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Implicit Bias: The Subconscious Beliefs Shaping Your World

Most of us are aware of bias, or unfounded beliefs that favor or benefit one person or group of people over another. You've probably witnessed bias in media that prefers to showcase thin people over overweight individuals. Bias is ubiquitous. Everyone has positive and negative attitudes that shape their world. However, unlike explicit bias in which you are aware of your convictions, some views influence your behavior without your knowledge. Known as unconscious or implicit bias, they impact your perceptions, decisions, and actions. Because they are subconscious, implicit biases often conflict with your beliefs and views of the world. They can lead you in directions you don't expect or intend.

Despite an aversion to the word, the reality is everyone possesses implicit biases. They form because of your brain's natural tendency to sort and rank information - it's how you make sense of the world! 11 million bits of information inundate your brain every second. You cannot interpret such a large amount of data and can only consciously process 14 to 60 bits. That means you are unaware of the majority of information your brain receives. So what happens with all the information filtered at a subconscious level?

Mental Shortcuts



With so much information to synthesize, your brain must prioritize the pertinent parts to bring to your awareness. Your brain optimizes information processing by forming shortcuts and finding patterns. Here's an example of how it works. The brain categorizes a dog as an animal and further classifies it as "friendly" or "fierce," depending on previous experiences. The direct and indirect messages you receive dictate how information is ranked and organized. A direct message is your personal experience. For example, a dog may have bitten your sibling, or your parents may have taught you to be extra cautious around canines.

Indirect messages consist of the media you consume, like watching a news story about a rabid dog or seeing violent canines in movies, social media, and TV. You develop preferences based on these categorizations and may learn to favor cats over dogs. Classifying information based on direct and indirect messages speeds up brain processing, allowing you to react quickly when an unfamiliar dog approaches you on the street.

The Biology of Bias

Three parts of the brain work together to shape your beliefs and reactions:

- **The hippocampus** is responsible for storing memories, noting the associations you make, and reminding you of them later. For example, imagine you walk past a run-down house and see a vicious-looking dog snarling inside. Months later, you walk past another dilapidated house and assume, "there must be a snarling dog inside." You've made a connection between run-down houses and snarling dogs.
- **The amygdala** triggers the fear response. Imagine you're terrified of dogs, and as you're walking on the street, you see a dog approaching. You immediately panic and run across the road to avoid an encounter. The hippocampus reminded you of your previous negative experiences, and the amygdala triggered your fight-or-flight response and impulse reaction.
- **The prefrontal cortex** is responsible for planning and reasoning. You have crossed the street (after the amygdala triggered your fear response) to avoid the dog that your hippocampus reminded you to fear. That's when you calm down and notice the dog is on a leash, and its owner is walking alongside it. You realize there is nothing to fear. Your prefrontal cortex has analyzed the situation and applied rational thinking.

Unconscious Bias Causes Harm

Unfortunately, our implicit biases don't always result in relatively harmless behavior, like an avoidance of dogs. In the medical field, physicians are less likely to treat suicidal ideation in elderly patients despite the fact that those 85 and older have the **second-highest rate** of suicide of any age group. Further studies show women are **three times less likely** to be referred for total knee replacement than men even when clinically indicated.



Sources: [American College of Cardiology](#)

Identifying Implicit Bias

Everyone has implicit biases, and it's essential to understand that a failure to recognize them can lead to harmful behaviors and actions. When you're unaware of them, subconscious biases are more likely to guide your behavior in ways you don't intend. Think of all the experiences that shape your perceptions about the world. You've probably made categorizations or "mental shortcuts" about groups of people. Here are a few thought exercises you can use to identify these mental shortcuts:

Substitution: Ask yourself if you would respond differently to a colleague if they shared your ethnic background, gender, age, or other characteristics. Consider how you would feel- would you be more confident in their abilities, or perhaps trust their judgment more?

Individuation: See people as individuals first. Recognize stereotypes can't accurately define large populations. Categorizations like "all women" or "all people of color" are far too broad and can't accurately portray the unique individuals who comprise these groups.

Slow Down: You're more likely to rely on mental shortcuts if you are stressed or tired. Take a few extra minutes for thoughtfulness before making decisions or reacting.

Are you curious about the ways bias creeps into everyday life? [Visit the Smithsonian's online exhibition "The Bias Inside Us"](#)



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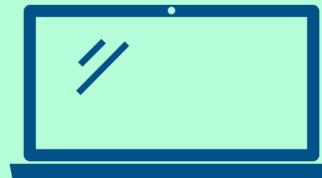


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