



The Buddha and Implicit Bias

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Part I

What is implicit bias?

An implicit bias is an unconscious association, belief, or attitude toward any social group. Due to implicit biases, people may often attribute certain qualities or characteristics to all members of a particular group, a phenomenon known as stereotyping.¹ For example, implicit bias can be created by the unconscious association of images and words that we have been exposed to throughout our lives over and over again. Our mind looks for patterns and connects what we are experiencing in the moment with what is stored in the memory.

“Research on “implicit bias” suggests that people can act on the basis of prejudice and stereotypes without intending to do so. While psychologists in the field of “implicit social cognition” study consumer products, self-esteem, food, alcohol, political values, and more, the most striking and well-known research has focused on implicit biases toward members of socially stigmatized groups, such as African-Americans, women, and the LGBTQ community. For example, imagine Frank, who explicitly believes that women and men are equally suited for careers outside the home. Despite his explicitly egalitarian belief, Frank might nevertheless behave in any number of biased ways, from distrusting feedback from female co-workers to hiring equally qualified men over women. Part of the reason for Frank’s discriminatory behavior might be an implicit gender bias.²

The images below are of a nun and a young Black man in a hoody.



If these were two patients seen on the same day by a physician, they might treat them differently depending on unconscious implicit bias developed by exposure to images seen over time that portray the nun as goodness and the person in the hoody as dangerous or untrustworthy. The physician might spend more time with the nun being very polite and shortening the visit with the hoody with terse questions. Yet at the end of the day, the physician might feel that they treated both patients equally. The same behavior might be true in other occupations such as a police officer being called to a scene of an accident and treating the nun or the person in the hoody differently yet feeling that they treated them the same.

Here is another example of how gender implicit bias might develop. Here are two ads promoting an app for flight reservations:



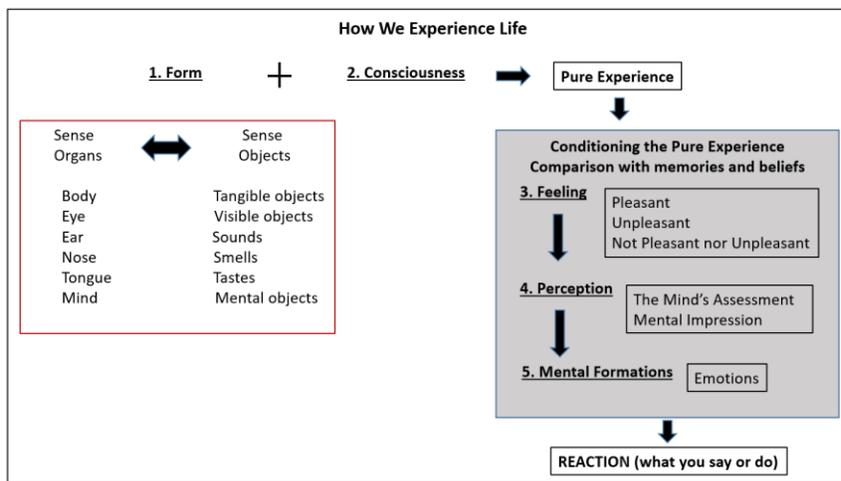
Although probably not intentional, the man is portrayed as person with business work and the women as portrayed as a shopper. Exposure to many similar portrayals can lead to implicit gender bias.

This next example shows how words can create implicit bias:

An author, Catherin Nichols, sent out her a portion of her novel to 50 literary agencies as she was seeking publication. She received 2 requests to see the full manuscript and other comments such as “your main character isn’t very plucky, is she?”; “very high quality, but unlikely that the entire book will maintain same quality” She then changed the author’s name to George Leyer and sent the same packet

out to 50 agencies including some that she had sent the manuscript under her own name. She received 17 requests to see the full manuscript and other comments included: “clever”, “well-constructed”, “exciting”, “Mr. Leyer, please send the full manuscript”. “George’s manuscript was requested a total of 17 times, which means that, as Nichols puts it, “he is eight and a half times better than me at writing the same book.” Perhaps most appalling, Nichols cited one instance where an agent who had rejected the book when it was sent from Catherine, requested George’s manuscript and even offered to send it along to a more senior agent³

Let’s review how implicit bias is embedded in the mind. The diagram below shows that we experience life through the five aggregates of clinging (form, consciousness, feeling, perception, and mental formations). For each experience, the mind conditions our reaction through searching and providing associations with our stored memories and beliefs. This influences our behavior as new conditioned experiences are added to our memories which are retrieved by the mind for future comparisons.



It is the natural tendency of the mind to sift, sort, and categorize information about the world that leads to the formation of these implicit biases. We're susceptible to bias because of these tendencies:

- **We tend to seek out patterns.** Implicit bias occurs because of the brain's natural tendency to look for patterns and associations in the world. Social cognition, or our ability to store, process, and apply information about people in social situations, is dependent on this ability to form associations about the world.
- **We like to take shortcuts.** Like other cognitive biases, implicit bias is a result of the brain's tendency to try to simplify the world. Because the brain is constantly inundated with more information than it could conceivably process, mental shortcuts make it faster and easier for the brain to sort through all of this data.
- **Our experience and social conditioning play a role.** Implicit biases are influenced by experiences, although these attitudes may not be the result of direct personal experience. Cultural conditioning, media portrayals, and upbringing can all contribute to the implicit associations that people form about the members of other social groups.⁴

Larry Barsalou, a professor of psychology at the University of Glasgow in Scotland, studies the mind through the lens of what's called grounded cognition. He calls those stored memories, concepts. In a

recent talk, he notes: “So the way I think most people think about what a concept is, is that it's aggregated information and memory about some kind of thing. So, our brain naturally divides the world into categories—chairs, tables, birds, pizzas, apples. We know thousands and thousands of these categories. And our brain, there are all sorts of principles by which it does this...So concepts are used to identify things in the environment, and they can also be used to represent things in their absence. ...When we see something, for instance, we generate what I like to call these days as self-relevance...information about self-relevance is stored in every concept for every category.

And so that's (what he calls) the situated action cycle, is: 1) something occurs in the world, you perceive it, 2) you compute self-relevance across all those dimensions, 3) you have affective states, 4) you have action, and then 5) outcomes.”⁵ This is entirely consistent with what the Buddha stated about experiencing life.

How can implicit bias be discovered in an individual?

“Implicit gender bias may be assessed by several different instruments, such as sequential priming or the “Implicit Association Test” The IAT—the most well-known implicit test—is a reaction time measure. In a standard IAT, the subject attempts to sort words or pictures into categories as fast as possible while making as few errors as possible.”⁶

The Implicit Association Test ([IAT](#))

The IAT measures the strength of associations between concepts (e.g., black people, gay people) and evaluations (e.g., good, bad) or stereotypes (e.g., athletic, clumsy). The main idea is that making a response is easier when closely related items share the same response key.

When doing an IAT you are asked to quickly sort words into categories that are on the left and right hand side of the computer screen by pressing the “e” key if the word belongs to the category on the left and the “i” key if the word belongs to the category on the right. The IAT has five main parts.

In the first part of the IAT you sort words relating to the concepts (e.g., fat people, thin people) into categories. So if the category “Fat People” was on the left, and a picture of a heavy person appeared on the screen, you would press the “e” key.

In the second part of the IAT you sort words relating to the evaluation (e.g., good, bad). So if the category “good” was on the left, and a pleasant word appeared on the screen, you would press the “e” key.

In the third part of the IAT the categories are combined and you are asked to sort both concept and evaluation words. So the categories on the left hand side would be Fat People/Good and the categories on the right hand side would be Thin People/Bad. It is important to note that the order in which the blocks are presented varies across participants, so some people will do the Fat People/Good, Thin People/Bad part first and other people will do the Fat People/Bad, Thin People/Good part first.

In the fourth part of the IAT the placement of the concepts switches. If the category “Fat People” was previously on the left, now it would be on the right. Importantly, the number of trials in this part of the IAT is increased in order to minimize the effects of practice.

In the final part of the IAT the categories are combined in a way that is opposite what they were before. If the category on the left was previously Fat People/Good, it would now be Fat People/Bad.

The IAT score is based on how long it takes a person, on average, to sort the words in the third part of the IAT versus the fifth part of the IAT. We would say that one has an implicit preference for thin people relative to fat people if they are faster to categorize words when Thin People and Good share a response key and Fat People and Bad share a response key, relative to the reverse.⁷

There are number of tests available to take including Age (young/old), Sexuality (Gay/Straight), Disability (Disabled/Abled), Race (Black/White), Weight (Fat/Thin) and Gender-Career.

You have completed the study.

During the Implicit Association Test (IAT) you just completed:
Your responses suggested no automatic preference between African Americans and European Americans.

Disclaimer: These IAT results are provided for educational purposes only. The results may fluctuate and should not be used to make important decisions. The results are influenced by variables related to the test (e.g., the words or images used to represent categories) and the person (e.g., being tired, what you were thinking about before the IAT).

How does the IAT work?
The IAT measures associations between concepts (e.g., European Americans and African Americans) and evaluations (e.g., Good, Bad). People are quicker to respond when items that are more closely related in their mind share the same button. For example, an implicit preference for European Americans relative to African Americans means that you are faster to sort words when 'European Americans' and 'Good' share a button relative to when 'African Americans' and 'Good' share a button.
Studies that summarize data across many people find that the IAT predicts discrimination in hiring, education, healthcare, and law enforcement. However, taking an IAT once (like you just did) is not likely to predict your future behavior well.

Percent of web respondents with each score

Preference Category	Percentage
Strong automatic preference for European American compared to African American	24%
Moderate automatic preference for European American compared to African American	27%
Slight automatic preference for European American compared to African American	17%
Little to no automatic preference between African American and European American	18%
Slight automatic preference for African American compared to European American	7%
Moderate automatic preference for African American compared to European American	5%
Strong automatic preference for African American compared to European American	2%

Part II

The Buddha and Implicit Bias

As we have learned, implicit bias is stored in our memories and through the conditioning process, it arises to influence our behavior (what we say and do).

Robin DiAngelo in *White Fragility* notes: “Our lack of understanding about implicit bias leads to aversive racism....Aversive racism is a manifestation of racism that well-intentioned people who see themselves as educated and progressive are more likely to exhibit. It exists under the surface of consciousness because it conflicts with consciously held beliefs of racial equality and justice. Aversive racism is a subtle but insidious form, as aversive racists enact racism in ways that allow them to maintain a positive self-image (e.g., “I have lots of friends of color”; “I judge people by the content of their character, not the color of their skin”).”⁸

The Buddha prescribed the Eightfold Path (the Fourth Noble Truth) as the way to end suffering. When we examine the steps of the Eightfold Path, we can learn what to do to reduce and neutralize implicit bias.

Steps of the Eightfold Path (element in parentheses)

Step 1 Skillful Understanding (Wisdom)

We understand causes and conditions and how our exposure to words and images can embed implicit biases in our memories.

Step 2 Skillful Intention (Wisdom)

In the sutta, Two Sorts of Thinking [Dvedhāvitakka Sutta](#) (MN 19), the Buddha said:

“Whatever a monk keeps pursuing with his thinking & pondering, that becomes the inclination of his awareness. If a monk keeps pursuing thinking imbued with sensuality, abandoning thinking imbued with renunciation (letting go), his mind is bent by that thinking imbued with sensuality. If a monk keeps pursuing thinking imbued with ill will, abandoning thinking imbued with non-ill will, his mind is bent by that thinking imbued with ill will. If a monk keeps pursuing thinking imbued with harmfulness, abandoning thinking imbued with harmlessness, his mind is bent by that thinking imbued with harmfulness.

“Whatever a monk keeps pursuing with his thinking & pondering, that becomes the inclination of his awareness. If a monk keeps pursuing thinking imbued with renunciation (letting go), abandoning thinking imbued with sensuality (desire), his mind is bent by that thinking imbued with renunciation. If a monk keeps pursuing thinking imbued with non-ill will (loving kindness), abandoning thinking imbued with ill will, his mind is bent by that thinking imbued with non-ill will. If a monk keeps pursuing thinking imbued with harmlessness (compassion), abandoning thinking imbued with harmfulness, his mind is bent by that thinking imbued with harmlessness.”

The Buddha is say that by practicing the three intentions of letting go (renunciation), loving-kindness (non-ill will), and compassion (harmlessness), we can strive to overcome our biases and see others and ourselves as beings, not the others) through the lenses of loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity.

Step 3 Skillful Speech (Skillful Living)

In communicating with other beings, we only speak the truth without harshness, frivolousness, and slander.

We practice the pause before speaking to confirm that what we are going to say is beneficial.

Step 4 Skillful Action (Skillful Living)

We follow the five precepts, not harming anyone with our speech or actions.

1. Abstaining from killing
2. Abstaining from stealing
3. Abstaining from speaking falsely (from Right Speech)
4. Abstaining from sexual misconduct
5. Abstaining from misusing intoxicants such as alcohol (because this can lead to unskillful behavior).

Step 5 Skillful Livelihood (Skillful Living)

We pursue skillful activities, not those which will expose us to more biases.

Step 6 Skillful Effort (Practice)

We overcome our unskillful thoughts of bias, prevent new ones from arising and cultivate and maintain wholesome ones.

Step 7 Skillful Mindfulness (Practice)

In the sutta, mentioned in Step 2 above, the Buddha uses the term, inclination of awareness, to mean what we expose ourselves to. Although he didn't use the term, implicit bias, we can understand that our exposure to others' biases through words and images can create implicit bias in our memories. Therefore, we need to be mindful to the best of our ability to recognize the biases in these words and images.

We practice mindfulness to pay attention moment to moment to what is.

Step 8 Skillful Concentration (Practice)

We maintain our concentration to support our mindfulness.

Recommendations from others

Dr. Quinn Caper offers four strategies to reduce/neutralize implicit bias when interacting with others:

1. Common Identity Formation
 - a. Focus on a shared, common identity (interests, activities) between you and the other person.
2. Perspective
 - a. Take the perspective of the other person during discussion.
3. Consider the opposite
 - a. When you feel yourself judging, look for evidence in the opposite direction.
4. Counter-stereotypical exemplars
 - a. Bring to mind individuals you admire in this group.

From Kindra Cherry notes: “Implicit biases impact behavior, but there are things that you can do to reduce your own bias:

- Focus on seeing people as individuals. Rather than focusing on stereotypes to define people, spend time considering them on a more personal, individual level.
- Work on consciously changing your stereotypes. If you do recognize that your response to a person might be rooted in biases or stereotypes, make an effort to consciously adjust your response.
- Take time to pause and reflect. In order to reduce reflexive reactions, take time to reflect on potential biases and replace them with positive examples of the stereotyped group.
- Adjust your perspective. Try seeing things from another person's point of view. How would you respond if you were in the same position? What factors might contribute to how a person acts in a particular setting or situation?
- Increase your exposure. Spend more time with people of different racial backgrounds. Learn about their culture by attending community events or exhibits.
- Practice mindfulness. Try meditation, yoga, or focused breathing to increase mindfulness and become more aware of your thoughts and actions.”⁹

Robin DiAngelo states, “ no one can be taught to treat people equitably, because humans cannot be 100 percent objective. For example, I could lecture you for hours that it is not nice to judge, that no one likes to be judged—“You wouldn’t want to be judged, would you?”—and so on. At the end of that lecture, you would still continue to judge, because it is impossible not to. We can try to examine our judgments, hold them more lightly, and so forth, but to be free of judgment? Not possible. Nor can we treat everyone the same. Indeed, the person professing to treat everyone the same is stating a personal value, but the claim closes off any further reflection. Once we understand the power of implicit bias, for example, we know that we must deepen rather than close off further reflection. Although deeper reflection won’t free us of unconscious inequitable treatment of others, it will get us closer than will outright denial.”¹⁰

That is why a mindful approach to implicit bias is so important.

¹ Cherry, Kindra [How does Implicit Bias Influence Behavior?](#)

² [Implicit Bias](#) Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy

³ Finn, Nettie [Pseudonymous Disguises: Are Pen Names An Escape From the Gender Bias in Publishing?](#)

⁴ Cherry

⁵ [Larry Barsalou – Habits of Mind](#) Mind and Life Institute Blog March 26, 2021

⁶ [Implicit Bias](#) Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy

⁷ The Implicit Association Test ([IAT](#))

⁸ DiAngelo, Robin J.. White Fragility (p. 43). Beacon Press.

⁹ Cherry

¹⁰ DiAngelo p. 81-82