, in the worst case, discrimination and abuses. This is often subconscious and without bad intent. If we instead are aware that our brains tend to simplify and take shortcuts, we can become better at noticing when this happens or at creating strategies for preventing the negative consequences of it.

What is prejudice?

A prejudice can be described as an opinion not based on fact. It can be both positive or negative. In English the word bias can also be used, which does not have the same negative implications as the word prejudice. Prejudice is a kind of over-generalising based on subjectivity. Regardless of which word we use, we have prejudices whether we want them or not.

It is important to understand that a prejudice is not, in individual cases, automatically wrong always insufficient.

Be aware of your unconscious shortcuts

It is not just others who have prejudices, the same unfortunately also applies to you. Having the courage to try to understand and become aware of one's own prejudices is not just a first step, it is perhaps also the most important step. We will continue working to learn more about the subject and ourselves, but there is nothing stopping you from getting a head start now. In what situations do you find it easy to take unconscious shortcuts? What are your fears? In which areas and with what types of people do you have inadequate knowledge/experience and therefore an increased need of generalizations, stereotypes and shortcuts.

Fact Box unconscious shortcuts

Unspoken stereotypes/Unconscious prejudices: This is when the brain associates a group with certain characteristics – e.g. “men are good at math”, “women are good at caring”. Without consciously making the link, we often judge individuals on the basis of characteristics we associate with their group – even if they have little or nothing to do with the individual's actual qualities. In organizations this can, if you are not careful, play a large role in important decisions such as who gets a job or who is promoted.

In-group favouritism: A standard shortcut in the brain is to favor people similar to ourselves. This can easily lead to the path of least resistance, meaning that we choose to work with those of us who are from the same country, of the same age or of the same ethnicity as ourselves.

The assumption that other groups are more homogeneous than one's own: The assumption that other groups are more homogeneous than one's own: Humans often perceive that the group of people they themselves belong to has many differences and unique characteristics within it. They also tend to see the members of other groups as very similar, and sometimes even interchangeable.

We make mistakes when we try to explain reasons: We make mistakes when we try to explain reasons: When we give a reason for someone's behavior we are often mistaken. Along with our tendency to favor those similar to us, we often find negative reasons to explain the behavior of people outside our own group and positive reasons for those we see as being from our own group.

"Group think" occurs when the fear of conflict and the desire for harmony in the group unconsciously trumps rational decision-making.

The unwillingness to question one's own truths: This is known as confirmation bias and refers to our tendency to interpret facts and information in a way that confirms that which we already believe that we know, despite the fact that a more objective interpretation or a willingness to see a greater whole would give a totally different answer.

Sources

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