

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.

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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