Everyday Bias, Howard J. Ross, Suggested Group Discussion Questions

1. After reading this book, which research examples stand out the most in your mind? Notice the examples shared by each group member, and whether or not there are biases at play in the stories that each person held on to.

2. Ross states that “bias has been defined as ‘a particular tendency or inclination, especially one that prevents unprejudiced consideration of a question.’[4]” How might you define it?

3. In his Introduction, Ross offers us an example of a time that his initial biases of a fellow traveler on an airplane were challenged. What are your moments of checking your own initial bias and assumptions of a person or people?

4. Ross tells us, “…we are constantly making decisions that are influenced by unconscious biases. In fact, even when our biases seem conscious, they may be influenced by a pattern of unconscious assumptions that we have absorbed throughout our lives.” He quotes Brett Pelham as saying, “’Being biased is how we get through life without evaluating everything afresh every time we experience it.’”

What are the ways in which your experiences have created “protective biases”? What are the “protective” biases that may have been passed down to you by your family or community?

5. Ross states that “what we think we see may not be clearly happening at all. Our perceptions, our memories, and our social judgments are all constructed by our unconscious mind from the limited information that we interpret through the expectations we have, the context that we see the situation in, and what we hope to get out of the situation.”

Can you think of a time when your previously held perceptions were challenged based on a new experience?

6. Ross describes the undercurrent of unconscious messages that we each carry. He asks us the following questions:

“Whose ideas do we hear? Which do we miss? Who do we see doing something wrong, while we do not notice others? How many students do teachers observe differently, sometimes depending on their opinion of the student? Selective attention and
inattentional blindness show up in every area of our lives. Think about it for a minute. What might you be missing in your own life?”

How would you answer the same questions?

7. What are times you notice yourself or others using:

**Pattern Recognition** – the tendency to sort and identify information based on prior experience or habit.

**Value Attribution** – the inclination to imbue a person or thing with certain qualities based on initial perceived value.

**Confirmation Bias** – a tendency for people to gather information or respond to a circumstance in a way that confirms their already established beliefs or ideas.

**Priming**— the implicit tendency to respond to something based on expectations created by a previous experience or association.

**Commitment Confirmation (Confidence Bias)**— becoming attached to a particular point of view, even when it may be obviously wrong.

**Stereotype Threat (Internalized Bias)**— the experience of anxiety or concern in a situation where a person has the potential to confirm a negative stereotype about their social group.

**Anchoring Bias (Focalism)**— the common tendency to rely too heavily or “anchor” on one trait or piece of information when making decisions.

**Group Think**— the way in which our personal biases are deeply influenced by the cultures and groups with whom we associate.

8. Ross states that “power provides a foundation for our sense of agency in life. Our ability to get things done, to influence outcomes, to exercise authority, and to control our environment has an enormous influence on how secure we feel in our ability to keep ourselves safe, as well as to get what we want and make the kinds of things we want to happen…” and “because we often think of bias as a function of overt acts of bigotry, we can sometimes remain blind to the invisible structures, systems, and behaviors that bestow and reinforce that power and privilege on a daily basis.”

How do you feel power plays out in your own community? In your work?
9. When have you witnessed or embodied the following types of power?

**Coercive Power**—The ability to use positional force or dominance to get people to comply with your desire.

**Reward Power**—Reward power emerges when one has the ability to give another person things they want (e.g., pay, vacation, job assignments, promotions) or to relieve people of things that they don’t want (e.g., telling somebody that they don’t have to travel or attend a meeting).

**Relational Power**—This form of power comes from a real or perceived connection to some figure or figures of authority.

**Resource Control**—It is often said that “whoever controls the purse strings,” controls the situation.

**Assumed or Demonstrated Expertise**—This kind of power comes with a real or perceived ability to provide expertise that is either limited or nonexistent in a particular situation.

**Informational Power**—We all know the expression “knowledge is power.” Informational power is based on the access people have to inside information within an organization or a system.

10. Ross writes about institutional biases, and offers some disparaging data on the health disparities in our country. Ross states “people in health care are among the most dedicated I know. They are deeply committed to healing people, and yet the information contained in the reports cited earlier shows that conscious intent and results are not necessarily aligned.”

Since many of us work in the Healthcare system, what are some areas that you have seen access, politics, and generalized societal biases play out systemically in your own work environments, on you, and on your clients?

11. Ross asks the following questions:

“Can we trust our own perceptions?”

“Is there anything we can do about our unconscious biases? Or, are we destined to simply wander blindly through our lives, biases alive, intact, and operational? What it comes down to is this: Can unconscious bias be eliminated?”
Ross offers his own explanation – what do you think?

12. Ross offers the following suggested steps along with some tools for disengaging with our bias:

1. Recognize bias is a normal part of the human experience.
2. Develop the capacity for self-observation.
3. Practice constructive uncertainty.
4. Explore awkwardness or discomfort.
5. Get feedback and data.

What are some other ways you would add to begin to disentangle your own experiences of unconscious biases?

13. Ross addresses “status quo bias” or “nonuseful stability.” What are some areas in your institution or practice where you might be doing things as you’ve always done them?

14. Ross suggests all institutions should be doing this work on an organizational level. He says:

“Of course, one of the most important shifts in mind-set is in understanding that bias makes an impact upon every organizational decision. And instead of wondering ‘if’ bias affects organizations, we should begin to wonder ‘where’ bias makes its mark. That may seem negative at first blush, but remember, bias is everywhere; the only question is whether we are willing to look for it. This requires a willingness to honestly assess the way we operate. This means reviewing every aspect of the employment life cycle for hidden bias. And this includes examining job postings and advertisements, the way we screen resumes, conduct interviews, and handle onboarding. It means looking at how we handle job assignments, mentoring and sponsorship, performance reviews, as well as how we identify high performers and decide how people are promoted and terminated, etc.”

What are some ways you could begin to introduce unconscious bias education into your own communities?

15. Think of a time that your organization or workplace was undergoing a change, or growth. How do you think your organization or workplace might answer the “EIGHT GREAT QUESTIONS TO ASK WHILE MAKING GROUP DECISIONS” from Chapter 8.

16. Do you think people are more or less biased today than they might have been in the past?
17. What are the ways in which you are growing your consciousness and building your self-compassion?