

Inquiring Minds topic - 25 November 2016

Ed Thomson, Moderator

Bias

Questions for discussion:

1. Are you biased about anything?
2. What are your biases?
3. How do the biases you have effect your behavior?
4. How do you respond to bias that another person may have?
5. What might be done to reduce bias a person may have?

As background please review the article (below) from the New York Times Magazine of October 23, 2016, entitled “Basic Instinct” by Emily Bazelon.

In 2004, 57 police officers of different races were divided into two groups for a simple experiment. Half of them were shown two photo lineups, one with an array of white faces and one with black faces. This group was more visually attuned to the white faces. A second group looked at the same lineups after words like “violent,” “crime” and “shoot” flashed on their screens, at the edge of their field of vision. This group of officers’ eyes were mostly drawn to the black faces. In a similar test, using pictures of guns and knives instead of words, a group of white college students exhibited a similar shift in attention.

The psychologists who did the research described their findings in terms of a “bias” in perception, rather than of intentional prejudice. The distinction is important: The test measured the split-second reactions of the police officers and the students, not their considered judgments. This kind of bias lies beneath the surface, implicit and often automatic. “Just as black faces and black bodies can trigger thoughts of crime, thinking of crime can trigger thoughts of black people,” the psychologists wrote in an article called “[Seeing Black.](#)”

Before the civil rights era, and even more recently, it would have been strange to describe bias as hidden or implicit. Outright bias was codified by Jim Crow, among other laws, and reinforced by discrimination at work, at school and in access to housing. Today, the country imagines itself differently. We have a “[colorblind Constitution.](#)” Justice Clarence Thomas asserted nine years ago, at the dawn of the Obama era, as he joined the court’s conservative majority to strike down school-desegregation plans. In 2013, [Chief Justice John Roberts decreed](#) that central protections in the Voting Rights Act “have lost their relevance” because “things have changed dramatically” in the 50 years since the law’s initial passage.

And yet this dark election season suggests otherwise. From dim beginning to dimmer end, the campaign has laid bare how bias and accusations of bias are cleaving us from one another. Donald Trump complains that he can’t get a fair ruling from a judge of Mexican ancestry, pledges to ban Muslims from entering the country and suggests that a woman doesn’t have what it takes to be president on the grounds of her gender. In August, [a Washington Post poll found](#) that 60 percent of Americans believed that Trump was “biased against women and minorities.” And many Trump

supporters believe that Hillary Clinton is biased against *them*, based on her statement (for which she later apologized) that half of them are “deplorable” and “irredeemable” because of their racism, sexism and xenophobia.

The most profound division may be over the nature of bias itself. Now that frank prejudice is ostensibly out of bounds, the country finds itself in murkier territory, arguing about the kind of bias that is less obvious and intentional. While some people (mostly on the left) puzzle over the lessons of studies like “Seeing Black,” others (mostly on the right) feel blamed for what they see as an imaginary problem.

In the realm of politics, the distinction between observation and judgment is easily lost.

Sigmund Freud popularized the concept of the unconscious in the early decades of the 20th century, describing a model of the mind in which some cognitive processes lie beneath the surface, waiting to be “discovered and translated into conscious form.” Beginning in the 1930s, Freud’s followers in psychoanalysis theorized that along with fleeting thoughts and feelings, attitudes including prejudice and stereotyping could take root in the unconscious.

In 1998, the psychologists Anthony G. Greenwald, Mahzarin R. Banaji and Brian Nosek began a [groundbreaking project](#) to test these ideas empirically. They used an “[implicit association test](#),” which measured the speed of responses for associating positive and negative terms (“terrific,” “lovely,” “evil,” “hurtful”) with black and white faces, by hitting keys on a computer. More than five million people have taken this test online to date, and the researchers have found that most whites and Asian-Americans more quickly associate positive qualities with white faces than with black ones. So do more than 30 percent of African-Americans.

This type of bias stems from the human instinct to order the world, by sorting its pieces into familiar groups. Often, automatic associations are morally neutral, like the link between “doctor” or “nurse” and “hospital.” Instantly connect “doctor” to “he” and “nurse” to “she,” however, and the links become more loaded. Still, your choices don’t necessarily reveal that your true self is sexist. They express the influence of stereotypes, but they’re not an endorsement. “It’s not a comment on your character,” says [Phillip Atiba Goff](#), one of the psychologists who conducted the experiments in “Seeing Black,” with a team led by [Jennifer Eberhardt](#) of Stanford University.

In the realm of politics, however, that distinction is easily lost. “Implicit bias is a problem for everyone,” Hillary Clinton said at the first presidential debate in September. She was answering a question about the police, and for a second after responding she paused, perhaps nervous that she would be misinterpreted as painting them as racist. “I think, unfortunately, too many of us in our great country jump to conclusions about each other,” Clinton finished. It took two days for Trump to twist her words into the accusation “that everyone, including our police, are basically racist and prejudiced” — in other words, you’re guilty and you just don’t know it.

At the vice-presidential debate a couple of weeks after Clinton and Trump’s exchange, Mike Pence expressed incredulity that the shooting of Keith Lamont Scott, a black man in Charlotte, by a black police officer could be an example of the same phenomenon. “Enough of this seeking every opportunity to demean law enforcement broadly by making the accusation of implicit bias every time tragedy occurs,” he said.

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Law-enforcement officials do not necessarily see it Pence’s way, however. [In a speech](#) about race and bias at Georgetown University last February, the F.B.I. director, James Comey, frankly acknowledged

that for many police officers, “the two young black men on one side of the street look like so many others that officer has locked up. Two white men on the other side of the street, even in the same clothes, do not. The officer does not make the same association about the two white guys, whether that officer is white or black.”

Over the summer, the Department of Justice [announced](#) that it would start implicit-bias training for 28,000 personnel, including F.B.I. agents, prosecutors and immigration judges. Many police officers already take implicit association tests about race and crime, says Noble Wray, a former police chief in Madison, Wis., who leads the Policing Practices and Accountability Initiative at the Justice Department. “We try to help officers understand that if you’re going to deal with your implicit biases, you have to be introspective. You have to ask yourself questions about how you’re interacting with people.”

The stakes of implicit bias may be particularly high in policing, but that’s hardly the only area of public and private life where bias has consequences. In the last decade, researchers have repeatedly [found](#) a discrepancy among men and women in letters of recommendation for faculty positions in the sciences and in teaching evaluations across various disciplines. Last summer, Sara B. Pritchard, an associate professor of science and technology studies at Cornell University, ran through the evidence for this kind of gender bias and proposed giving women a scoring bonus for teaching evaluations across the board.

“Critics will no doubt argue that such a policy would give female faculty a distinct and unfair advantage,” [Pritchard wrote](#) in an online post — and indeed, on a [Fox News panel](#), Tucker Carlson called her idea “insane.” One of his fellow panelists was Cabot Phillips of [Campus Reform](#), a conservative group that describes itself as exposing “bias and abuse” on college campuses. He cited [a study](#) that found that university hiring committees preferred women for positions in the sciences — when they were competing with identical male candidates. In other words, when women, too, had stellar recommendation letters and teaching evaluations, universities would snap them up to address the gender imbalance in science departments.

Phillips, who had just graduated from Liberty University, said that his favorite college professor was a woman. He meant to undermine the case that gender bias is real. But he was actually exemplifying the effect of working with people across lines of race and gender when they are your equals or betters.

This presidential campaign, which began with a wall as its chief symbol, has driven a wedge into the body politic. Polls show a widening split in how men and women plan to vote, and the gap between white voters and those of color is even larger. We have to confront that rift. The work of knitting the country back together means looking inward, to understand the biases we didn’t ask to have, and then outward, at people we didn’t fully see before. The question before us is how many Americans are willing to do that.

Emily Bazelon is a staff writer for the magazine and the Truman Capote fellow at Yale Law School