

What lies beneath

Implicit associations can be costly.

by KAREN WITHAM *and* KARA HELANDER



In spite of your best efforts, you may not be as neutral as you think. Tools and resources are available to help you assess and improve your decision-making process.

Dozens of decisions must be made every day. Professionally, you may have to contend with personnel and management issues, asset allocation and performance questions, and communication conundrums involving your boards, beneficiaries or other constituencies. However, you probably aren't aware of deeply buried associations and assumptions that can derail your decision making and impair your results. In spite of your best efforts, you may not be as neutral as you think.

Tools and resources are available to help you assess and improve your decision-making process, including one that was co-developed by Dr. Mahzarin Banaji of Harvard University. The co-developer of the Implicit Association Test and co-author of *Blindspot: Hidden Biases of Good People* recently spoke to BlackRock's senior leaders on the topic of unconscious bias in decision making. Read on to learn how her research and insights can benefit you.

Dr. Banaji, your research is about implicit associations. Can you tell us what that means and why they're important to understand?

"Implicit associations" is just a complex-sounding phrase for something really simple: treating two things that have come to co-occur in our experience as if they are one. When you eat bread with butter repeatedly, those two come together to become one in your mind. Well, that sounds very simple. Why shouldn't the brain, a smart machine, be learning these sorts of associations? The problem arises when certain associations cloud our perceptions and create assumptions.

Give us a sense of why this is so important for an organization to understand.

The importance of implicit associations comes from the fact that without our knowing, we may be making decisions that are not in our own self-interest, whether as individuals or organizations. Decisions that involve hiring are one place where implicit associations can override logic or facts. We implicitly assess a person's appearance and factor in where they are from and how similar they are to us. Those decisions can cost us, and the evidence now suggests that you can actually measure those costs. I think the critical place where implicit associations come in is in our everyday interactions with people. Our biases play out in simple judgments of how good a person somebody is, how trustworthy, how competent. Implicit associations are subtle enough to influence our view of others and of ourselves.

How do managers address the issues you've raised?

I think the best model is to think about what the mind's diet is, the same way we think about the body. What do we put into it? We turn on a TV channel that we are comfortable with and we "consume" it. What we may not realize is that information transforms the brain the way food transforms the body. It turns out that brains are believing organs. They believe whatever they see. To *not* believe takes a huge amount of cognitive effort because literally just seeing a picture causes it to get etched in your mind and tell you a story of the way the world is.

I would argue that a leader should ask “What am I consuming every day? What do I see, what do I hear, and with whom do I interact? What is the diversity of experiences I have?” Sometimes the solution is simply making small changes.

Your brain is not wrong in learning certain patterns. But, if you want to change the world, and those patterns are going to lead you to a very fixed view of the world, then you may go wrong. So I would argue that a leader should ask “What am I consuming every day? What do I see, what do I hear, and with whom do I interact? What is the diversity of experiences I have?” Sometimes the solution is simply making small changes. There is a lot to be said for small changes that can in some ways wipe out fairly large systemic biases.

So a key theme here is making sure you expose yourself to information that expands your associations. Are there any other important takeaways for our readers?

I want to leave you with some optimism, because there is in this message a certain pessimism: you may not be as unbiased or logical as you thought you were. We have to lead with optimism because

throughout history there have been so many ways in which we have come upon discoveries about ourselves that frightened us but we didn't walk away.

Consider Galileo. When he turned his telescope to the skies he saw something there that was shocking, that was completely in conflict with everything everybody believed. He could have turned away, tried to forget what he saw, and never again looked at the stars. I think that when we come upon these moments of seeing something about ourselves or our place in the universe that is troubling to us, we have to look into that telescope again. In that fearsome situation lies knowledge that is incredibly powerful. By nature human beings strive especially hard to figure things out when something bothers them. And that, I think, is one of the biggest gifts that we have, that we will not leave good enough alone, because we know that there could be something better. ♦

Photo: Harvard University News Office.



Dr. Mahzarin Rustum Banaji

Mahzarin Banaji taught at Yale for 15 years where she was Halleck Professor of Psychology. In 2002 she moved to Harvard where she is Cabot Professor of Social Ethics in the Department of Psychology.

Banaji is a fellow of the Association for Psychological Science and served as president of the society. She was inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the American Academy of Political and Social Science.

Together with Brian Nosek and Tony Greenwald, Dr. Banaji co-developed the Implicit Association Test (implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/demo), which is meant to provoke an awareness of the hidden biases of good people.

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