

# Implicit Bias: What It Means and How It Affects Behavior

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An implicit bias is any unconsciously-held set of associations about a social group. Implicit biases can result in the attribution of particular qualities to all individuals from that group, also known as stereotyping.

Implicit biases are the product of learned associations and social conditioning. They often begin at a young age, and most people are unaware that they hold them. Importantly, these biases do not necessarily align with personal identity. It's possible to unconsciously associate positive *or* negative traits with one's own race, gender, or background.

## The Implicit Association Test

Social psychologists Mahzarin Banaji and Tony Greenwald first coined the term *implicit bias* in the 1990s. In 1995, they published their theory of implicit social cognition, which asserted that individuals' social behavior and biases are largely related to unconscious, or implicit, judgments.

The term grew in popularity in 1998, when Banaji and Greenwald developed the well-known Implicit Association Test (IAT) to confirm their hypothesis. The IAT test assessed the strength of unconscious biases through a computer program. Subjects were asked to observe a screen that displayed a series of faces from different racial backgrounds and a series of positive and negative words. Researchers told the subjects to click on the positive words when they saw a face from racial background X, and the negative words when they saw a face from racial background Y. Then, they reversed the association and had subjects repeat the process.

The researchers argued that clicking more quickly meant that the subject had a greater unconscious association. In other words, quickly clicking "happy" when viewing a certain face meant that the individual had a close unconscious association between the positive trait and the race. A slower click time means that the individual had more difficulty associating that the positive trait with the race.

Over time, the IAT has been replicated successfully in multiple subsequent trials, demonstrating its efficacy in proving implicit bias. In addition to racial bias, the test has also been used successfully to assess implicit bias related to gender and sexual orientation.

## Effects of Implicit Bias

Holding an implicit bias towards a particular social group can determine how you treat an individual from that group. Implicit biases affect human behavior throughout society, including in classrooms, workplaces, and the legal system.

### Effects in the Classroom

Implicit bias affects how teachers treat students in the classroom. Research conducted by the Yale Child Study Center found that black children, particularly black boys, are more likely to be expelled and suspended from preschool for "challenging behavior" than white children. The research also

found that, when primed to look for such challenging behavior, teachers tended to look longer at black children, particularly boys. The results suggested that implicit racial bias affects educational access and achievement in the classroom.

Implicit bias results in an effect called stereotype threat, which occurs when an individual internalizes negative stereotypes about a group to which they belong. Researchers demonstrated this effect through a standardized test study. Black and white college students with similar SAT scores were given a 30-minute college-level standardized test. Half of the students were told that the test measured intelligence, while the other group was told that the test was a problem-solving activity that did not correspond to ability. In the first group, black students performed less well than their white peers; in the second group, black students' performance was equal to that of their white peers. The researchers concluded that the first group had been affected by stereotype threat when the researchers stated that the test measured intelligence. Similar results have also been found when comparing female and male performance on math exams.

### Effects in the Workplace

Although explicit forms of workplace discrimination are banned in most developed countries, implicit bias plays a significant role in the professional world. Studies have shown that identical resumes receive a different number of callbacks depending on the name at the top of the document. Across all industries, resumes with a name commonly associated with black individuals received fewer callbacks than those with names associated with white individuals. Comparable implicit bias has also been shown in relation to gender and age.

### Effects in the Legal System

Implicit bias has a significant impact on the legal system. Evidence suggests that black defendants are more likely to be treated harshly in the courtroom than white defendants. Prosecutors are more likely to charge black defendants and less likely to offer them plea bargains. Plea bargains offered to white defendants tend to be more generous than those offered to black or Latino defendants. Furthermore, juries are more likely to exhibit bias against defendants of a race different from the racial background of the majority of the jury. IAT tests have shown implicit associations between the words black and guilty.

### Implicit Bias vs. Racism

Implicit bias and racism are related concepts, but they do not have the same meaning. Implicit bias is an unconsciously held set of associations about a particular group. Racism is prejudice against individuals from a specific racial group and can be either explicit or implicit. Implicit bias can lead to implicitly racist behavior, like when a teacher disciplines black children more harshly than white children, but many individuals harbor implicit biases without ever displaying overt racism. By becoming aware of our own implicit biases and actively resisting them, we can avoid perpetuating harmful racist stereotypes and prejudices.

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