



3-4-7 Information Sheet on Implicit Bias

This info sheet is a great source of education for parents and staff members.

Implicit biases are automatic associations that our brains make between two concepts without our being conscious (or aware) of it. Being able to make these quick, automatic associations or mental shortcuts helps us organize and manage the *billions* of pieces of information our brains need to process in a single day.

One way our brains manage so much information is by creating **schemas**, which are like patterns or models, to represent things. This helps us organize specific **examples** into broader **categories**. “When we see, for example, something with a flat seat, a back, and some legs, we recognize it as a ‘chair’ . . . We know what to do with an object that fits into the category ‘chair.’ Without spending a lot of mental energy, we simply sit . . .”¹

We create schemas (or these mental models) in our unconscious minds about human beings, too. When we sort people into categories -- such as by age, gender, or race — which we can do in a fraction of a second -- we unconsciously form expectations about them based on the *category* we put them in rather than the *individual*.² This type of mental sorting is also the definition of stereotyping: assigning certain traits to a person based on that person’s membership in a group. So this same mental process, which helps us navigate through our day without becoming overwhelmed with information, can also cause us to unconsciously associate certain *identities*, like African-American, with undesirable *traits*, like violence.

When we recognize that our culture contains many negative **stereotypes** about people, we see how problematic this automatic thinking can be.

So, while many of these associations are neutral, such as the example of our tendency to associate peanut butter with jelly, other biases (or automatic associations) we make are harmful and have very serious consequences in the real world.

So where do these negative and harmful association come from?

Well, we all grow up in a **culture**. We are exposed to stories, books, movies, and news images. We are shaped by our experiences with family, friends, strangers, our schools, and later, our workplaces. When the culture around us contains negative stereotypes and attitudes about people, we wind up taking these in from a very early age, even if these notions are very different from our conscious or stated values and beliefs. Beverly Daniel Tatum, a former president of Spelman College, compares these negative cultural messages and biases to a **smog** in the air that we all breathe in. She says that, “To live and grow up in our culture, then, is ‘to take in’ these cultural messages and biases and do so largely unconsciously.”³ Unfortunately, we can also absorb negative stereotypes about *ourselves*, and hold implicit biases against our own group, whether it’s our own gender, race, ethnicity, etc.

So, to recognize that someone holds implicit biases is different from calling them a racist. Rather, acknowledging that these negative stereotypes influence our thinking and behavior is to understand the culture that we live in and how our brains work sometimes. Fortunately, this type of automatic thinking alone does not drive all of our behavior. Our brains have evolved in a way that allows us to curb (or stop) our impulses and gut reactions. Even though stereotypes are everywhere in our culture, we do not all act on them. In the end, we have the ability and the responsibility to control our own behavior and treat one another as individuals and with respect.

Other factors that create bias: the role of preferences

In general, we tend to *prefer* people who sound like us, dress like us, have similar hobbies, are from our home town, etc. For instance, if you see someone wearing a Captain America shirt at school and you also like Captain America, you may be inclined to strike up a conversation with that individual or even become that person's friend.

We also *tend* to like people who are of the same gender, age, nationality, ethnicity, race or religion as we are. There is a saying "birds of a feather flock together" that illustrates this point. Some researchers say that pre-modern humans have historically had the tendency to like "sameness" because it has led to feeling more secure and safe. (You would likely not be attacked from someone in your own town, your own tribe, etc.).

In-groups vs. Out-groups: We *generally* tend to hold implicit biases that favor our own "in-group," (like our own gender, race, age and ethnicity), though research has shown that we can still hold implicit biases against our in-group, especially if the media presents those stereotypes to us.

In short, implicit bias matters because it can cause us to treat people unfairly and results in inequities (unequal treatment and opportunity) despite people's best intentions. Implicit bias also hurts people when they absorb or internalize negative associations *about themselves*.

What can we do to try to combat implicit bias?

Research has shown that implicit bias can be reduced in a variety of ways. The implicit associations that we have formed can be gradually unlearned. We can expose ourselves to diverse positive role models and examples of people who contradict (or don't fit) the bias or stereotype. We can do this through the relationships we form with others and through the media we consume. By being aware that we hold these implicit biases, we can work to prevent them from influencing our attitudes and actions toward others.

Notes:

1-2. *The Blink of an Eye*, Facing History and Ourselves, <https://www.facinghistory.org/holocaust-and-human-behavior/chapter-1/blink-eye>.

3. E. Badger, "We're All a Little Biased, Even if We Don't Know It," The New York Times, October 5, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/07/upshot/were-all-a-little-biased-even-if-we-dont-know-it.html>