

FAIRNESS FACTS

REDUCING BIAS IN DECISION MAKING

For a decision to be procedurally fair, the decision maker must be unbiased and impartial about the issue being decided and those affected by it.

What is bias?

A preference in favour of or against a thing, person or group. Biases can be unfair when they impact the decisions and actions taken that affect others.

Bias has been defined by Canadian courts as “a leaning, inclination, bent or predisposition towards one side or another or a particular result”.¹

Two broad categories of bias:

Conscious

- Biases you are consciously aware of
- Can be self-reported and addressed easier than unconscious biases

Unconscious

- Biases that we are not aware of
- Tendency to prefer a thing, a person, or point of view at an unconscious level
- Can affect everyday decisions, attitudes and behaviours without knowing it

Why should we be concerned about bias?

People receiving public services have the right to an impartial decision maker. If a decision maker is biased, they may make decisions that are, or are perceived to be, unfair. This is an integral part of [procedural fairness](#).

Bias in public sector decision-making can also harm public confidence in government.

There are many types of bias that can operate both consciously or unconsciously.

Some common types include:

- **Affinity bias (similarity bias).** An unconscious preference to those similar to oneself such as similar likes, ideas and characteristics.
- **Attitudinal bias.** When one’s opinion is so strong and rigid they appear closed to alternative perspectives such as a past statement made on an issue that is central to the decision.
- **Confirmation bias.** A tendency to look for evidence that confirms or supports one’s prior beliefs or values.
- **Gender bias.** A preference of one gender over the other or a belief that certain qualities exist in a person based on their gender identity. These are often informed by society’s ideas on gender roles and stereotypes.
- **Self-serving bias.** Causes people to see things in ways that support their own interests such as unintentionally making a decision that benefits themselves over others.

¹ *Wewaykum Indian Band v. Canada*, 2003 SCC 45.

The danger of unconscious biases

We all have biases, both conscious and unconscious. Simply put, they are preferences. Unconscious biases are concerning because they can affect how we treat people without much, if any, awareness. Unconscious biases that focus on characteristics – such as gender, race, ability, age, or size can affect our judgment, perpetuate discrimination and fuel hate. Acting on biases

can lead to the discrimination of certain people or groups. And, when certain people or groups experience discrimination, this can be a violation of their human rights.²

Interrupting these unconscious biases is necessary to break the chain that reinforces societal systems of discrimination, such as racism, sexism, ableism and heterosexism.

Strategies to mitigate bias	
Acknowledge it.	Having a bias isn't necessarily a bad thing. If you believe you may be biased towards a person who will be impacted by your decision, recognize it and name it. To make a biased decision while delivering public services is unfair.
Be honest with yourself and others.	Don't try to ignore or hide a bias – we all have them. Share your thoughts with a colleague or supervisor and engage in collaborative decision making when a potential for bias exists. Be cautious, however, to ensure that those you collaborate with have diverse lived experiences than your own; otherwise it's possible you will reinforce your bias (ie. confirmation bias).
Step aside.	If you think you may be biased, it is best to remove yourself from the decision-making process. Ask someone else to make the decision to ensure fairness. This is referred to as recusing yourself.
Take your time and consider your perspective.	Slow down and reflect before taking action or making a decision. Consider the person's situation and their perspective.
Think of counter examples.	Research shows that replacing an automatic or stereotypical image or association with one that counters that stereotype can help challenge unconscious biases that creep into our decision making
Learn.	Take time to learn about diverse perspectives, people, cultures and histories

² In British Columbia, human rights are protected and upheld by the [Human Rights Code](#).

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