

# HIDDEN/UNCONSCIOUS BIAS: A PRIMER

## *Excerpts*

*The following excerpts are taken from Hidden Bias: A Primer, an article published by Tolerance.org, a project of the Southern Poverty Law Center. The entire article can be found at [http://www.tolerance.org/hidden\\_bias/index.html](http://www.tolerance.org/hidden_bias/index.html). The excerpts are printed with permission from Tolerance.org.  
Adapted by R. Rhys, Diversity Resource Office.*

---

---

### I. What is Hidden or Unconscious Bias?

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.

Recent 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. So even though we believe we see and treat people as equals, hidden biases may still influence our perceptions and actions.

Psychologists at Harvard, the University of Virginia, and the University of Washington created "Project Implicit" to develop Hidden Bias Tests — called Implicit Association Tests, or IATs, in the academic world — to measure unconscious bias. IATs can tap those hidden, or automatic, stereotypes and prejudices that circumvent conscious control.

Your willingness to examine your own possible biases is an important step in understanding the roots of stereotypes and prejudice in our society.

You may complete the IAT at Project Implicit's website <http://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/>.

After taking one or more of the tests, you can learn more about stereotypes, prejudice and the societal effects of bias at Tolerance.org's tutorial [http://www.tolerance.org/hidden\\_bias/tutorials/index.html](http://www.tolerance.org/hidden_bias/tutorials/index.html).

### II. Does Unconscious Bias Influence Our 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. Similar results have been noted with regards to students with disabilities and LGBTQ students (Crumpacker & Vander Haegen, 1987; Shapiro, 1999)<sup>1</sup>.

- 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.
- 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.
- 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.

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.

### III. Creating Change: Conscious attitudes and beliefs can 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.

- Shared Problem Solving - 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.
- Imagining strong women leaders or seeing positive role models of African Americans has been shown to, at least temporarily, change unconscious biases.

"...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..."

To learn more visit Southern Poverty Law Center's Tolerance.Org <http://www.tolerance.org/teach/>

Notes

<sup>1</sup> LGBTQ and persons with disabilities research added by editor.

References

Crumpacker, L., Vander Haegen, E. (1987) Pedagogy and Prejudice: Strategies for Confronting Homophobia in the Classroom. *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 15(3-4): 65-73.

Shapiro, A. (1999). *Everybody Belongs: Changing Negative Attitudes Toward Classmates with Disabilities*. Critical Education Practice, Volume 14. New York, NY: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group.