

What Is Implicit Bias? How to Recognize and Change Our Unconscious Stereotypes and Assumptions

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Reader's Digest**

Experts say we all have some bias, but there are ways to fight against it.

Implicit bias is a term that's being used with increasing frequency, and you may nod your head when you hear it but not fully understand it. So, what is implicit bias, exactly? Psychologists define it as the prejudice and stereotypes that we unconsciously hold against others, and it's something that can run contrary to our conscious beliefs. The result can infiltrate every level of society, leaving disparities and unfair policies and procedures in its wake—from institutional racism and structural racism that leads to shocking gaps in health care, housing, and education, and on a smaller scale, unpleasant microaggressions, like being told, “You’re really pretty...for a Black girl.”

Everyone has some degree of implicit bias. How it began within us is no fault of ours, either, says Beverly Daniel Tatum, PhD, an expert on the psychology of racism and the author of *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? And Other Conversations About Race*. “Starting from birth, we are exposed to information about other people—observing interactions, hearing adult comments, watching television, and reading books,” explains Tatum. “If we live in an environment in which we are bombarded with stereotypical images in the media, are frequently exposed to ethnic jokes, and are rarely informed of the accomplishments of marginalized groups, we are likely to develop negative categorizations of those groups that form the basis of prejudice or bias.”

But while these unconscious stereotypes may be unavoidable, they’re not impossible to counter. The first step is being able to identify examples of implicit bias in everyday life—and then being aware of your own biases. A little self-awareness can go a long way toward becoming anti-racist and learning to fight racism in small ways...and big ones, too.

What is the Implicit Association Test?

Our implicit bias can be measured by the Implicit Association Test (IAT), which was created in 1998 by psychologist Anthony Greenwald, PhD.

Aside from race, the IAT offers separate exams to examine biases on age, race, gender, and sexuality, and they claim to elucidate commonly held preferences toward youth, whiteness, skinny people, heterosexuals, and more. The questions come quick-fire-style, thus eliminating much of the consciousness used for survey questions, says Tatum. If you’re wondering just how honest people are about their answers, the test measures your response time. “By timing their reactions, the researchers can see the pattern of associations that participants are making,” explains Tatum.

How is implicit bias different from racism?

The two are linked but not the same. “Implicit bias contributes to the problem of racism, but racism is bigger than just implicit bias,” says Tatum. Implicit bias is the subliminal prejudice that can lead to racism. “Many people use the terms ‘prejudice’ and ‘racism’ interchangeably, but this is inaccurate,” explains Tatum. “Racial prejudice refers to an individual’s beliefs and attitudes. Racism is more than that. It is a system involving cultural messages and institutional policies and practices as well as the beliefs and

actions of individuals. In short, racism is a system of advantages based on race. That system can operate and be perpetuated even by individuals who don't hold negative attitudes about people of color."

Or, at least those people may think they don't hold negative attitudes towards POC. Implicit bias does not need a stream of consciousness to operate. "When someone acts on 'automatic White preference,' even if they don't consciously hold negative attitudes about people of color, they are reinforcing the system that already advantages White people over people of color," Tatum says.

How does implicit bias affect our everyday lives?

Implicit bias is hiding in plain sight within nearly every aspect of society. Implicit bias could be subtle, like when a BIPOC student raises his or her hand in a classroom, yet the teacher routinely selects a White classmate to answer. Or it could be more overt, like being passed over for promotions in favor of white colleagues, even when the credentials are identical. Clinical racial bias is an example where BIPOC are discriminated against in health care settings, leading to poorer health outcomes. "Whom we offer help to in an emergency, whom we decide to hire, whom we give a warning to instead of a ticket at a traffic stop, or whom we shoot at during a police encounter," explains Tatum, are all examples of this ugly bias.

What's the difference between implicit vs. explicit bias?

Both biases are discriminatory, according to Tatum, but there are differences. Implicit bias entails the thoughts we don't even know we have that may manifest into prejudiced actions. Explicit bias is far more recognizable. "Explicit bias is conscious and intentionally discriminatory," says Tatum. Examples of explicit bias include verbal or physical harassment or racist policies that exclude or unfairly disadvantage marginalized groups.

Are there ways to reduce implicit bias?

Adults harbor an untold amount of bias smog. But all is not lost if you want to be more open-minded or be a true ally. Being self-aware of your bias and having the determination to reverse course is a good start. For example, hiring managers can "blind" themselves by removing names from a resume, thus eliminating preconceived notions about an applicant's race. Or, you can create an accountability system for yourself, engaging colleagues to help you check for gender and racial disparities. "If you only evaluate a person on the things that matter for a decision, then you can't be swayed by demographic factors," reads a statement from the official website for the IAT.

Tatum says there is also some evidence suggesting repeated exposure to counter-stereotypic imagery, ideas, and various forms of media can be beneficial. And then, of course, you can invest in the next generation. It's important to do this early, since breaking biased thinking is hard. "That is one reason," says Tatum, "why we should try to limit our children's exposure to the 'smog' of racial and other stereotyping."

Sources:

- Beverly Daniel Tatum, PhD, an expert on the psychology of racism and the author of *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? And Other Conversations About Race*
- Anthony Greenwald, PhD, a psychologist and the creator of the Implicit Association Test

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