MYTHBUSTERS
IMPLICIT BIAS EDITION

CLEARING UP THE CONFUSION SURROUNDING IMPLICIT BIAS

What is Implicit Bias?

MYTH: Implicit bias is nothing more than beliefs people choose not to tell others. They know how they feel; they just know they cannot or should not say those beliefs aloud, so they hide them.

BUSTED Implicit bias differs from suppressed thoughts that individuals may conceal for social desirability purposes. **Implicit biases are activated involuntarily and beyond our awareness or intentional control**. Implicit bias is concerned with unconscious cognition that influences understanding, actions, and decisions, whereas individuals who may choose not to share their beliefs due to social desirability inclinations are consciously making this determination.

MYTH: Implicit bias is nothing more than stereotyping.

BUSTED Implicit biases and stereotyping are closely related concepts that can be easily confused. Both implicit biases and stereotypes are types of associations that can be positive and negative. While it is true that implicit associations may form as a result of exposure to persistent stereotypes, **implicit bias goes beyond stereotyping to include favorable or unfavorable evaluations toward groups of people**. Additionally, implicit biases are activated involuntarily, whereas stereotyping may be a deliberate process of which you are consciously aware.

MYTH: Having implicit biases makes me a bad person.

BUSTED Bias is a natural phenomenon in that our brains are constantly forming automatic associations as a way to better and more efficiently understand the world around us. **No one is a "bad" person for harboring implicit biases; these are normal human processes that occur on an unconscious level**. Some implicit biases are even positive in nature. In terms of the existence of unwanted, negative implicit biases, fortunately our brains are malleable, thus giving us the capacity to mitigate their effect though research-based debiasing strategies.

How Does It Operate?

MYTH: I am not biased; I have diverse friends and I believe in equal treatment.

Actually, we all have implicit biases. Research shows that all individuals are susceptible to harnessing implicit associations about others based on characteristics like race, skin tone, income, sex, and even attributes like weight, and accents. Unfortunately, these associations can even go as far as to affect our behavior towards others, even if we want to treat all people equally or genuinely believe we are egalitarian.

MYTH: I am fully aware of my thoughts and actions, and I make all of my decisions based on facts and evidence; therefore, implicit bias does not affect my behavior.

By their very nature, implicit biases operate outside of our conscious awareness. Thus, it is possible that your thoughts and actions are being influenced by implicit associations beyond your recognition. **In fact, researchers have found that sometimes implicit associations can more accurately predict behavior than explicit beliefs and thoughts**.

MYTH: I'm Black; I can't have bias against Black people. I'm also a woman, so it does not make sense that I would have implicit biases against my own sex.

Researchers have discovered that many Americans, regardless of race, display a pro-White/anti-Black bias on the Implicit Association Test. Similarly, some research has documented the prevalence of pro-male/anti-female implicit biases in both men and women. **This occurs because implicit biases are robust and pervasive affecting all individuals**, even children. We are all exposed to direct and indirect messages throughout the course of our lifetime that can implicitly influence our thoughts and evaluations of others.

What Can We Do About It?

MYTH: If bias is natural, there is obviously nothing we can do about it.

Just because bias is a natural tendency does not mean that we are helpless to combat it. Indeed, **unwanted implicit biases can be mitigated**. Researchers have demonstrated the efficacy of various intervention strategies, such as intergroup contact, perspective-taking, and exposure to counter-stereotypical exemplars. By taking the time to understand your personal biases, you can begin to mitigate their effects.

MYTH: It's a waste of time to try to mitigate my implicit biases. They do not impact anyone anyways.

Extensive research has documented the real-world effects of implicit biases in the realms of health care, criminal justice, education, employment, and housing, among others. For example, implicit biases can affect the quality of care a patient receives, the level of encouragement students receive from their teachers, whether or not an individual receives an interview or promotion, and more. **Implicit biases have huge implications**; thus, it is important to identify your own biases and then actively engage in debiasing techniques to address them.

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