

# Section 2: Contemporary forms of bias and discrimination

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Since a central concern of this guide is to explore ways in which philosophy can promote equity, inclusion, and diversity within the profession, some orientation with respect to existing scholarship on questions of bias and discrimination seems appropriate as a background to the more specific discussions of particular areas of concern, addressed in subsequent sections of this guide. Any such orientation will necessarily be selective, and the current state of research will itself always be subject to change and disagreement among reasonable people. Therefore this orientation is meant simply to introduce some frameworks for thinking about bias and discrimination, and to indicate how they might relate to some of the challenges our profession faces. The APA itself has no position on these empirical issues, and instead encourages all philosophers to seek, and critically assess, a wide range of information.

As philosophers, we are professionally involved in encouraging self-understanding and the critical examination of concepts, assumptions, reasoning, and values that figure in ordinary thought and practice. We also live in a society that has been, and continues to be, divided in many ways along lines of “race,”<sup>3</sup> ethnicity, religion, political affiliation, socioeconomic status, and gender or sexual identity—with profound effects upon the outcomes individuals experience in life. Colleges and universities have the capacity to bring together diverse groups of students and faculty, and to make a distinctive contribution to overcoming various forms of bias, discrimination, or unfairness that might be found in the larger society. But it would be a mistake to confuse this potential with reality—colleges and universities will be able to play this role only through the active efforts of those involved, and those efforts are likely to be more successful if informed by our developing empirical and philosophical understanding of these phenomena.

## Forms of bias and discrimination

At the individual level, “bias” as such is a general phenomenon of cognition and affect—a matter of prior beliefs, preferences, feelings, or expectations that individuals bring to situations, and that shape how they interpret and respond to those situations. Thought and learning could hardly occur without some prior attitudes, and, in humans, such attitudes often take the form of category schemes that impute traits with causal or explanatory potential (Gelman 2009). This kind of categorization can be found across a wide array of natural and social domains, and can be implicit (in the sense of not involving self-conscious cognition or feeling) as well as explicit (Uleman et al. 2008). Categorization of this kind can be linked to stereotyping, in which some category-associated traits or behaviors are attributed to all members, ignoring individual differences within the category and actual comparative frequencies of traits or behaviors across categories. Categories and stereotypes need not have any positive or negative valence, although evaluative attitudes often are associated with them (Eagly & Chaiken 2007). Categorization, stereotyping, and evaluation can also be fine-grained, cross-cutting, and contextually-influenced, not simply tied to predominant social groupings as such (Fiske et al. 2002, Livingston & Brewer 2002). In the social domain, tendencies to categorize appear to emerge in the first year of life, and have the important feature that individuals tend to

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<sup>3</sup> Throughout this section, the term “race” is being used to designate the self-ascribed social categories typically used in public records and in social psychology research. Similarly for “Black” and “White.” For recent philosophical discussions concerning “race” and related categories or concepts, see James (2016) and Yancy (2017).

place *themselves* as well as others in categories, and begin to show preferences toward those identified as belonging to their own group (Lieberman et al. 2017).

Own-group preferences are a robust psychological phenomenon, but are not as such equivalent to *social prejudice* as this is normally understood, since own-group preferences need not involve negative stereotypes of other groups. Moreover, own-group preferences can be quite labile, shifting in focus and scope with changing contexts, and can operate without reference to, or across, other categories of social division. For example, if a discussion section is arbitrarily divided into two groups for an informal debate, members of one's own side can become objects of own-group preference even though the division is known to be arbitrary, and brings together individuals belonging to disparate social groups (cf. Billig & Tajfel 1973). Own-group preference thus can work against, or in favor of, individuals who are members of one's own social category, and the pervasiveness of own-group preference does not mean that social prejudice as we know it is inborn or unchangeable.

Moreover, social prejudice can involve unfavorable attitudes toward, or negative stereotypes about, one's own group, and various kinds of preference for socially valorized groups (see Fiske et al. 2002; Uhlmann et al. 2002; Dunham et al. 2014; though see Olson et al. 2009). For example, in the US, individuals of all ages tend to show a stronger implicit association between positive words and youth, and girls who, in fact, outperform their male peers in mathematics nonetheless tend to have a negative association between femaleness and mathematical ability and a positive association between maleness and such ability (Nosek et al. 2002). Contending with social prejudice thus is not a matter of eliminating own-group preference, but of working to encourage the development of greater and more accurate self-understanding and understanding of others—and it therefore is fully compatible with the educational and research mission of colleges and universities.

Although, as discussed above, “bias” as a term of psychological theory is not equivalent to prejudice, commonsense usage of “bias” as a matter of negative beliefs and attitudes toward particular social groups is sufficiently entrenched that we will generally follow that usage in this guide. Entrenched, too, is a sense that “bias” involves some form or degree of epistemic defect—for example, holding positive or negative stereotypes on the basis of limited or unrepresentative experience, or failure to be open to certain kinds of evidence, or partiality in the weighing evidence. The subsections that follow discuss some forms that bias can take.

## Explicit bias

Explicit social bias is a matter of self-conscious positive or negative attitudes about the capacities or behaviors of social groups. While expression of explicit bias has become less common on the whole (Dovidio et al. 2017), it continues to be present to some degree in contemporary social and academic life (Craig & Richeson 2014). Prevalent social norms against bias have the effect that explicit bias, even though self-conscious, is infrequently publicly *expressed* as such, despite the fact that a significant number of individuals may be motivated to express such bias, and will do so privately or in contexts where they feel the usual social norms are not dominant (Forscher et al. 2015). While reliable statistics are hard to assemble, a number of campuses have recently experienced increased incidents of explicit expressions of biased attitudes in which the favored or disfavored groups or individuals are identified in terms of race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, or immigration status (Bauer-Wolf 2017).

Confusion exists, however, over whether or when expressions of explicit bias are a form of protected speech. Colleges and universities have come under attack for failing to protect free expression of a full range of political opinions, in part because they are thought to treat expressions of explicit bias as forbidden, whatever the context. However, some ways of expressing explicit bias are indeed protected forms of speech, and treating them as such is important if colleges and universities are to maintain an open climate of discussion on campus, and to avoid the exclusion or marginalization of certain social or political points of view. Yet when such expressions take the form of verbal harassment, abuse, or threat, they lose this protection (for some criteria, see the next paragraph). In the present climate, it therefore is important for colleges and universities to affirm their commitments both to free expression and to the creation of a climate free of harassment, abuse, or threats.

Academic units are encouraged to have open discussions of the distinction between protected speech and harassment, abuse, or threat, and to develop and publicize guidelines to help members of the academic community to make these distinctions. It is not a simple matter to make these distinctions, especially given the pervasive use of online media, but open discussion of such issues can help an academic community develop appropriate norms for encouraging tolerance of speech, teaching, or scholarship involving unpopular views while at the same time providing an environment where staff, students, and faculty of all backgrounds can participate fully in the core activities of institutions of higher learning. Having had such discussions even in the absence of an on-going controversy may help individuals and the academic community as a whole to avoid the chilling effect of vague notions about permissibility, while also creating clear spaces for legitimate forms of protest and contestation. Among the criteria relevant to distinguishing protected expression from harassment include: where and in what circumstances the expressive acts take place; whether the expressive acts espouse a general viewpoint publicly or target an individual or individuals; whether the individual or individuals are targeted *as* members of a protected category (e.g., religious, racial, ethnic, gender, disability, etc.); whether the expressive acts are intensive in manner, repeated, or involve threats to retaliate if the unwelcome behavior is reported; and whether the acts create a hostile environment or undermine the possibility of equal educational access or opportunity for the individual or group targeted (see Sokolow et al. 2011). Those at public institutions should be aware that they are under stricter constitutional constraints regarding free expression than public institutions. The following are two relevant statements that indicate the challenge and importance of making the distinction between harassment and protected speech:

- [American Civil Liberties Union statement on campus speech](#)
- [APA statement on bullying and harassment](#)

## Implicit bias

Recent decades have seen increased attention to implicit cognition and affect, elements of an individual's beliefs, attitudes, or preferences of which the individual is often (though not always) unaware, but which can operate in shaping thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in ways that require no conscious recognition, endorsement, or effort. While researchers vary in how they understand the notion of "implicit" thought or feeling, and how accessible "implicit" attitudes might be (for discussion, see Brannon & Gawronski 2017), it is widely agreed elements of cognition and affect not readily accessible to introspection play an important role in perception, language, choice, motor control, and social interaction—complex activities where the amount of information that must be taken in and used to adjust one's responses exceeds the capacity for self-conscious, controlled thought and decision-making. Our conscious mental lives thus depend pervasively

on processes and attitudes that shape how we see the world and act upon it, but which have not been the products of prior deliberation and choice, and often are not open to direct introspection. Implicit affective processes, too, such as non-conscious preferences (Jost et al. 2002) or implicit empathic simulations of the mental states of others (Gutsell & Inzlicht 2010), also appear to be part of the equipment that enables us to lead the complex social lives we do. Since such implicit processes and attitudes influence what we attend to, perceive, think, remember, feel, want, and do, sometimes despite our stated intentions and avowed beliefs or principles, they pose a special problem in our efforts to live up to ideals of impartiality, fairness, open-mindedness, evidence-sensitivity, and rigor in judgment.

One heavily studied form of implicit cognition and affect has come to be known as “implicit bias”—the existence of implicit stereotypes of, and evaluative attitudes toward, socially identified groups such as races, ethnicities, gender or sexual orientations, social classes, and so on. As with other forms of implicit cognition and affect, the individual is often unaware, or only partially aware, of these attitudes, and they may be at odds with the individual’s self-consciously endorsed beliefs and values. Despite the existence of widely used measures of implicit bias, the extent to which implicit bias as measured in these ways predicts actual behavior is a matter of controversy (Nosek et al. 2005; Karpinski & Ross 2006; Greenwald et al. 2002, 2009, 2015; Oswald et al. 2013; Lai et al. 2014; Forscher et al. 2016). It is important, therefore, to distinguish between, on the one hand, a psychological “probe” intended to indicate the existence of underlying associations, such as the well-known [Implicit Association Test \(IAT\)](#), and, on the other hand, measures of actual individual behaviors in context, which typically are the result of a multiplicity of factors. While some evidence exists that individual scores on the IAT, for example, have predictive power for particular kinds of behavior in a range of settings (see below) or with respect to behavior at the aggregate level (Greenwald et al. 2015), individual scores tend to vary significantly from one test context to another. However, such a pattern of test-retest variation in the face of a significant effect-size is typical of most probes of implicit mental processes, including the well-established Stroop test and Erikson flanker task (Hedge et al. 2017; see also Ableson 1985 on the limitations of variation-based arguments), and does not in itself indicate that there is no robust underlying cognitive or affective phenomenon at work. But it does argue against using particular IAT test scores as a basis for inferring whether individuals will exhibit greater or lesser prejudice in their behavior.

A potentially valuable use of tests like the IAT is in providing individuals with a first-personal experience that encourages them to think seriously about whether they might have underlying cognitive or affective attitudes at odds with their avowed beliefs, principles, or values, and that might have an influence in their thought and action that they would hope to avoid. Studies of interventions to counter discriminatory effects have found that explicit instructions to “avoid stereotyping” or “avoid prejudice” have little effect, and may even activate stereotypical thinking (Kunda & Spencer 2003), but some interventions for which we have evidence of effectiveness use administration of the IAT as an initial step, accompanied by making the results available to the individual and providing the individual with a discussion of what such results do or do not mean (Forscher et al. 2017). Because the IAT and various other measures of implicit associations are confidentially accessible online, it is possible for individuals to take, and retake, these tests privately as part of their reflection on the challenges of overcoming bias, though they should be cautioned against using the test score diagnostically. Moreover, it is as yet unclear which aspects of taking the IAT or thinking about possibility of discrepancy between one’s avowed beliefs and one’s spontaneous or unacknowledged cognitive and affective reactions, combined with which level of motivation to avoid prejudice, contribute to the value of the IAT in encouraging effective reflection upon one’s possible biases (Hahn & Gawronski 2018).

For us as philosophers and educators, the ongoing discussions within psychology and philosophy about the reality, nature, measure, and significance of implicit bias themselves afford an important opportunity for developing critical thinking, self-reflection, and an appreciation of the methodological challenges of understanding a phenomenon as complex as bias or a mind as complex as our own (Acup et al. 2015; Brownstein et al., ms.; Brownstein & Saul 2016; Machery 2017).

## Contextual bias

Studies of explicit and implicit bias often find that *context* plays an important role in mediating the relationship of measurements of potential bias to actual behavior. Some theories of discrimination therefore seek to incorporate context directly into understanding the intrapersonal and interpersonal dynamics of bias. For example, the theory of “aversive racism” grew out of earlier attempts to account for how individual attitudes and behaviors involving race have evolved in response to changing laws and social norms in the wider society (Dovidio et al. 2017; this approach has also been used to study gender- and class-oriented bias; see also Alba et al. 2002 and Craig and Richeson 2014 on responses of attitudes about race and immigration to changing real or perceived demographics). For example, the theory considered how individuals self-identifying as White who explicitly endorse prevailing anti-discriminatory policies and practices may nonetheless, when in a direct interaction with an African American individual, experience discomfort, anxiety, ambivalence, or fear in ways that contribute to discriminatory outcomes, e.g., through failures of communication (Pearson et al. 2009).

The theory of aversive racism as a form of contextual bias is of special interest for educators since an important component of its evidence comes from studies of professional interactions, e.g., of physicians with patients. These studies include assessments of explicit and implicit attitudes, but also use such objective indicators as the kind of medical care given to a patient for a particular medical condition, as well as subjective indicators such as the self-reported experience of patients with the physician. The physicians studied generally saw themselves as non-prejudiced on matters of race and scored low on explicit bias measures, but their medical practice indicated differences in treatment between African-American and White patients with similar conditions, and the scores these physicians received on measures of implicit bias were predictive of lower quality of coronary care (Green et al. 2007), shorter visits (Cooper et al. 2012), and fewer prescriptions of narcotics for pain relief after pediatric surgery (Sabin & Greenwald 2012). Moreover, when Penner and colleagues looked at interactions between non-Black physicians with a profile of low scores on explicit bias measures but higher scores on implicit bias measures, they found that these physicians offered African-American patients less information about possible side-effects and that African-American patients on average reported lower levels of satisfaction and trust in the aftermath of interactions (Penner et al. 2010; Penner et al. 2012). The debate over sources of disparities in medical treatment and outcomes across racial categories is complex, and the contextual hypothesis of aversive racism must be placed in a yet larger social context (see below), but the hypothesis suggests that achieving more inclusive ideals as teachers and colleagues requires active attention not only to one’s personal attitudes, but to the structure and qualities of interactions and to the kinds of information that may as a result be consciously or implicitly exchanged. While implicit attitudes and their psychological workings might not be readily available to introspection, they may well manifest themselves in spontaneous affective responses of which we can become aware (Gawronski 2019). Such self-understanding, combined with greater sensitivity to context, may help cue attention to the need to provide more structure to interactions in order to promote fuller communication and more equal treatment (cf. Levishina et al. 2014). (For a critical discussion of recent attempts to understand implicit bias measures situationally, see Machery 2017.)

A second suggestive link with the theory of contextual bias arises in connection with hiring and selection decisions. Measures of implicit bias were found to be predictive of favoring White over non-White candidates primarily in those cases where neither candidate's credentials were clearly superior, or where the criteria for choice were unclear (Dovidio & Gaertner 2000; Son Hing et al. 2008). This research supports recommendations made throughout this guide that encourage the development of selection procedures where criteria are explicit and agreed upon in advance, and where candidates are scored and discussed on these individual criteria, rather than evaluated in more impressionistic or holistic manner. Uhlmann and Cohen (2007), for example, found that when experimental subjects were asked to evaluate two hypothetical candidates for police chief, one a man with more street experience and less formal training, and the other a woman with more formal training but less street experience, the man was favored and street experience was cited as more important in selecting a police chief than formal training. However, when the woman was described as having more street experience and the man as having more formal training, the man was again preferred, and this time subjects cited formal training as more important than street experience. Commitment to a weighing of job criteria in advance of awareness of candidate gender eliminated this effect (see also Hodson et al. 2002).

### **Structural bias and discrimination**

Individual adoption of principles against prejudice and attempts to contend with explicit or implicit bias, even when combined with unit-level adoption of policies and practices, is not enough to contend with all the ways in which social fault lines and disparities associated with race, ethnicity, gender, or class tend to be self-reinforcing. Structural bias or discrimination arises when large-scale factors such as the distribution of resources and the background array of social institutions, policies, and practices have the effect of perpetuating various kinds of inequality in opportunity or achievement in ways that do not depend upon the existence of discriminatory attitudes at the individual or unit level (Bonilla-Silva 1997). For example, parents who are not authorized immigrants to the US, or whose immigration status is pending, may be reluctant to interact with the school system or other sources of social support, even though their children are fully-entitled US-born citizens. Even if the teachers and other officials were free of bias toward these children, there could be a cumulative effect on the children's education or health that results in lowered opportunities (cf. Viruell-Fuentes 2012 on immigrant health).

Colleges and universities need to be especially mindful of structural factors that may yield academic disadvantage for some students—and academic advantage for others—independently of faculty or administration attitudes or local policies. Talk of a promoting a more diverse student body or faculty may fail to take cognizance of the very different levels of family resources and social capital individuals bring with them to campus, and how these differences shape academic processes and outcomes (Anderson & Hansen 2012). For example, the precarious financial situation of the families of some college students can combine with other structural factors—such as background lack of access to health insurance, child care, or public transportation—to result in crises brought on by ill health or job loss in the family that disrupt a student's life and may force an interruption in the student's studies, resulting in a loss of equal ability to access educational opportunities for reasons that may be invisible to teachers and staff.

The existence of financial aid for students does not eliminate such disparities. Departments should be aware that a given level of graduate student funding, for example, can have quite different meaning for a student whose family has ample resources versus a student whose family is financially straitened. Questions such as when the first stipend of an academic year will be paid, or whether summer funding is available, or whether

travel funds are paid in advance, can make a considerable difference to some students' ability to pursue their graduate studies as successfully as possible. Departments therefore should seek to be informed about the adequacy of levels of support, and students should have access to information about how aid will be administered and to confidential financial counseling. Careful attention to matters of funding and effective communication with students does not remove structural bias, but they might at least help to avoid aggravating its effects.

Overcoming structural bias or discrimination typically takes efforts at many levels (Haslanger 2015), and recognition of the existence of structural factors is an important step toward understanding how discrimination works in the actual lives of our students and colleagues. Commitment to reducing discrimination or lack of equal access on a small scale thus requires commitment to working for larger-scale changes as well. In the end, overcoming bias and discrimination is not a matter of structure *versus* attitudes, but of structure *and* attitudes.

### Contending with bias and discrimination

What is known about effective ways of contending with bias? Much less than we might hope. However, because explicit and implicit social cognition and affect are profoundly shaped by learning mechanisms (Baron & Banaji 2006; Castelli et al. 2008), similar mechanisms may also help in unlearning bias (Rudman et al. 2001; Devine et al. 2012; Forscher et al. 2017; though see also Forscher et al. 2016). The most effective ways of unlearning bias seem to involve bringing members of diverse groups together in settings in which they engage in joint projects where each makes a contribution (Dasgupta 2013). Colleges and universities are well situated to provide such experiences, which can fit naturally into their teaching and research mission. But success in these efforts requires active steps—simply bringing together a diverse student body without such structured occasions for bridging across social divides can have the effect of triggering and reinforcing, rather than challenging and reducing, negative stereotypes (Rae et al. 2015).

Moreover, contending with bias and discrimination should not be thought of entirely in terms of affecting attitudes. Discrimination is a matter of practice as well as attitudes, and changes in practice can reduce differential treatment or outcomes in admissions, hiring, and retention. Here are some practices or interventions that have shown promise in reducing discrimination:

- Taking active steps to diversify the pool of candidates at every level of recruitment (van Ommeren et al. 2005).
- Requiring those on hiring, promotion, and graduate admission committees to attend workshops on contending with explicit and implicit bias (see Jackson, Hilliard, and Schneider 2014) and inviting faculty with expertise in the various dimensions of bias and discrimination to make a presentation at a department meeting.
- Developing and using explicit criteria of selection or evaluation for deliberations about hiring, promotion, graduate admissions, fellowships, recognitions, etc.—seeking to use a uniform procedure when discussing candidates so that each receives similar scrutiny and similar information is brought to bear in each case (Bauer & Baltes 2002; Uhlmann & Cohen 2005), and having available full applications, rather than relying heavily on letters of recommendation (Schmader et al. 2007).
- Asking for explicit justifications for rejecting candidates (Foschi 1996).

- Encouraging awareness—in assessments of the teaching of faculty or graduate students, or in evaluating the teaching dossier of candidates for positions—of typical patterns of variation in student comments for male vs. female instructors, or for instructors perceived as heterosexual vs. gay, or for instructors belonging to underrepresented groups in the discipline (this involves understanding a mixture of attitudes rather than unidimensional discrimination; see, e.g., Ewing et al. 2003; Waldo & Kemp 1997).
- Instituting a review process for letters of recommendation used in placement, and encouraging greater awareness in faculty of some of the ways letters of recommendation can reflect, or encourage, implicit bias (Morgan et al. 2013).
- Encouraging a systematic review of the ways in which departmental handling of financial questions may adversely affect students from relatively disadvantaged backgrounds.

For more discussion of relevant research, and of methods that can be effective in countering bias, see also these university-maintained websites: the Harvard University website of [resources for Faculty Development and Diversity](#) and the University of Michigan [ADVANCE project](#).

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