

Responsibility for Implicit Bias

Implicit bias refers to the psychological associations that subconsciously affect our actions, decisions and judgments toward certain groups of people. According to Ohio State University's Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity, implicit biases are "activated involuntarily and without an individual's awareness or intentional control."²⁶ Furthermore, our implicit biases are not generally accessible to us through introspection, and it is possible that our implicit biases about other groups can conflict with our conscious attitudes about them. For example, it is possible to have implicit biases regarding people of other races even if one is an avowed anti-racist.

Because implicit bias is not generally accessible through introspection, social psychologists have developed a test called the Implicit Association Test (IAT). According to Project Implicit at Harvard University, "the IAT measures the strength of associations between concepts (e.g., black people, gay people) and evaluations (e.g., good, bad) or stereotypes (e.g., athletic, clumsy)."²⁷ The IAT is supposed to uncover our implicit biases by testing how we associate certain concepts with certain groups. If we tend to associate certain groups with negative evaluative concepts, this is taken to be evidence that we have implicit biases toward those groups.

According to the results from the IAT, implicit racial and gender biases are widespread.^{28,29} One set of results from the IAT indicates that 70 percent of people have implicit biases against African-Americans.³⁰ This number compares to only 20 percent of people who report having explicit biases against African-Americans. The results of the IAT are often shocking to the many people who test as having these implicit biases despite explicitly disavowing any kind of prejudicial attitude. Often, they are worried that having these implicit biases makes them bad people.

When people explicitly hold racist, sexist, or otherwise prejudicial attitudes, we tend to blame them for developing and maintaining these attitudes and regard them as criticizable for having them. We hold them morally responsible for their ignorance and judge that they ought to educate themselves about other groups in order to remove their prejudices. However, it is less clear what to think about our widespread implicit biases. Implicit biases could have many of the same negative consequences that explicit biases do, but they are also harder to identify and control. So, should we blame people for having or acting on implicit biases, and if so how much?

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What, if any, are the morally relevant differences between explicit biases and implicit biases?
2. If we are not morally responsible for having implicit biases, are we also not morally responsible for acting on them? Why or why not?
3. How should the fact that implicit biases are so widespread influence what we think about them?

²⁶ <http://kirwaninstitute.osu.edu/research/understanding-implicit-bias/>

²⁷ <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/iatdetails.html>

²⁸ <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2009/06/090617142120.htm>

²⁹ <http://www.aauw.org/resource/iat/>

³⁰ <https://tierneylab.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/11/18/a-shocking-test-of-bias/>

