

Beyond Diversity 101: Micro-inequities, Implicit Bias, and Moving toward Equity
Mt. Olive Lutheran Church
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Defining Implicit Bias

Also known as implicit social cognition, **implicit bias refers to the attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner.** These biases, which encompass both favorable and unfavorable assessments, are activated involuntarily and without an individual's awareness or intentional control. **Residing deep in the subconscious, these biases are different from known biases that individuals may choose to conceal for the purposes of social and/or political correctness.** Rather, implicit biases are not accessible through introspection.

The implicit associations we harbor in our subconscious cause us to have feelings and attitudes about other people based on characteristics such as race, ethnicity, age, and appearance. **These associations develop over the course of a lifetime beginning at a very early age through exposure to direct and indirect messages.** In addition to early life experiences, the media and news programming are often-cited origins of implicit associations.

A Few Key Characteristics of Implicit Biases

- Implicit biases are **pervasive**. Everyone possesses them, even people with avowed commitments to impartiality such as judges.
- Implicit and explicit biases are **related but distinct mental constructs**. They are not mutually exclusive and may even reinforce each other.
- The implicit associations we hold **do not necessarily align with our declared beliefs** or even reflect stances we would explicitly endorse.
- We generally tend to hold implicit biases that **favor our own ingroup**, though research has shown that we can still hold implicit biases against our ingroup.
- Implicit biases are **malleable**. Our brains are incredibly complex, and the implicit associations that we have formed can be gradually unlearned through a variety of debiasing techniques.

The Kirwan Institute worked with MTV to create an online race, gender, and LGBTQ bias cleanse. It provides daily tasks that will help you de-bias yourself. lookdifferent.org

Project Implicit, Harvard University, implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/research

Project Implicit is a non-profit organization and international collaboration between researchers who are interested in implicit social cognition - thoughts and feelings outside of conscious awareness and control. **The goal of the organization is to educate the public about hidden biases and to provide a "virtual laboratory" for collecting data on the Internet.**

How Can We Challenge Implicit Bias in Ourselves and Our Organizations?

- **Self-reflection & Paying Attention.** Start noticing your own “internal dialogue” about all sorts of things. What assumptions do you make about other people? Are there people you inherently like or trust – or those you don’t like nor trust? Are there people or places that make you nervous or scared? People or places that you think are weird or abnormal or wrong? People or places you judge negatively? Are there people or places that you think are just inherently good or normal or right? Are there behaviors that seem ok when certain people do them but not when others do them? *The goal here is to be as honest as possible with yourself – just to notice how you feel and think.*
- **Analysis & Questioning.** Now ask yourself why you think and feel these things? What are the reasons behind your judgements? Maybe you have a good reason for why you feel the way you do. Or maybe you realize it’s just what you’ve been taught. *This is where you can start to notice patterns and bias.* For example, why do I notice (and care) if women are smiling but not men? Why do I mention someone’s race only when talking about a person of color? Why am I nervous to talk with someone who has an apparent disability? Why does it bother me to see two men kiss?
- **Educate Yourself about Myths and Stereotypes.** Take opportunities to understand what myths and stereotypes exist about different social identities. Recognize that stereotypes can be both broad and specific (all women are overly emotional; black women are always angry), and often *create negative emotional reactions like fear, distrust, pity, disgust, and hatred toward those with marginalized identities.* Also *recognize that the flip side of a negative stereotype is an unearned positive stereotype for those with privileged identities* (men are rational; white men are only appropriately angry).
- **Challenge Your Stereotypical, Biased Thinking – in Your Thoughts and Actions.** *This will be a daily practice.* The steps of paying attention, questioning, and learning are the core components of challenging your own biases. As you get better at these steps, you’ll see a change in your thoughts and your actions. This is lifelong work, so change won’t happen overnight. *It can be helpful to think of this work as the creation of a new lens, through which you view the world and your relation to it. With commitment and effort, you can continue to develop this “inclusion lens,” ensuring that your thoughts and actions become less and less biased.*
- **Organizations can also Commit to Self-reflection, Analysis, and Learning.** *Any organization can undertake a formal or informal audit to look for patterns that may be related to stereotypes and implicit bias.* Every part of an organization, from hiring and promotion to policies and procedures, from supplier diversity to outreach and community engagement, can be viewed through an inclusion lens. The same steps of noticing and awareness, analyzing, and gaining context through education can be applied to all parts of an organization. *As with individuals, this needs to be understood as a critically important, daily practice, that will run for the life of the organization.*