



Implicit Bias Series

PART 1: What Is It and Why Does It Matter?

Implicit biases are subconscious assumptions about people of different races/ethnicities, cultures, nationalities, religions, sexualities, gender identities, abilities, etc., that can influence how a person perceives of and/or interacts with someone else. Within a higher education context, these biases often appear in the form of harmful stereotyping, particularly when it comes to perceived academic ability, identity, or viewpoint (Ambrose et al., 2010). For example, some instructors may unconsciously believe that certain groups are not as capable as others, which may unconsciously influence classroom interactions.

Experts Define Implicit Bias

In their 2017 State of the Science Report, the Kirwan Institute defined implicit bias as: "the attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner. Activated involuntarily, without awareness or intentional control. Can be either positive or negative. Everyone is susceptible." (Kirwan Report, 2017, p.10). Though implicit in nature, these biases do not necessarily align with explicit beliefs nor to positions we may explicitly endorse (Kirwan Report, 2015; Beattie, et al., 2013). All of us can engage in this type of "unthinking discrimination" without even being aware (Wilkerson, 2013). Still, a sizeable amount of research shows, implicit bias has the potential to impact behavior (Keng et al., 2012), yet is malleable and can be "unlearned" (Dasgupta, 2013; Roos, et al., 2013).

Implicit Biases, Inequalities, and Cognitive and Social-Psychological Processes

In society at large, inequalities are created and reproduced via two mechanisms: (1) the allocation of people to social positions and (2) an institutionalization of practices that allocate resources disparately across these positions. Massey (2007) explains how social classification operates on both a psychological and social level. Cognitively, we construct myriad categories in order to classify individuals. Our brains are wired to constantly evaluate and categorize the stimuli we regularly observe. The conceptual categories into which they are sorted are known as schemas. While this in-group / out-group sorting is mostly automatic and unconscious, our implicit biases generally favor the groups to which we belong (Reskin, 2005). Common forms of bias include race, gender, age, size, and ability. Unconscious bias can also arise from differences in religion, sexual orientation, social class, and hierarchical status in an organization.

Recent neuroscience research on implicit perception of social categories finds evidence to suggest that social perception works more as an interactive process, whereby visualizing signals the recognition of a social category which then activates higher level cognitive processes to connect to our own attitudes, beliefs, or stereotypes. Research has further shown that priming subjects can actually bias their initial perceptions (Cassidy & Krendl, 2016). Terbeck et al. (2016) investigated the role of norepinephrine — a stress hormone — in social cognition, both cognitively and physiologically via its connection to such basic emotions as anger, fear, and happiness. The authors found that these emotions, a byproduct of the release of norepinephrine, influence social judgments and thus may directly influence such judgments as implicit social attitudes and in-group bias.

Psychological work then plays out in the social world via boundary construction. Once established, boundaries are constantly negotiated and/or reinforced through interactions between in-group and out-group members. It is at this social-relational level that variation in status (both within and between groups) manifests. Status matters because beliefs about social differences can stabilize inequality, evoke perceptions of differences, and become a sustaining force. Widely-shared cultural beliefs exist for all types of social groups (e.g., social class, race, gender, educational level, age). They may lead to generalizations of worth and competence about groups but can also be misapplied to individuals.

Sociologist, Cecilia Ridgeway, asserts that these cultural status beliefs drive inequalities, first, by shaping expectations for ourselves and others and, then, through the resulting actions in social contexts (2014). Beliefs about social differences can bias evaluations (including self-evaluations) about competence and



behavior without much conscious awareness. They also bias associational preferences (potentially leading to segregated social networks), whereby both in- and out-group members tend to prefer higher-status groups. Lastly, inequalities can evoke resistance behaviors (e.g., higher-status groups defend their position) against members of disadvantaged or less-privileged groups.

Classroom Implications of Implicit Bias

Psychological and social-relational processes intersect in the classroom. Our unconscious and implicit biases become tangible and visible when they manifest themselves in actions or behaviors. For example, at the beginning of courses, certain students may be given priority positions as team leads or undergraduate research assistants based on privileged statuses (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender, etc.). The unconscious (or implicit) belief, while incorrect, is that more-privileged groups are more qualified. In this example, an instructor's implicit biases manifest and reproduce inequity in that their behavior reinforces the positions and status of more privileged groups. Another common example of implicit bias, when an instructor consistently calls upon male students, or students of a particular race/ethnicity, to respond to questions. Though the instructor may be unaware of their actions, their behavior suggests implicit bias related to male students, or students of a particular race/ethnicity—they speak with greater authority and have more important things to say—which disregards and marginalizes the contributions of other students. Like these examples illustrate, when behaviors are delivered in different ways to different groups, they contribute to inequities. Instructors and students both can demonstrate such behaviors or exhibit differential treatment. (For more on this, see our [Microaggressions series](#).)

The cumulative effects of any and all inequities can translate into both lasting and damaging effects in and out of the classroom:

- The potential and talent of all students is marginalized and under-utilized.
- Recruitment into specialized programs, research assistantships, and mentoring opportunities is reduced.
- Retention in classes or fields-of-study is affected.
- Creativity and growth are stifled.
- Team work and collaboration are inhibited.

Since both implicit and explicit beliefs, biases, and behaviors have potential to create new and perpetuate existing inequalities, it matters for our students that, as institutional gatekeepers who control access to potential future opportunities, we seek to examine our own beliefs, biases and behaviors. With a goal of minimizing the effects of implicit bias, part 2 of this series discusses how instructors can begin to counter biases internally and interpersonally. Part 3 describes ways in which instructors might extend these countering strategies to the classroom.

Additional Resources

- For training videos from UC Davis Human Resources, visit [this site](#)
- For resources and videos on Inclusive environments from Carnegie Mellon University, visit [this site](#)
- For more on unconscious bias from Vanderbilt University, visit [this site](#)
- For video and the Implicit Bias Module series from Kirwan Institute, visit [this site](#)
- To read more about micro inequities, visit [this site](#)

Citation

Center for Educational Effectiveness [CEE]. (2019). Implicit Bias Series. *Just-in-Time Teaching Resources*. Retrieved from <http://cee.ucdavis.edu/JITT>

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