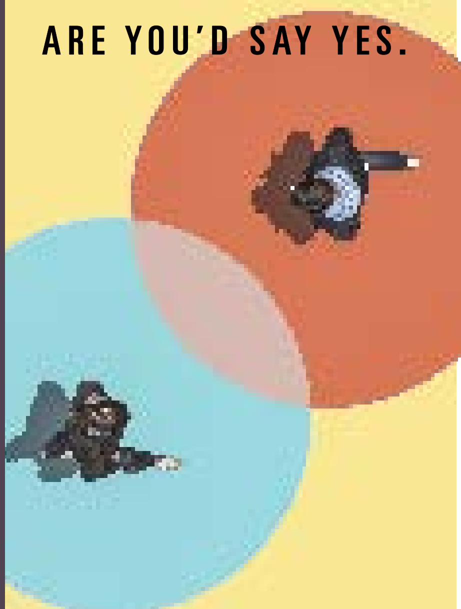
HOW TO SEE WHAT YOU CANNOT SEE

Everyone, even the best intentioned among us, has unconscious biases: deeply ingrained, sometimes subtle prejudices against people who are in marginalized groups or embody a trait with which we don’t want to be associated. The key to shedding these preconceptions lies in understanding our own brains.

BY MERYL DAVIDS LANDAU

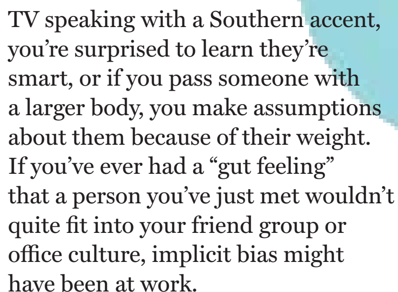
IF SOMEONE ASKED YOU WHETHER PEOPLE OF DIFFERENT GENDERS SHOULD BE TREATED EQUALLY OR BLACK PEOPLE DESERVED THE SAME OPPORTUNITIES AS WHITE PEOPLE, ODDS ARE YOU'D SAY YES.



Americans have made strides over the decades, in law and in life, in reducing overt prejudice against members of society's marginalized groups—even as the rise of white supremacist movements and the increased awareness of police violence against Black people show that we have light years to travel before we achieve full equality. Recently, white Americans seem to have entered a new stage of reckoning with anti-Blackness. This is due to the work of Black activists, who have focused attention on police murders as well as anti-Black rhetoric and violence at Black Lives Matter protests.

But the sad truth is that even among people who think of themselves as having no prejudices, subtle and more insidious biases remain—in part because they fly under the radar of those who hold them, especially when they are members of a dominant group (white or heterosexual people, for example). These biases involve gender and race but can also be related to religion, body weight, sexual orientation, physical ability, and many other traits.

None of us like to think of ourselves as biased, but no one is immune. "Even people who consider themselves incredibly egalitarian are subject to unconscious bias," says Calvin Lai, Ph.D., an assistant professor of psychological and brain sciences at Washington University in St. Louis. Perhaps when you hear a person on



TV speaking with a Southern accent, you're surprised to learn they're smart, or if you pass someone with a larger body, you make assumptions about them because of their weight. If you've ever had a "gut feeling" that a person you've just met wouldn't quite fit into your friend group or office culture, implicit bias might have been at work.

Close your eyes for a moment and quickly picture a scientist. What came to mind? Did you envision an older white man, maybe with Albert-Einstein-esque hair? Default assumptions like this about what kind of person should be in a certain role are a form of bias, with very real effects. When researchers at Yale University sent professors otherwise identical résumés for a lab position, some with names traditionally associated with men and some with names traditionally associated with women, more of the professors (including those who were women) said they would hire the men, and they offered to pay them more, according to a study published in the journal *PNAS*.

Implicit bias is, of course, especially widespread in the United States when it comes to race and gender. In a subsequent version of the résumé study, published in *Sex Roles*, the names of the candidates seemed to indicate that applicants were Black, white, Latinx, or Asian; Black women and Latinx women and men were rated lowest in hireability compared with the others. The professors reviewing the résumés ranked women of color as less competent than their white counterparts, and both groups were ranked below the men. Other research has uncovered that Black guests on Airbnb are less likely to be approved to rent a property, that preschool-aged Black children are suspended or expelled at up to four times the rate of white children, and that people assign a higher value to an object when a white person's hand holds it in an ad than when it is held by a Black person's hand.

For people on the receiving end of bias, the practical and psychological repercussions are vast, harmful, and heartbreaking. Being unfairly rejected by a school can derail a career, and losing out on a job and ending up with lower pay can lead to myriad disadvantages, including reduced access to quality health care. Health care providers have been shown to harbor biases against Black, Latinx, and Indigenous people as well as other people of color, which can result in poorer health outcomes. The fact that these unconscious biases don't

involve what members of dominant groups customarily consider "overt" racism doesn't diminish the devastating effects.

THE BRAIN IS BUILT FOR BIAS

Fortunately, with significant determination and effort, we can become aware of our biases and work to eliminate them. "Short interventions don't yield long-lasting results," Lai says—our attempts must be consistent and sustained. Self-monitoring is part of it, but the bulk of the effort involves recognizing and working to change the culture of systemic racism and discrimination that instilled those biases in the first place (see "Where to Turn to Learn," page 71, for ways to start).

Why is this so challenging? Because in addition to living in a culture that reinforces our biases every single day, we are working against the way our minds naturally function. Human beings regularly take shortcuts in thinking—if we had to ponder everything carefully, from how to dress in the morning to how to perform a work task we've completed thousands of times, we'd collapse from mental exhaustion. We do such things without thinking. These mental shortcuts can lead to problematic biases because they're often based on discriminatory images or ideas we've seen or heard repeatedly. "Implicit biases generally favor the socially dominant group in a society," Lai says, and in the U.S., that often means white people—specifically straight, white, relatively thin, Christian men. So strong is the idea of the "norm" in our society that members of a marginalized group can have biased thoughts about their peers with similar traits (for example, people in large bodies often think negatively about other large people), says Mary S. Himmelstein, Ph.D., an assistant professor of psychological sciences at Kent State University in Kent, OH.

And marginalizations build on one another, so while a white woman's ideas may often be ignored in a meeting full of men, a Black woman's are even more likely to be ignored, says Eva Pietri, Ph.D., an assistant professor of psychology at Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis. If that woman is also disabled or a lesbian, and/or has a large body, she is in many settings exponentially more likely to be looked through or mistreated by her less marginalized peers.

One way in which experts determine what unconscious biases we have is through a test developed at Harvard known as the Implicit Association Test (IAT), in which subjects are asked to associate images with words as quickly as possible. "Concepts linked in memory get categorized faster," says Lai. "You can group 'peanut butter' with 'jelly' in less time than linking 'peanut

butter' to 'pickle.'" These tests consistently find that, for instance, a picture of a white person is joined with the word 'good' faster than one of a Black person is joined with the same adjective, especially when the tester is white. (You can take the IAT by searching for Project Implicit online, but bear in mind that it is not necessarily a good measure of an individual's biases so much as of the biases we have in aggregate.)

STUBBORN, BUT NOT CEMENTED

Another way to lift the curtain on your hidden prejudices is to honestly examine all parts of your life. If, for no conscious reason, you have no friends of a different race, sexual orientation, or religion than yours; if your office hasn't hired an employee who is disabled, queer, or speaks English with an accent; or if you're a teacher or a landlord and your favorite students or tenants are people like yourself, it's worth questioning whether implicit biases are at least partly to blame.

Unfortunately, becoming aware of biases is not enough to dislodge them. Biased thoughts are "sticky" because they get reinforced by the world around us, which is fueled by the dominant culture. The conceptualizing of scientists as white men comes from the reality that in the course of history most have been—though that's starting to change, Pietri says. Himmelstein notes that fat phobia results from society's widespread (albeit mistaken) notion that body weight is under a person's complete control and that we all wish to be thin, so anyone who can't drop pounds must lack willpower. (Actually, many factors, including biology and environment, are involved in BMI, itself a biased measure of health.) Stereotypical images and biased representations exist in advertising, TV shows, movies, song lyrics, what we hear friends and family members say and share on social media, and in many other realms.

When societal changes do eventually take hold, however, they can affect our unconscious thoughts rather powerfully. Take sexual orientation: As recently as in 1994, nearly half of Americans said that people who were gay or lesbian shouldn't be accepted by society, a figure that plummeted to 21% in 2019. This change has been mirrored by a drop in implicit bias toward LGBTQ people in the past decade. And with more Black actors being cast in roles beyond those of criminals and support staff, our perceptions about race continue to shift, says Lai, since media exposure to Black people in positive roles (such as those of athletes and politicians) has been shown to reduce anti-Black bias. Still, with limited positive imagery about age and disability, related prejudices have been harder to shake; prejudice against people of above-average weight has *increased*.

HOW TO BEAT YOUR BIASES

The most effective way to overcome prejudices is to expand our experiences so we're having meaningful interactions with people from diverse backgrounds. "When we see people as individuals, the assumptions we have based on group associations fall away," says Lai. This does not mean relying on Black or gay or large-bodied friends to teach us. Rather, it's about stepping outside our bubbles, becoming more aware of our thoughts and teaching *ourselves* to challenge them. But even as we work on that, there are ways, right now, that we can avoid acting on harmful prejudices. Here's how.

DISAMBIGUATE

Biases most often show up in ambiguous situations, such as when we first meet someone and don't know a lot about them. That's why in the *Sex Roles* study the applicants' qualifications were ambiguous—they had good but not spectacular credentials. If one had been a Nobel Prize winner, that person would have had a better chance of being hired, potentially overriding knee-jerk bias, says study coauthor Asia Eaton, Ph.D., an associate professor of psychology at Florida International University in Miami. When we don't know a lot, "people may implicitly look to stereotypes to guide their processing," Eaton says. To counter that tendency, do what you can to make ambiguous situations less so. Let's say you're looking to hire an accountant or a lawyer: Decide at the outset the exact criteria you'll use, setting a defined percentage for, say, relevant experience, another fixed amount for personality, etc., so you'll be more likely to stay objective, Eaton suggests.

AVOID SNAP DECISIONS

When overwhelmed or depleted, we don't think as critically, says Lai, and we fall back on stereotypes. Say you're a teacher deciding which of two students you'll give a math award to. Do it in the morning, when you're rested and less likely to resort to mental shortcuts.

PUSH BACK AGAINST DEFAULT ASSUMPTIONS

When you do notice a reflexive judgment pop into your head, challenge it and consciously replace it with a more thought-through opinion. As with toning a muscle, you'll need constant repetition for a lasting effect, Pietri says. Eventually, a new, more accurate vision will override the automatic one. "There are many tools at our disposal to help us check ourselves," Lai says. If enough of us deploy them regularly, society will be a much better place for everyone.

WHERE TO TURN TO LEARN

Experts agree that overcoming biases doesn't happen quickly. Fortunately, there's lots of info out there to help us start to unlearn our culture's most dangerous prejudices, especially anti-Blackness. Melinda Weekes-Laidlow, Esq., is an organizational consultant and the founder and CEO of Beautiful Ventures, a company that works to normalize Black humanity-affirming narratives in pop culture. We asked her to suggest a few things to read, watch, share, and ponder.

1 **"5 WAYS OF UNDERSTANDING BLACK LIVES MATTER"** (YouTube). This portion of the event Broadway for Black Lives Matter is an engaging 17-minute video on what the BLM movement is truly about, presented by NYU professor, activist, and educator Frank Leon Roberts, Ph.D.

2 ***STAMPED FROM THE BEGINNING: THE DEFINITIVE HISTORY OF RACIST IDEAS IN AMERICA*** by Ibram X. Kendi is an eye-opening history that chronicles how anti-Black concepts were created to rationalize deeply entrenched discriminatory policies and inequities—and why they persist.

3 **RACIAL EQUITY TOOLS GLOSSARY** (racialequitytools.org/glossary). *Privilege. Microaggression. Model minority. Institutional racism.* This site provides definitions and explanations for all the terms you'll want and need to know to understand the conversation surrounding race in America.

4 ***BETWEEN THE WORLD AND ME*** by Ta-Nehisi Coates is a stirring, National Book Award–winning message to the author's son. The memoir may leave you with a deeper understanding of what it is like to live in this country as a Black person.

5 **THE BLACK YOUTH PROJECT (BLACKYOUTHPROJECT.COM).** Want to know what young people are thinking? *BYP* is an online publication that amplifies the voices, ideas, and perspectives of Black people ages 18 to 30 to empower and mobilize their generation toward activism and social justice leadership.