

Stuff to Think About

About Stereotypes and Prejudices

Hidden Bias Tests measure unconscious, or automatic, biases. Your willingness to examine your own possible biases is an important step in understanding the roots of stereotypes and prejudice in our society.

The ability to distinguish friend from foe helped early humans survive, and the ability to quickly and automatically categorize people is a fundamental quality of the human mind. Categories give order to life, and every day, we group other people into categories based on social and other characteristics.

This is the foundation of stereotypes, prejudice and, ultimately, discrimination.

Definition of terms

A ***stereotype*** is an exaggerated belief, image or distorted truth about a person or group — a generalization that allows for little or no individual differences or social variation. Stereotypes are based on images in mass media, or reputations passed on by parents, peers and other members of society. Stereotypes can be positive or negative.

A ***prejudice*** is an opinion, prejudgment or attitude about a group or its individual members. A prejudice can be positive, but in our usage refers to a negative attitude.

Prejudices are often accompanied by ignorance, fear or hatred. Prejudices are formed by a complex psychological process that begins with attachment to a close circle of acquaintances or an "in-group" such as a family. Prejudice is often aimed at "out-groups."

Discrimination is behavior that treats people unequally because of their group memberships. Discriminatory behavior, ranging from slights to hate crimes, often begins with negative stereotypes and prejudices.

How do we learn prejudice?

Social scientists believe children begin to acquire prejudices and stereotypes as toddlers. Many studies have shown that as early as age 3, children pick up terms of racial prejudice without really understanding their significance.

Soon, they begin to form attachments to their own group and develop negative attitudes about other racial or ethnic groups, or the "out-group". Early in life, most children acquire a full set of biases that can be observed in verbal slurs, ethnic jokes and acts of discrimination.

How are our biases reinforced?

Once learned, stereotypes and prejudices resist change, even when evidence fails to support them or points to the contrary.

People will embrace anecdotes that reinforce their biases, but disregard experience that contradicts them. The statement "Some of my best friends are _____" captures this tendency to allow some exceptions without changing our bias.

How do we perpetuate bias?

Bias is perpetuated by conformity with in-group attitudes and socialization by the culture at large. The fact that white culture is dominant in America may explain why people of color often do not show a strong bias favoring their own ethnic group.

Mass media routinely take advantage of stereotypes as shorthand to paint a mood, scene or character. The elderly, for example, are

routinely portrayed as being frail and forgetful, while younger people are often shown as vibrant and able.

Stereotypes can also be conveyed by omission in popular culture, as when TV shows present an all-white world.

Psychologists theorize bias conveyed by the media helps to explain why children can adopt hidden prejudices even when their family environments explicitly oppose them.

About Hidden Bias

Scientific research has demonstrated that biases thought to be absent or extinguished remain as "mental residue" in most of us. Studies show people can be consciously committed to egalitarianism, and deliberately work to behave without prejudice, yet still possess hidden negative prejudices or stereotypes.

"Implicit Association Tests" (IATs) can tap those hidden, or automatic, stereotypes and prejudices that circumvent conscious control. [Project Implicit](#) — a collaborative research effort between researchers at Harvard University, the University of Virginia, and University of Washington — offers dozens of such tests.

We believe the IAT procedure may be useful beyond the research purposes for which it was originally developed. It may be a tool that can jumpstart our thinking about hidden biases: Where do they come from? How do they influence our actions? What can we do about them?

Biases and behavior

A growing number of studies show a link between hidden biases and actual behavior. In other words, hidden biases can reveal themselves in action, especially when a person's efforts to control behavior consciously flags under stress, distraction, relaxation or competition.

Unconscious beliefs and attitudes have been found to be associated with language and certain behaviors such as eye contact, blinking rates and smiles.

Studies have found, for example, that school teachers clearly telegraph prejudices, so much so that some researchers believe children of color and white children in the same classroom effectively receive different educations.

A now classic experiment showed that white interviewers sat farther away from black applicants than from white applicants, made more speech errors and ended the interviews 25% sooner. Such discrimination has been shown to diminish the performance of anyone treated that way, whether black or white.

Experiments are being conducted to determine whether a strong hidden bias in someone results in more discriminatory behavior. But we can learn something from even the first studies:

- Those who showed greater levels of implicit prejudice toward, or stereotypes of, black or gay people were more unfriendly toward them.
- Subjects who had a stronger hidden race bias had more activity in a part of the brain known to be responsible for emotional learning when shown black faces than when shown white faces.

Leading to discrimination?

Whether laboratory studies adequately reflect real-life situations is not firmly established. But there is growing evidence, according to social scientists, that hidden biases are related to discriminatory behavior in a wide range of human interactions, from hiring and promotions to choices of housing and schools.

In the case of police, bias may affect split-second, life-or-death decisions. Shootings of black men incorrectly thought to be holding guns — an immigrant in New York, a cop in Rhode Island — brought this issue into the public debate.

It is possible unconscious prejudices and stereotypes may also affect court jury deliberations and other daily tasks requiring judgments of human character.

People who argue that prejudice is not a big problem today are, ironically, demonstrating the problem of unconscious prejudice. Because these prejudices are outside our awareness, they can indeed be denied.

The Effects of Prejudice and Stereotypes

Hidden bias has emerged as an important clue to the disparity between public opinion, as expressed by America's creed and social goals, and the amount of discrimination that still exists.

Despite 30 years of equal-rights legislation, levels of poverty, education and success vary widely across races. Discrimination continues in housing and real estate sales, and racial profiling is a common practice, even among ordinary citizens.

Members of minorities continue to report humiliating treatment by store clerks, co-workers and police. While an African American man may dine in a fine restaurant anywhere in

America, it can be embarrassing for him to attempt to flag down a taxi after that dinner.

A person who carries the stigma of group membership must be prepared for its debilitating effects.

Studies indicate that African American teenagers are aware they are stigmatized as being intellectually inferior and that they go to school bearing what psychologist Claude Steele has called a "burden of suspicion." Such a burden can affect their attitudes and achievement.

Similarly, studies found that when college women are reminded their group is considered bad at math, their performance may fulfill this prophecy.

These shadows hang over stigmatized people no matter their status or accomplishments. They must remain on guard and bear an additional burden that may affect their self-confidence, performance and aspirations. These stigmas have the potential to rob them of their individuality and debilitate their attempts to break out of stereotypical roles.

What You Can Do About Unconscious Stereotypes and Prejudices

Conscious attitudes and beliefs can change.

The negative stereotypes associated with many immigrant groups, for example, have largely disappeared over time. For African-Americans, civil rights laws forced integration and nondiscrimination, which, in turn, helped to change public opinion.

But psychologists have no ready roadmap for undoing such overt and especially hidden stereotypes and prejudices.

Learned at an early age

The first step may be to admit biases are learned early and are counter to our commitment to just treatment. Parents, teachers, faith leaders and other community leaders can help children question their values and beliefs and point out subtle stereotypes used by peers and in the media. Children should also be surrounded by cues that equality matters.

In his classic book, *The Nature of Prejudice*, the psychologist Gordon Allport observed children are more likely to grow up tolerant if they live in a home that is supportive and loving.

"They feel welcome, accepted, loved, no matter what they do."

In such an environment, different views are welcomed, punishment is not harsh or capricious, and these children generally think of people positively and carry a sense of goodwill and even affection.

Community matters

Integration, by itself, has not been shown to produce dramatic changes in attitudes and behavior. But many studies show when people work together in a structured environment to solve shared problems through community service, their attitudes about diversity can change dramatically.

By including members of other groups in a task, children begin to think of themselves as part of a larger community in which everyone has skills and can contribute. Such experiences have been shown to improve attitudes across racial lines and between people old and young.

There also is preliminary evidence that unconscious attitudes, contrary to initial expectations, may be malleable. For example, imagining strong women leaders or seeing positive role models

of African Americans has been shown to, at least temporarily, change unconscious biases.

'Feeling' unconscious bias

But there is another aspect of the very experience of taking a test of hidden bias that may be helpful. Many test takers can "feel" their hidden prejudices as they perform the tests.

They can feel themselves unable to respond as rapidly to (for example) old + good concepts than young + good concepts. The very act of taking the tests can force hidden biases into the conscious part of the mind.

We would like to believe that when a person has a conscious commitment to change, the very act of discovering one's hidden biases can propel one to act to correct for it. It may not be possible to avoid the automatic stereotype or prejudice, but it is certainly possible to consciously rectify it.

Committing to change

If people are aware of their hidden biases, they can monitor and attempt to ameliorate hidden attitudes before they are expressed through behavior. This compensation can include attention to language, body language and to the stigmatization felt by target groups.

Common sense and research evidence also suggest that a change in behavior can modify beliefs and attitudes. It would seem logical that a conscious decision to be egalitarian might lead one to widen one's circle of friends and knowledge of other groups. Such efforts may, over time, reduce the strength of unconscious biases.

It can be easy to reject the results of the tests as "not me" when you first encounter them. But that's the easy path. To ask where

these biases come from, what they mean, and what we can do about them is the harder task.

Recognizing that the problem is in many others — as well as in ourselves — should motivate us all to try both to understand and to act.