American Philosophical Association

Good Practices Guide
Draft for Public Comment, Spring 2017

Developed by the APA Task Force on a Best Practices Guide
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Section 5
Countering Implicit Bias

Implicit attitudes and structural relations: Coming to terms with contemporary forms of discrimination

As philosophers, we are professionally involved in unearthing assumptions and values underlying ordinary thought and practice, and subjecting them to critical examination. We also live in a society that has been, and continues to be, divided in many ways along “racial,” ethnic, religious, gender, and socio-economic lines—with profound effects upon the outcomes individuals experience in life. The phenomenon of “implicit bias” has its roots in this fact about our social lives, yet it lies below the surface of ordinary self-awareness. It thus affords us an opportunity for just the sort of critical unearthing of assumptions and values that has been central to philosophy since its inception—but only if we seize the opportunity constructively, and doing so will mean making ourselves the first targets of this critical inquiry. Because implicit bias can figure in virtually any aspect of academic life, it seems appropriate to include here some general discussion of the phenomenon as currently understood. In other sections, specific recommendations will be made that have shown some signs of helping to reduce the effects of implicit bias.

“Implicit bias” is an instance of a more general phenomenon, implicit social cognition, which involves the attribution of traits and formation of explanations (Uleman et al. 2008). Implicit social cognition is essential to our capacity to function effectively in the social world since the amount of information needed for social interactions far exceeds the capacity of explicit, controlled cognition. Moreover, explicit, controlled cognition cannot get underway unless provided with categories and expectations as starting points. Our conscious mental lives thus depend pervasively on processes and attitudes that shape how we see the world and act upon it, but which have not been the product of prior deliberation and choice, and typically are not open to direct introspection. We are not, then, typically in a good position to say what our implicit social attitudes are, yet they will nonetheless influence what we attend to, perceive, think, remember, feel, want, and do. In particular, implicit trait attributions or essentialist explanations will influence our thought, feeling, and behavior even in ways we would not consciously endorse. Implicit social cognition therefore poses a special problem in our efforts to live up to ideals of impartiality, fairness, open-mindedness, evidence-sensitivity, and rigor in judgment.

The term “implicit bias” is typically used for dimensions of implicit social cognition that involve racial, ethnic, gender, or status stereotyping—attributions to groups of generic traits that mask individual variation. Most theorists of social cognition hold that implicit bias is largely acquired—it emerges developmentally, typically becoming noticeable by age 6 and highly developed by age 14 (Baron and Benaji 2006). Implicit bias thus is distinct from a putative in-born prejudice in favor of one’s own group. Rather, it tends to reflect specific social contexts and hierarchies, and to be associated with more or less specific characteristics or abilities. Thus members of dominant and disfavored groups may share many of the same implicit stereotypes, and these stereotypes may mix positive and negative traits for each group (see Fiske et al. 2002; Dasgupta 2012; Dunham et al. 2014). For example, in the US, individuals of all ages tend to show a stronger implicit association between positive words and youth, and young women who, in fact, outperform their male peers in mathematics may nonetheless tend to have a negative implicit association
between femaleness and mathematical ability and a positive implicit association between maleness and such ability (Nosek et al. 2003).

Implicit bias appears to depend upon quite general tacit learning processes by which individuals adapt their assumptions, expectations, and behavior to prevalent social circumstances, norms, and evaluative attitudes, often in fairly subtle ways. Children who observe greater anxiety or lack of ease when adults from diverse racial groups interact, even when the surface interactions are positive, will tend to extract from such experiences the idea that it is risky to engage with the other racial group (Castelli et al. 2008). At the same time, the lack of alignment between implicit and express attitudes can work the other way. Individuals who are self-consciously racist can exhibit a lower level of implicit bias if they've had extensive experience of working together with individual members of other racial groups, while individuals from privileged backgrounds who reject racist principles, but who have had little personal experience with members stigmatized groups, may have more strongly biased implicit attitudes.

Implicit attitudes thus are complex in character and subject to change with changing social context. This is a critical point for us as educators, scholars, and participants in academic deliberation and decision-making. For it suggests that we can make progress in dealing with implicit biases in ourselves and others if we can make the academic setting one in which members of diverse groups come together to work on shared projects. Because implicit social cognition is grounded in learning mechanisms, implicit bias can be unlearned as well as learned, but this requires actual engagement—by ourselves and our students—across the many divides in our society (Waldo and Kemp 1997). Adoption of abstract principles and policies is not enough, and mere exposure to members of other groups, without genuine interaction, can actually enhance implicit bias by encouraging the triggering of stereotypes (for discussion, see Rae et al. 2015). Thus, the structure and dynamics of social relations within our classrooms, departments, programs, and institutions are as important as the existence of diversity within the institution.

Social fault lines tend to be self-reinforcing, since they discourage such genuine engagement with, and learning about, others as individuals. This can be as true inside universities as in the wider society. Thus, faculty and administrators need to take affirmative steps if the greater diversity in our faculty or student body is to translate into real learning on all sides that provides the evidence implicit attitudes need if they are to change. We in the academy are in the privileged position of having very great freedom to develop new ways for individuals to work together in pursuit of shared intellectual goals—and these are the sorts of activities and experiences that are known to have some effect in reducing implicit bias.

Raising awareness of implicit bias is an important step in itself. For example, bringing such awareness to the discussion of evaluative information can help increase accuracy in judgment. Thus, to make accurate use of student evaluations of teaching performance in internal reviews or assessing job candidates, faculty and administrators should have some awareness of the typical patterns of variation in student comments for male versus female instructors, or for instructors perceived as heterosexual versus gay, which can involve a mixture of attitudes rather than unidimensional discrimination (Ewing et al. 2003).

A key to increased awareness is self-assessment. Since implicit bias cannot ordinarily be detected by introspection alone, self-scrutiny should include some attempt to find more objective measures. One such measure is afforded by various self-administered tests for implicit bias. The most extensively studied self-testing exercises can be found at Project Implicit.
It is reasonable to encourage all teaching and administrative staff to take such tests, and to ask students to take these Implicit Association Tests (IATs) as part of relevant course work. The tests rely upon the idea that implicit associations affect response-times—slowing counter-stereotypical responses while speeding stereotype-consonant responses. The results of such tests have been found to have predictive value for biased behavior in a range of contexts—a value that is independent of, and sometimes greater than, measures of explicit bias. Since the tests are online and confidential, they provide an opportunity for ourselves and our students to examine our implicit attitudes in a non-threatening, private setting. This experience can then help create a climate for more productive discussions in departments and classrooms of how to contend with implicit bias. At the same time, we should be aware that any testing instrument has limitations—for example, existing tests cover only a certain range of discrimination and rely on a restricted set of indicators. The tests are evidently being taken by individuals who know what is being tested for, and this limits their objectivity. And test results always need interpretation. The point of these tests is not to enhance guilt, or, for that matter, to provide a “proof” that one’s own implicit mind is clear of bias should one not score highly on any given test. Rather, they serve as an important counterweight to mere introspection by giving some evidence of the existence of implicit attitudes that will tend to affect one’s thought and behavior in ways one would not endorse.

For this reason, encouraging such interventions is quite consistent with commitment to impartial pedagogy and inquiry. They do, however, require initiative on the part of teachers, colleagues, and administrators. The problem of bias does not seem to be going away—there is some evidence that, even as the US is becoming a more diverse society, the implicit and explicit attitudes of majority-group students are becoming less tolerant in several dimensions (Craig and Richeson 2014). For a discussion of some other effective—and ineffective—interventions, as well as a review of recent literature, see the Kirwan Institute’s Implicit Bias Review, especially pp. 65–66.

Interventions faculty can take to reduce the role of implicit attitudes in shaping decision-making include the following:

- Taking the implicit attitude test (IAT) and encouraging other faculty to do so as well
- Inviting research faculty with expertise in implicit bias to make a presentation at a department meeting and encouraging “literacy” about implicit bias (see, for example, the WISELI Breaking the Bias Workshop)
- Requiring those on hiring, promotion, and admission committees to attend university workshops on reducing explicit and implicit bias (see Jackson, Hilliard, and Schneider 2014)
- Taking active steps to diversify the pool of candidates at every level (van Ommeren et al. 2005)
- Developing and using explicit criteria of selection or evaluation for deliberations about hiring, promotion, graduate admissions, fellowships, recognitions, etc.—seek to use a uniform procedure when discussing candidates so that each receives similar scrutiny and similar information is brought to bear in each case (Bauer and Baltes 2002; Uhlmann and Cohen 2005)
- In such deliberations, having available and reviewing full applications, rather than relying heavily upon letters of recommendation (Schmader et al. 2007)
- Asking for explicit justifications for rejecting candidates (Foschi 1996)
• Instituting a review process for letters of recommendation for placement, and encouraging greater awareness in faculty of some of ways letters of recommendation can reflect, or encourage, implicit bias (Morgan et al. 2013)

To be sure, the Implicit Association Test and the implicit attitude research program in general are based upon empirical findings, and these always carry with them an element of uncertainty. (For some recent discussions of the test, its implications, constructs, and validity, see Nosek et al. 2005; Karpinski and Ross 2006; Amodio and Devine 2006; Greenwald et al. 2002, 2009, 2015; Oswald et al. 2015.)

Just as the tests and associated hypotheses afford a teaching opportunity, so do questions of the validity of the tests and hypotheses. Such questions can be integrated into classroom or collegial discussions, providing an important methodological perspective and helping students and colleagues to see that the question of implicit bias is not over culpability—it is a set of empirical claims that give us a chance for critical self-examination, and the possibility of finding ways to better live up to our ideals, individually and collectively.

For more discussion of relevant research, and of methods which can be effective in countering implicit bias, see also these university-maintained websites: the Harvard University website of resources for Faculty Development and Diversity and the University of Michigan ADVANCE project.

References


