

WHO'S BIAS?
THE TRUTH ABOUT IMPLICIT BIAS

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- I. What is implicit bias?
 - a. Implicit bias refers to the attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner.
 - b. Implicit bias encompasses favorable and unfavorable associations that are developed over the course of a lifetime.
 - c. They are activated involuntarily and without individual awareness.
 - d. The implicit associations we hold do not necessarily align with our declared beliefs or even reflect stances we would explicitly endorse.

- II. How does it form?

According to Dr. Timothy Wilson, the unconscious mind plays an influential role in controlling our actions. Although the human brain can process up to 11 million pieces of information in any one moment, we are only consciously aware of 40 of these at best.

- a. Neurological Origins of Prejudice.
 - i. Limbic system
 - 1. The limbic system is involved in many of our emotions and motivations.
 - 2. It drives emotions related to survival: the “fight or flight response.”
 - ii. Schemas
 - 1. Help us organize information into broader categories.
 - 2. Once a schema is formed, meanings that we associate with the category become associated with its respective members.
 - 3. It is responsible for strong emotional responses (i.e., fight or flight). Studies have shown that specific areas of the brain, called amygdalae, activate when we feel fear, threat, anxiety and distrust. People with diagnosed phobias of spiders and snakes have significantly higher levels of amygdala activation when they view pictures of those fear triggers than when they view pictures of other predatory or ferocious creatures, such as tigers.
 - 4. A pioneering study showed a measurable increase in the activation of the amygdala when Caucasian participants viewed African American male faces versus Caucasian male faces. Subsequent studies expanded upon this finding: 2005 study discovered similar amygdala activity across African American and Caucasian participants when viewing African American faces and a 2007 study found that skin tone variations also affect amygdala activation, with dark skin tones provoking greater levels of activity than lighter ones.

III. What are the impacts?

a. Individual Actions

- i The amygdala processes information much faster than the prefrontal cortex, where rational thought occurs. Consequently, our subconscious beliefs manifest before we can make objective assessments about a situation or individual.
- ii Confirmation bias allows us to rationalize the biases we harbor subconsciously.

b. Social Manifestations

i Persistent Prejudices

1. Biases that persist unconsciously shape our society.
2. Unconscious biases are reflected our policy and in institutional arrangements.
3. Implicit biases, explicit biases, and structural forces often reinforce each other.
4. Implicit bias studies have found an impact in many institutions and systems where fairness is critical including healthcare, education and the criminal justice system.

IV. What can be addressed?

a. Identification

i. Researchers have developed various ways to test for it.

1. A computerized test, called the Implicit Association Test (IAT), helps us see our unconscious or implicit biases and preferences for certain groups.
2. An IAT score is computed by comparing speed and error rates on trials in which the pairing of concepts is consistent with common stereotypes to trials in which the pairing of concepts defies common stereotypes.
3. IATs can be taken online at <http://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit>.
4. Several large reviews have found the IAT to be reliable, relatively unsusceptible to intentional distortion, and most ominously, predictive of a range of discriminatory behavior, in some cases better than self-report.

b. Mitigating Bias

- i. Implicit biases are malleable. Our brains are incredibly complex, and the implicit associations that we have formed can be gradually unlearned through a variety of debiasing techniques.
- ii. An emerging body of laboratory-based research suggests that strategies are available for regulating implicit biases.

1. Change-based approach

- a. Intergroup contact - interaction between members of different social groups appears to diminish implicit prejudice.
- b. Approach training - repeated negation of stereotypes and affirmation of counter-stereotypes through physical reactions.
- c. Counter-stereotype exposure - increasing individuals' exposure to images, film clips, or even mental imagery depicting members of stigmatized groups acting in stereotype-discordant ways.

2. Control-based approach

- a. Implementation intentions - "if-then" plans that specify a goal-directed response when encountering an anticipated cue.
- b. Priming goals, moods, and motivations - priming egalitarian goals, multicultural ideologies, or moods can lower prejudice.

c. Practical Steps

- i. Education: increase access to ongoing trainings and learning opportunities
- ii. Cognitive load: increase time allowed for decision-making
- iii. Environment: evaluate natural environment for cues that reinforce or combat stereotypes
- iv. Organizational review: create a system of internal accountability
- v. Increased standardization: use objective factors to assess matters as frequently as possible
- vi. Affirmative action: assume that bias will occur and create a structure to promote diversity
- vii. Mission: foster egalitarian motivations by explicitly addressing bias in organization goals and mission statements.