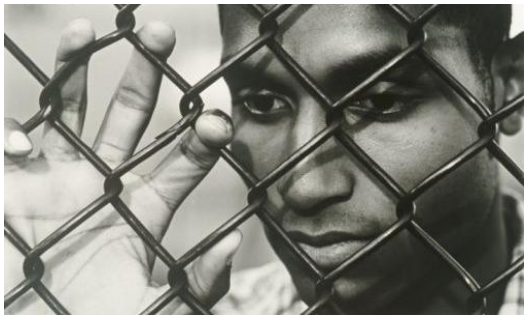
Bias Subtle Influence on Education

By Horacio Sanchez

Recent sophisticated assessment methods have established that people unwittingly hold an astounding assortment of stereotypical beliefs and attitudes about social groups: black and white, female and male, elderly and young, gay and straight, fat and thin. Although these implicit biases inhabit us, they can consistently vary depending on our own group membership and our everyday environments (Carpenter 2008).



It is the nature of explicit bias that has placed our focus on outrageous actions by extremist that has led many to maintain that implicit bias is of secondary concern. But hundreds of studies of implicit bias show that its' effects can be equally insidious, because it is far more wide spread and often unrealized. In the past it was thought that implicit bias did not influence human behavior. However, Russell H. Fazio of Ohio State University says that the data is incontrovertible that implicit bias influences our daily behavior.

Implicit biases grow out of a normal process that enables learning. The human brain gains new understanding based on what it already knows. The brain associates new information with old and files related data together. Therefore associations occur naturally due to the learning process. More importantly, the original function of the ability to naturally make associations was a product of the primitive brain to enable survival. Man's basic survival requires him to be able to associate things with danger. The distinction between associations held in the cognitive brain and those held in the primitive brain are significant. Associations held in the cognitive brain imply control over information, conscious awareness, and intentional behavior.

Associations held in the primitive brain imply a lower level of control, awareness, and unintentional behaviors. A key player in the primitive brain, the amygdala, secretes chemicals that cut off interference from the cortex when aroused. This is a necessary feature since the amygdala is in charge of survival and when threatened does not want to compromise reaction time by the slower more deliberate process of the cortex. The negative outcome to this feature is that things held in the amygdala influence actions without man being able to cognitively control the reaction. The amygdala seizes control of our nonverbal behaviors to express emotion and to reflect strongly held implicit biases. The nonverbal behaviors include facial expressions, hand movements, body

posture, and tone of voice. In addition, since the amygdala is a reaction system, it is likely to produce behaviors at any level of emotionality. Therefore, even dormant implicit biases will produce a range of actions. In order to make sense of the world, the human brain puts things into groups and the retrieval of certain data often produces unintentional associations. Without this most basic of abilities, we could not navigate the world around us. Since this is such a natural process, research has concluded that we all possess implicit bias.

Hence some associations reside outside conscious understanding in our primitive brain. The problem arises when we form associations that contradict our intentions, beliefs and values. For example, many minorities in the United States believe racial profiling to be wrong. Yet after 9/11 when many of these individuals traveled by plane and saw an Arab, their minds automatically associated the person with a terrorist. This bias was understandable. Thousands of Americans had just spent two weeks viewing emotionally charged news on television associating a brutal act of terrorism to a group of people. Since this was such an emotional experience, it was stored in our amygdala. The amygdala is also the part of the primitive brain that is in charge of emotional memory. Therefore, even though the values of many of these minorities are vehemently opposed to any form of profiling, their emotional brain had already formed a bias that was opposed to their cognitive values and beliefs.

Most of our implicit biases are formed before we can defend against them or by the patterns in our environment that are unavoidable. Therefore, biases are formed by the little things we experience during our early development: the stories, comments, and even jokes people tell concerning a group of people. Other biases are a product of the saturation of information that is a product of today's instant media. Once a story breaks you cannot avoid it. It is on the television, radio, internet, and in the newspapers. Once a storyline presents a persistent pattern and is repeated over and over for an extended period of time, it is hard not to develop implicit biases. In addition, a person's environment often produces implicit biases. The nuances of a person's job begin to influence individuals over time. The workplace often produces some of the stronger implicit biases that humans develop.

School environments can unwittingly help promote bias. Any disproportionate representation by any one group within the school settings will promote bias. For example, if students of Asian descent only represent 11% of the student population but 45% of the honors program; the brain will over time begin to associate Asians with honors program. However, negative associations are far more harmful. For example, if black students represent 18% of the total student population but 66% of students in special education: then the brain will begin to associate black students with students with high needs.

The relevant question is does implicit bias actually influence human behavior? The answer is yes. A number of studies indicate that implicit association may be especially vulnerable to life situations requiring reflexive actions and snap judgments made by the amygdala. For example, a number of studies that asked whites and blacks to make a snap judgment as to whether the person had a weapon or a harmless object consistently found that both blacks and whites tend to mistake a harmless object such as a cell phone or hand tool for a gun if a black face accompanies the object. The reflex or snap judgment made by the participants is understandable. We live in a society that constantly depicts a higher rate of crime and violence by black males. Both black and white students in a school where the rate of suspension of black students is disproportionately higher to that of students in the majority claim that school personnel seem to assume the involvement of black students standing in the vicinity of any incident. This behavior is consistent regardless of the race of the school personnel.

So what can be done to combat bias in schools? I offer the following recommendations:

The first recommendation is simple no bad classes no bad schools. Avoid allowing associations to be made by adults and students alike. Nothing can be more damaging than a student being associated to a slow class or a teacher to a bad school.

The second recommendation is actively recruit underperforming subpopulations into activities that will help diminish negative bias and help establish more positive bias. For example, school systems should seek to use alternative screening instruments for access into gifted education, such as the Naglieri Nonverbal Abilities Test. Having honors classes represent the entire school population can combat longstanding perceptions concerning who can academically excel.

The third recommendation is for schools to promote climates conducive for change. Individuals coming from unstructured environments who have been exposed to more stress and violence have the greatest problems adjusting to school. They must attend schools that work diligently in structuring and supervising the major transitions of the school day as well as lunch periods.

As humans we might not be able to prevent biases from occurring but we can diligently prevent them from being institutionalized. Negative biases profoundly influence what people see: they prevent us from seeing the greatness in many students.