

How unethical are you essay



Most of people believe that they are ethical and unbiased. They imagine they're good decision makers, able to objectively size up a job candidate or a venture deal and reach a fair and rational conclusion that's in their, and their organization's, best interests. But more than two decades of research confirms that, in reality, most of them fall woefully short of our inflated self-perception. This article explores four related sources of unintentional unethical decision making:

1. **Implicit Prejudice:** Bias that emerges from unconscious beliefs Most fair-minded people strive to judge others according to their merits. What makes implicit prejudice so common and persistent is that it is rooted in the fundamental mechanics of thought. Early on, we learn to associate things that commonly go together like rain and thunder or gray hair and old age. But our associations only reflect approximations of the truth; they are rarely applicable to every encounter.

Because we automatically make such associations to help us organize our world, we grow to trust them, and they can blind us to those instances in which the associations are not accurate. Because implicit prejudice arises from the ordinary and unconscious tendency to make associations, it is distinct from conscious forms of prejudice, such as overt racism or sexism. This distinction explains why people who are free from conscious prejudice may still harbor biases and act accordingly. Biases are also likely to be costly. In controlled experiments, psychologists Laurie Rudman at Rutgers and Peter Glick at Lawrence University have studied how implicit biases may work to exclude qualified people from certain roles. One set of experiments

examined the relationship between participants' implicit gender stereotypes and their hiring decisions.

Woman was less likely to be socially than the man, though their qualifications were in fact the same. Legal cases also reveal the real costs of implicit biases, both economic and social. In a case of Ann Hopkins, the details of the case reveal that her evaluators were explicitly prejudiced in their attitudes. Testifying as an expert witness for the defense, psychology professor Susan Fiske at Princeton University, argued that the potential for biased decision making is inherent in a system in which a person has "solo" status, that is a system in which the person is the only one of a kind.

2. In Group Favoritism: Bias that favors your group Most of us are glad to help out with such favors. We tend to do more favors for those we know, and those we know tend to be like ourselves: people who share our nationality, social class, and perhaps religion, race, employer, or alma mater. This all sounds innocent. Few people set out to exclude anyone through such acts of kindness. But when those in the majority or those in power allocate scarce resources to people just like them, they effectively discriminate against those who are different from them.

The ethical cost is clear and should be reason enough to address the problem. Lenders who discriminate in this way, for example, incur bad-debt costs they could have avoided if their lending decisions were more objective. They also may find themselves exposed to damaging publicity or discrimination lawsuits if the skewed lending pattern is publicly revealed. In-

group favoritism is tenacious when membership confers clear advantages, as it does, for instance among whites and other dominant social group.

3. Overclaiming Credit: Bias that favors you Many studies show that the majority of people consider themselves above average on a host of measures, from intelligence to driving ability. Business executives are no exception. Likewise in business, claiming too much credit can destabilize alliances. When each party in a strategic partnership claims too much credit for its own contribution and becomes skeptical about whether the other is doing its fair share, they both tend to reduce their contributions to compensate. Unconscious overclaiming can be expected to reduce the performance and longevity of groups within organizations, just as it diminished the academic authors' willingness to collaborate.

4. Conflict of Interest: Bias that favors those who can benefit you Everyone knows that conflict of interest can lead to intentionally corrupt behavior. But numerous psychological experiments show how powerfully such conflicts can unintentionally skew decision making. Physicians, for instance, face conflicts of interest when they accept payment for referring patients into clinical trials. Similarly, many lawyers earn fees based on their clients' awards or settlements. Since going to trial is expensive and uncertain, settling out of court is often an attractive option for the lawyer.