BEHAVIOR & SOCIETY

How to Think about "Implicit Bias"

Amidst a controversy, it's important to remember that implicit bias is real—and it matters

By Keith Payne, Laura Niemi, John M. Doris on March 27, 2018

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When is the last time a stereotype popped into your mind? If you are like most people, the authors included, it happens all the time. That doesn't make you a racist, sexist, or whatever-ist. It just means your brain is working properly, noticing patterns, and making generalizations. But the same thought processes that make people smart can also make them biased. This tendency for stereotype-confirming thoughts to pass spontaneously through our minds is what psychologists call implicit bias. It sets people up to overgeneralize, sometimes leading to discrimination even when people feel they are being fair.

Studies of implicit bias have recently drawn ire from both right and left. For the right, talk of implicit bias is just another instance of progressives seeing injustice under every bush.

For the left, implicit bias diverts attention from more damaging instances of explicit bigotry. Debates have become heated, and leapt from scientific journals to the popular press. Along the way, some important points have been lost. We highlight two misunderstandings that anyone who wants to understand implicit bias should know about.

First, much of the controversy centers on the most famous implicit bias test, the Implicit Association Test (IAT). A majority of people taking this test show evidence of implicit bias, suggesting that most people are implicitly biased even if they do not think of themselves as prejudiced. Like any measure, the test does have limitations. The stability of the test is low, meaning that if you take the same test a few weeks apart, you might score very differently. And the correlation between a person's IAT scores and discriminatory behavior is often small.

The IAT is a measure, and it doesn't follow from a particular *measure* being flawed that the *phenomenon* we're attempting to measure is not real. Drawing that conclusion is to commit the *Divining Rod Fallacy*: just because a rod doesn't find water doesn't mean there's no such thing as water. A smarter move is to ask, "What does the other evidence show?"

In fact, there is lots of other evidence. There are perceptual illusions, for example, in which white subjects perceive black faces as angrier than white faces with the same expression. Race can bias people to see harmless objects as weapons when they are in the hands of black men, and to dislike abstract images that are paired with black faces. And there are dozens of variants of laboratory tasks finding that most participants are faster to identify bad words paired with black faces than white faces. None of these measures is without limitations, but they show the same pattern of reliable bias as the IAT. There is a mountain of evidence—independent of any single test—that implicit bias is real.

The second misunderstanding is about what scientists mean when they say a measure predicts behavior. It is frequently complained that an individual's IAT score doesn't tell you whether they will discriminate on a particular occasion. This is to commit the *Palm Reading Fallacy:* unlike palm readers, research psychologists aren't usually in the business of telling you, as an individual, what your life holds in store. Most measures in psychology, from aptitude tests to personality scales, are useful for predicting how *groups* will respond *on average*, not forecasting how particular *individuals* will behave.

The difference is crucial. Knowing that an employee scored high on conscientiousness won't tell you much about whether her work will be careful or sloppy if you inspect it right now. But if a large company hires hundreds of employees who are all conscientious, this will likely pay off with a small but consistent increase in careful work on average.

Implicit bias researchers have always warned against using the tests for predicting individual outcomes, like how a particular manager will behave in job interviews—they've never been in the palm-reading business. What the IAT does, and does well, is predict average outcomes across larger entities like counties, cities, or states. For example, metro areas with greater average implicit bias have larger racial disparities in police shootings. And counties with greater average implicit bias have larger racial disparities in infant health problems. These correlations are important: the lives of black citizens and newborn

black babies depend on them.

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Field experiments demonstrate that real-world discrimination continues, and is widespread. White applicants get about 50 percent more call-backs than black applicants with the same resumes; college professors are 26 percent more likely to respond to a student's email when it is signed by Brad rather than Lamar; and physicians recommend less pain medication for black patients than white patients with the same injury.

Today, managers are unlikely to announce that white job applicants should be chosen over black applicants, and physicians don't declare that black people feel less pain than whites. Yet, the widespread pattern of discrimination and disparities seen in field studies persists. It bears a much closer resemblance to the widespread stereotypical thoughts seen on implicit tests than to the survey studies in which most people present themselves as unbiased.

One reason people on both the right and the left are skeptical of implicit bias might be pretty simple: it isn't nice to think we aren't very nice. It would be comforting to conclude, when we don't consciously entertain impure intentions, that all of our intentions are pure. Unfortunately, we can't conclude that: many of us are more biased than we realize. And that is an important cause of injustice—whether you know it or not.

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Case Study 1 – Generating the Pipeline: Addressing Bias in Recruitment and Hiring

After four years of not hiring in a large department with little diversity (including an all-white, all-male cadre of Professors), a new position has been approved. The Department Chair, who has a reputation for ensuring that departmental issues remain in the department, has proposed a search committee composed of three Professors (all white males), an Associate Professor (a white female), and an Assistant Professor (a Hispanic male). The Chair assures you that the committee will conduct the search amicably and without the need for your office to be involved. In light of recent discussions in the department, the proposed committee, via the Chair, is requesting permission to adjust the original proposal to allow for a broader search to ensure that the department hires the best available candidate with the faculty line.

As soon as the Department Chair's recommendation for constituting the search committee arrives, Professor Weightoftheworld, who has been nominated to head the search committee, contacts your office concerned about the new process, its workload, and the ability of the committee to complete the process in a timely manner. Weightoftheworld is concerned about avoiding conflict and ensuring a smooth search process given the need for detailed rubrics and the overall documentation requirements. He worries that all of this will create legal liability for committee members and the university that did not exist when committee members simply ranked candidates based on their holistic reviews of the files and interviews. He also stresses the need to get the position posted immediately, the urgency of filling he position, and the unrelenting workload the search process will create for him and his committee.

Even before the Chair proposed the search committee membership, you had already heard from members of the department about this position. This included multiple emails and conversations with Professor Adamant, who insists that recent changes to the search processes reflecting "alleged best practices" are attempts to limit academic freedom and strip the faculty of their voice. Adamant insists that the university should focus on hiring the best people. Professor Imright has expressed open disdain for the proposed position arguing that the department has an ethical obligation to stand up to the Dean's Office and do what is best for its students. At a recent department meeting, Imright argued that this department and others have done so in the past, and the Dean's Office will ultimately approve the recommendation the department sends forward, going so far as to offer to take the final recommendation to the Provost personally. Last night at a reception for all newly tenured and promoted faculty in your college, Associate Professor New, who just received tenure and promotion to Associate Professor, told one of your Associate Deans that she is thankful that she did not have to serve on the search committee given the politics of the department, but declined to say more.

1. Where are there opportunities for bias to enter this search?

2. What questions do you need to ask about this situation? Of whom?

3. Is there anyone you can talk to about this situation for advice and counsel?

4. What strategies can be applied? What reasons and benefits/evidence can be shared to get everyone on the same page and address the potential issues identified in #1? What if these don't work?

Case Study 2 – Generating the Pipeline: Addressing Bias in Recruitment and Hiring

Dr. Ima Middleman, Chair of the Theater Department at This University, has come to you, Dr. Eva Underseige, Dean of the School of Arts and Sciences, for advice.

A departmental search committee chaired by Performance Studies Lecturer June Eeyore-Faculty, has recommended offering a Lecturer position to Sue Perior-Candidate, a Latina writer and actor from Southern Rural College. The position comes with a three year contract.

You approved of this choice, having met all of the candidates. You remember concluding that Perior-Candidate was the best candidate by far. There was an internal candidate among the three finalists, Professor Miles Handycam. Miles is concluding his final year of eligibility for a year-to-year contract and has become a popular teacher and colleague in the Theater Department.

When Dr. Middleman first conveyed to you the search committee's decision, you found yourself wondering how the search committee's selection would be received in the department, where there has been a tradition of "line conversions" that convert a temporary Lecturer line to a permanent one, but which have also frequently resulted in the hire of the incumbent even when there is a national search. The committee's selection of Perior-Candidate counters the idea that the fix is in for internal candidates, a frequent source of conflict between you as Dean and some long-time faculty members who object to their colleagues "having to compete for their own jobs." The fact that the committee's choice is person of color also pleases you, as you have made equity and inclusion in hiring one a top priority in the School.

Dr. Middleman has informed you that the Theater department is in turmoil. He reports that not only is there disappointment that has Miles Handycam been passed over, but that Chair Middleman has discovered that the search committee's report has been leaked to Miles. The report assesses the strengths and weaknesses of all three finalists in detail and includes an observation that Miles did not directly engage issues of diversity in his teaching demonstration and that he would benefit from some mentoring on inclusive pedagogy. Professor Handycam is hurt and angry about that statement and some of the departmental faculty are outraged.

Chair Middleman further reports that at the department meeting where the candidates were discussed, much anger was expressed at the search committee, and especially at June Eeyore-Faculty. At least one senior faculty member argued that the search committee's rubric (included with the report) gave too much weight to diversity and another noted that Miles offers improv workshops for veterans from a nearby military base and opined that this should count toward diversity. The faculty of color (mostly junior faculty) in the department were unhappy with that assertion. Their belief that the department offers a poor climate for faculty of color has (once more, in their view) been validated. Eventually the meeting came to a close and Dr. Middleman says that she could hear faculty lobbying one another as she left the meeting room.

When the vote is tallied, you learn that the external candidate has the majority, but that so many of the faculty abstained that the count is a few votes shy of the 50% +1 that the university demands for all of

its hires. There will presumably have to be a revote. The School has an internal process for such an outcome. You meet with Dr. Middleman and the search committee to let them know. They leave with grim expressions.

After the committee leaves, you check your email and gasp. You find that the entire search committee report has been forwarded to Sue Perior-Candidate from an email account named "This U Sucks." The report is prefaced with a few choice statements about the university's commitment to diversity and it accuses the School of Arts and Sciences of holding sham searches. Included on the distribution list for this document are the campus chancellor and vice-chancellor for academic affairs as well as the university system's president and provost. You wonder what the external candidate must be thinking, as well as what response the campus and system executive team might have. The School has a reputation for incivility and this will be more evidence for that assessment.

Questions:

What do you do about the email?

What advice would you give Chair Middleman on dealing with the conflicts in her department?

How would you evaluate the search-and-hire process described in this scenario?

What are your guiding principles for taking action?