

Implicit Bias

What is it?

How do we define it?

Do we have it?



The History of Implicit Bias

In 1954, the *Nature of Prejudice* was a first foray into the psychological research on prejudice. Decades of new research and understanding have evolved into what is currently referred to as implicit bias. The exploration in the 1970's delved into the ideas that implicit social cognition was either controlled, "thought to be voluntary, attention-demanding and of limited capacity" or automatic which "unfolds without attention". By the 1990's, the concept of "implicit attitudes" was based on studies that "awareness of stereotypes can affect social judgment and behavior in relative independence from subjects' reported attitudes".

Research has found that "white youth and youth of color engage in illegal activities at similar rates, however, there are substantial over-representation of youth of color in the juvenile justice systems across the country" and a serious difference in the way in which treatment or prosecution is dispersed.¹ Research in 2015 found that black youth were 5 times as likely, Native American were 3.1 times likely, and Latino youth were 1.6 times likely to be incarcerated than white youth. This demonstrates that at all entry points to the juvenile justice system, there is a significant disparity in how youth of color are treated.

Core Concepts

A bias is often explained as a way in which people develop unconscious patterns in their brain to organize information. Most people think of a bias as an intentional thought or action.² However, that view does not take into consideration "introspective unidentified traces of past experiences that mediate favorable or unfavorable feeling, thought or action toward social objects",³ which can also be referred to as stereotyping. As discussed, it means the brain is noticing patterns and making generalizations.⁴

There is also general agreement that implicit bias has several key characteristics:^{5 6}

- Implicit biases are pervasive. Implicit and explicit biases are related but distinct mental constructs. They are not mutually exclusive and may even reinforce each other.
- Unconscious and automatic: They are activated without an individuals' intention or control.
- The implicit associations we hold do not necessarily align with our declared beliefs or even reflect stances we would explicitly endorse.
- We generally tend to hold implicit biases that favor our own "in-group", though research has shown that we can still hold implicit biases against our in-group.
- Significant research has documented real-world effects of implicit bias across domains such as employment, education, and criminal justice, among others.
- 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.

Because of the link among cultural stereotypes and narrative, and systemic policies, practices and behaviors, implicit bias is one part of the system of inequity that serves to justify inequitable policies, practices and behaviors – part of the complex cycle people are trying to disrupt. The Cycle of Socialization by Bobbie Harro explains how our first socialization is taught on a personal level and then reinforced through messages from institutions and culture. From those structures, rewards, punishments and other enforcements result in negative feelings and reactions. It is at this point de-biasing is critical.

The Science Behind Bias

Several tools have emerged as a way of measuring one's own implicit bias, however, there is currently not consensus on the accuracy and what it reveals. One most commonly referred to is the Implicit Association Test (IAT) which measures the strength of associations between social groups and evaluations. Rapid images are displayed with positive and negative words. Flaws have surfaced that the outcome from one time to the next can vary, and significantly. Any social-psychological instrument must pass two tests to be considered accurate: reliability and validity. "A psychological instrument is reliable if the same test subject, taking the test at different times, achieves roughly the same score each time. But IAT bias scores have a lower rate of consistency than

is deemed acceptable for use in the real world—a subject could be rated with a high degree of implicit bias on one taking of the IAT and a low or moderate degree the next time around."⁷ It is also unclear whether the speed at which image are revealed caused challenges in response time and accurate reaction, for example with older populations taking the test. "I don't think this research is ready for application. It could even be true that implicit bias doesn't have a strong impact on behavior. Even if this is not true, we should not be using this body of research in its current state to inform public policy."⁸

In *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, Daniel Kahneman explains a "framework for understanding human cognitive functioning by delineating our mental processing into two parts: System 1 and System 2". System 1 occurs outside of conscious awareness and operates automatically and extremely fast. System 2 is conscious processing,

what's used for mental tasks that require concentration. Rather than being automatic and fast, this undertaking requires effortful, deliberate concentration. Psychologists estimate that our brains are capable of processing approximately 11 million bits of information every second, and most neuroscientists agree that the vast majority of our cognitive processing occurs outside of our conscious awareness.⁹

While there has been more than 30 years of research in neurology and social and cognitive psychology, researchers are still challenged with how to best identify and quantify implicit bias and how they translate it into behavior.

The Effect of Racial Implicit Bias on Youth

Understanding the brain's reaction to certain situations or social groups begins to explain "why some groups enjoy privilege while others remain subjugated in our society", however, looking at people in a system "without understanding the system inside each of us"¹⁰ provides an incomplete picture.

This has implications in every aspect of life and society. One that is often highlighted in the media, usually over a traffic result, is the interaction between youth of color and the police. In Jennifer Eberhardt's book *Bias: Uncovering the hidden prejudice that shapes what we see think and do*, her research has found that when people are exposed to black faces for milliseconds, they will "pick up guns and knives sooner". When asked what can be done, she explains that implicit biases surface when we are thinking and moving too fast, and that slowing down allows us to make a shift so "we're less likely to act on bias".¹¹ And given what we have learned above, this can be a challenge. In addition to this "shooter bias", it has been found that public defenders prioritize cases involving white defendants which leads to further mistrust of the justice system by, especially, men of color.¹²

Additional research has found that age of youth and their race contributes to the inequitable treatment of youth of color vs. white youth. The study found that black boys are viewed as older and less innocent than white youth. They also found that police viewed black youth suspected of committing a crime were 4.59 years older than they were, and this has serious implications "meaning a thirteen-year-old black male would be viewed as an adult". For the legal profession, understanding implicit bias and ways to debias one's approach is "critical to a fair and representative perception and reality of access to justice and equity".



Can Implicit Bias be Overcome?

The good news is that, as previously defined, implicit biases are malleable and can be debiased through intention and practice¹³ of new strategies designed to “break” your automatic associations that link a negative judgment to behavior that is culturally different from yours. Interrupting implicit biases is complex work. “The topic of implicit bias is so complex and emotionally messy that it’s tempting to just want to gloss right over it jump to culturally responsive lesson planning and instructional strategies. But an important part of being culturally responsive is the ability to build trusting relationships with diverse students and to validate their experiences.”¹⁴

One of the nation’s leading implicit bias scholars, Patricia Devine of the University of Wisconsin, developed a “multi-faceted prejudice habit-breaking” intervention. Several of the strategies she teaches include:

- **Re-Association (Stereotype Replacement):** An individual recognizes that he or she is responding to a situation or person in a stereotypical fashion. (S)he considers the reasons and actively replaces this biased response with an unbiased one. Another way to use this strategy is to reframe negative associations such as, “Black students are loud and disruptive. A reframe would be, “African American students are enthusiastic and energetic.”
- **Refuting (Counter-stereotypic Imagining):** Once a person recognizes she’s stereotyped a student of color, she thinks of examples that prove the stereotype to be inaccurate.
- **Perspective-taking** involves stepping into the shoes of a stereotyped person. What does it feel like to have your intelligence automatically questioned, or to be trailed by detectives each time you walk into a store? Perspective-taking can be very useful in assessing the emotional impact on individuals who are constantly being stereotyped in negative ways. It is also a way to checking one’s self if you begin to judge a person of color for reacting a particular way in a stressful situation.
- **Increasing Opportunity for Positive Contact:** Another strategy for reducing implicit bias is to actively seek out situations where one is likely to be exposed to positive examples of African Americans, Latinos or other people of color. This can involve either being in a very diverse social setting such as going to a farmer’s market in a more diverse part of town or seeking out personal contact through shared group activities with a diverse community.

In her trainings, she asks her participants to practice at least three (3) of them consistently on a weekly basis.

Policymakers and the public need to be educated on implicit bias and how it operates, the effects of it in the juvenile justice system¹⁵ and what we can do to interrupt it. By becoming aware of and beginning to unlearn implicit biases, we finally may be able to figure out how to conquer these biases and work together to breakdown systems that have enforced implicit bias.



Footnotes

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Resources

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The Tow Youth Justice Institute is a university, state and private partnership established to lead the way in juvenile justice reform through collaborative planning, training, research and advocacy.

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