

Forging A Distinct Understanding of Implicit Bias

Authors : Benjamin D Reese Jr

Abstract : Implicit bias is understood as unconscious attitudes, stereotypes, or associations that can influence the cognitions, actions, decisions, and interactions of an individual without intentional control. These unconscious attitudes or stereotypes are often targeted toward specific groups of people based on their gender, race, age, perceived sexual orientation or other social categories. Since the late 1980s, there has been a proliferation of research that hypothesizes that the operation of implicit bias is the result of the brain needing to process millions of bits of information every second. Hence, one's prior individual learning history provides 'shortcuts'. As soon as one see someone of a certain race, one have immediate associations based on their past learning, and one might make assumptions about their competence, skill, or danger. These assumptions are outside of conscious awareness. In recent years, an alternative conceptualization has been proposed. The 'bias of crowds' theory hypothesizes that a given context or situation influences the degree of accessibility of particular biases. For example, in certain geographic communities in the United States, there is a long-standing and deeply ingrained history of structures, policies, and practices that contribute to racial inequities and bias toward African Americans. Hence, negative biases among groups of people towards African Americans are more accessible in such contexts or communities. This theory does not focus on individual brain functioning or cognitive 'shortcuts.' Therefore, attempts to modify individual perceptions or learning might have negligible impact on those embedded environmental systems or policies that are within certain contexts or communities. From the 'bias of crowds' perspective, high levels of racial bias in a community can be reduced by making fundamental changes in structures, policies, and practices to create a more equitable context or community rather than focusing on training or education aimed at reducing an individual's biases. The current paper acknowledges and supports the foundational role of long-standing structures, policies, and practices that maintain racial inequities, as well as inequities related to other social categories, and highlights the critical need to continue organizational, community, and national efforts to eliminate those inequities. It also makes a case for providing individual leaders with a deep understanding of the dynamics of how implicit biases impact cognitions, actions, decisions, and interactions so that those leaders might more effectively develop structural changes in the processes and systems under their purview. This approach incorporates both the importance of an individual's learning history as well as the important variables within the 'bias of crowds' theory. The paper also offers a model for leadership education, as well as examples of structural changes leaders might consider.

Keywords : implicit bias, unconscious bias, bias, inequities

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