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What is Unconscious Bias?

Unconscious bias stems from social stereotypes we form outside our awareness, shaped by personal experiences and our need to organise the social world. Everyone holds unconscious biases, and being aware of them is essential.

These biases can lead to decisions based on false assumptions, such as:

- Thinking more positively of someone because they seem similar to us
- Thinking less of someone because they appear different—due to views, race, religion, age, or values

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What Can Unconscious Bias Look Like in Safeguarding Practice?

Unconscious bias in safeguarding may look like:

- Assuming capacity based on age or appearance
- Trusting carers over the adult's own voice
- Dismissing concerns from those with mental health issues
- Overlooking abuse in well-presented or same-gender individuals
- Avoiding cultural or religious needs
- Not questioning senior colleagues
- Assuming people with learning disabilities can't express their wishes
- Ignoring financial abuse if basic needs seem met

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The Impact of Unconscious Bias

Unconscious bias in safeguarding can lead to unequal treatment, missed signs of abuse, and flawed risk assessments.

Assumptions based on race, gender, age, or disability can leave adults feeling unheard and unsupported. This undermines **Making Safeguarding Personal**, which promotes choice, control, and tailored responses.

Tackling bias is key to ensuring safeguarding is fair, inclusive, and person-centred.

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SAR Harry

SAR Harry was a **Safeguarding Adult Review** conducted in Salford to examine how agencies supported a man with long-term mental health needs and addiction, who was exploited. The review found that unconscious bias—such as assumptions about his lifestyle and capacity—may have led to missed opportunities for support. It highlights the need for professionals to challenge assumptions and apply person-centred, non-judgemental safeguarding in line with best practice.

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Useful Resources

[SAR HARRY briefing document](#)

[SSAB 7 Minute Briefings](#)

[Making Safeguarding Personal \(MSP\) SCIE Resource](#)

[How can social workers tackle unconscious bias?](#)

[Tips for managing biases in your social work practice - Community Care](#)



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Remember

When an adult says they don't feel safe or may be at risk:

- ▶ **Listen without judgement** — avoid assumptions based on appearance, background, or behaviour.
- ▶ **Use professional curiosity** — explore their unique circumstances with an open mind.
- ▶ **Reflect on your own biases** — pause and consider how your beliefs may influence your response.
- ▶ **Keep exploring** until you're confident the adult is safe or risks are being appropriately managed.

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Strategies to Address Unconscious Bias

- ▶ Reflect on assumptions
- ▶ Use supervision to check bias
- ▶ Involve diverse perspectives via multi-agency input
- ▶ Prioritise the adult's voice
- ▶ Keep learning about inclusion and diversity
- ▶ Pause before reacting