Video Transcript: Understanding implicit bias

Speaker 1: Most of us think of ourselves as conscious and reflective thinkers. However, the unconscious thinking system is always in the background noticing connections between things and storing that information. Every day we are surrounded by millions of pieces of information. The thing is our conscious thinking system can only handle a few pieces of information at a time. This means that the vast majority of this information is processed by our unconscious thinking system.

This thinking system has evolved to deal with thousands of pieces of information instantaneously. As such, the unconscious thinking system makes our world manageable by instantly and effortlessly, and to some extent, automatically, guiding us based on the connections it has made and information it has stored. To illustrate how the unconscious brain tells us what to expect from objects, situations, and people, consider this object.

What is that? Is it scary? Is it edible? What would happen if you bit it? Because you have likely consumed many apples in your life, your unconscious thinking system enabled you to answer those questions rapidly and with little effort. In less than a second, you knew what to expect from a fresh looking apple. As you can see, the way the unconscious thinking system guides what we expect is generally helpful.

But when it comes to making sense of other people, especially those not similar to us, our unconscious thinking can cause us to be biased without even being aware of it. This is because every day we are repeatedly exposed to many stereotypes about different groups of people. While we are able to consciously ignore stereotypes, our unconscious system learns through repeated associations, and by seeing one thing connected to another over and over, our unconscious system locks in these impressions.

Unfortunately, this means we are more likely to automatically notice or assume things about people that fit into stereotypes. And often stereotypes make negative assumptions. When we make automatic assumptions, often driven by stereotypes, about people based on things like skin color, age, body type, or even style of clothing, these are called implicit biases.

And because implicit biases originate in the unconscious thinking system, they can exist even while we have conscious intentions to be fair and unbiased.