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Understanding Implicit Bias

What Is Implicit Bias



Implicit bias is a mental process that stimulates negative attitudes about people who are not members of one's own "in group." Implicit racial bias leads to discrimination against people who are not members of one's own racial group. In his book, [The Political Brain: The Role of Emotion in Deciding the Fate of](#)

[the Nation](#), Professor Drew Westen tells us that "Irrespective of what we may feel and believe consciously, most White Americans—including many who hold consciously progressive values and attitudes—harbor negative associations toward people of color." Implicit bias affects the way that we think about "out groups" and it influences the way that we react to and interact with out group members. Implicit bias operates in what researchers call our "implicit mind," the part of the brain that we commonly call the "subconscious" or the "unconscious." This means that implicit bias can operate in an individual's mind without a conscious awareness of this process. Westen suggests that, typically, our subconscious attitudes are less egalitarian than our conscious attitudes.

Implicit racial bias is a very complex mental process

Many researchers believe that implicit racial bias is a response to direct and indirect negative information that an individual receives starting in childhood. For example, consider a White adult who has had little or no interaction with African Americans. Starting in childhood, this person may be bombarded with distorted negative images of African Americans on television and in the news and negative comments about people of color from family members and other people who are respected by the individual. This input can lead to unfounded negative attitudes about African Americans.

As an emerging research field, there is not perfect agreement on the question of the precise process by which stereotypes unintentionally shape people's beliefs about and behaviors towards others. Many researchers and scholars believe that implicit bias leads to unconscious negative attitudes that reside outside our normal



cognition and beyond our control. Others believe that we may be aware of these attitudes but are reluctant to openly acknowledge them because they conflict with social norms and egalitarian values that are important to us. A third group of researchers urge that most people are aware that they have some degree of prejudiced and stereotypical thinking, but are unaware of the powerful influence those negative associations have on their behavior. More work is needed to resolve these disagreements in order to formulate strategies best able to fight against implicit bias.

Why should we care about implicit bias?

We must care because this phenomenon has the power to influence policies and conditions in the real world, to distort the opportunity that all Americans must have to achieve success. For example, an elementary school teacher may say—and explicitly believe—that she has equal expectations for all of her students, while in fact, implicit racial bias lowers her expectations for students of color, stimulates subtle differences in the way she behaves toward these students and lowers the academic performance of these students.

In the criminal justice system, implicit racial bias can negatively influence decisions made by judges. For example, research on capital punishment shows that killers of White victims are more likely to be sentenced to death than are killers of Black victims and that Black defendants are more likely than White defendants to receive the death penalty (R. Richard Banks, et al., “Discrimination and Implicit Bias in a Racially Unequal Society,” 94 CAL. L. REV. 1169, 1175: 2006). Other research shows that defendants with more afro-centric facial features are given longer sentences than defendants with fewer afro-centric features. (William T. Pizzi, Irene V. Blair and Charles M. Judd. “Discrimination in Sentencing on the Basis of Afrocentric Features.” Michigan Journal of Race & Law, Vol. 10, 2005).

Implicit racial bias can lead to devastating, sometimes fatal, consequences.

Research suggests that negative racial associations can lead people to see danger or a weapon where none exists. “Shooter studies” have documented that race affects the decision making of subjects asked to make split-second decisions about whether to discharge a weapon in self-protection. This research has established that many people stereotypically associate African Americans with violence and weapons, causing them in simulations to “fire” guns more often when presented with images of unarmed black persons, and less often when facing images of armed white persons. The February 26, 2012 fatal shooting in Florida of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed African American teenager, highlights the importance of deepening our understanding of implicit bias effects.

Implicit racial bias can also influence many of the most important decisions we make in our personal, professional, and social lives: where we live, where we work, who our children’s friends are, who our friends are, which political candidates we vote for, what social programs we support, etc. For most Americans all of these issues are influenced by racial attitudes. Implicit bias distorts these attitudes and limits the opportunity that each of us has to live a fully engaged life.

At the Kirwan Institute our work on structural racialization has shown us that the systematic processes which create and perpetuate racial inequality most often operate without racist intent. We know that racialized outcomes do not require racist actors. However, we are becoming increasingly aware that the ways in which individuals think about, talk about and act on race do have significant implications for social justice and access to opportunity. Through our emerging research on implicit bias we know that attitudes about race do influence our position on critical issues involving race—issues like affordable housing, affirmative action, school integration, and even the size and role of government. As we strive to create a just and inclusive society where all people and communities have opportunity to succeed we are working to expand the understanding of implicit bias, to expose the many ways that this phenomenon creates and reinforces racialized barriers to opportunity in critical life domains and to conceive of and implement interventions that have the power to reduce the influence of implicit bias in the real world.



The Kirwan Institute
works to **create** a just
and inclusive society where all people
and communities have
opportunity
to succeed.



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