

IMPLICIT BIAS

Implicit bias describes the automatic associations individuals make between groups of people and stereotypes about those groups. Under certain conditions, those automatic associations can influence behavior, making people respond in biased ways even when they are not explicitly prejudiced. More than 30 years of research in neurology and social and cognitive psychology has shown that people hold implicit biases even in the absence of explicit bigotry, simply based on exposure to or insulation from the social world around them. Implicit racial bias has given rise to a phenomenon known as “racism without racists,” which can cause institutions or individuals to act on racial prejudices, even in spite of good intentions and nondiscriminatory policies or standards.

In the context of criminal justice and community safety, implicit bias has been shown to have significant influence in the outcomes of interactions between police and citizens. While conscious, “traditional” racism has declined significantly in recent decades, “research suggests that implicit attitudes may be better at predicting and/or influencing behavior than self-reported explicit attitudes.”¹

Discussions of implicit bias in policing tend to focus on implicit racial biases; however, implicit bias can also be expressed in relation to nonracial factors, including gender, age, religion, or sexual orientation. As with all types of bias, implicit bias can distort one’s perception and subsequent treatment—either positive or negative—of a given person or group. In policing, this has resulted in widespread practices that focus undeserved suspicion on some groups and presume other groups innocent.

Further reading

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Reducing the influence of implicit bias is vitally important to strengthening relationships between police and minority communities. For example, studies suggest that implicit bias contributes to “shooter bias,” that is, the tendency for police to shoot unarmed Black suspects more often than White ones, as well as the frequency of police stops for members of minority groups.² Other expressions of implicit bias, such as public defenders’ prioritization of cases involving White defendants,³ can have negative impacts on communities and their perception of the justice system. This latter point is



particularly significant in light of recent findings about the importance of procedural justice in fostering cooperation between citizens and the criminal justice system and cultivating law-abiding communities.

Despite these challenges, Phillip Atiba Goff, president of the Center for Policing Equity, believes that through training, policy review, and other interventions, the impact of implicit bias can be reduced. Research suggests that biased associations can be gradually unlearned and replaced with nonbiased ones,⁴ and that simply changing the context in which an interaction takes place can mediate the overall influence of bias.⁵ Consequently, through policy and training, it is possible to mend the harm that racial stereotypes do to our minds and our public safety.

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Endnotes

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2. Joshua Correll, Bernadette Park, Charles M. Judd, and Bernd Wittenbrink, "The police officer's dilemma: using ethnicity to disambiguate potentially threatening individuals," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 83, no. 6 (2002): 1314; Joshua Correll, Bernadette Park, Charles M. Judd, and Bernd Wittenbrink, "The influence of stereotypes on decisions to shoot," *European Journal of Social Psychology* 37, no. 6 (2007): 1102-1117; Melody S. Sadler, Joshua Correll, Bernadette Park, and Charles M. Judd, "The world is not Black and White: Racial bias in the decision to shoot in a multiethnic context," *Journal of Social Issues* 68, no. 2 (2012): 286-313.
3. L.S. Richardson and Phillip A. Goff, "Implicit Racial Bias in Public Defender Triage," *Yale Law Journal* 122 (2013): 13-24.
4. Irene V. Blair, "The malleability of automatic stereotypes and prejudice," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 6, no. 3 (2002): 242-261; Irene V. Blair, Jennifer E. Ma, and Alison P. Lenton, "Imagining stereotypes away: The moderation of implicit stereotypes through mental imagery," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 81, no. 5 (2001): 828; Nilanjana Dasgupta, "Implicit attitudes and beliefs adapt to situations: A decade of research on the malleability of implicit prejudice, stereotypes, and the self-concept," *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 47 (2013): 233-279.
5. J.F. Dovidio, "On the Nature of Contemporary Prejudice: The Third Wave," *Journal of Social Issues* 57, no. 4 (2001): 829-849.

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