

Fact sheet: Implicit bias

The role of the unconscious

We only have conscious access to about 5 percent of our brains. There is a lot going on in our heads that we're unaware of – and that might even be at odds with our conscious decisions. For example, while more than 85 percent of Americans consider themselves to be unprejudiced, research shows that most of us harbor some implicit racial bias. (Source: Open Society Foundations)

There are some interesting exercises that academics have developed to help people explore their implicit bias – like this one: <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/demo/>

The role of the conscious

The good news is that most Americans of all colors consciously stand against racism. We need to work to make sure that our unconscious gets the message and aligns itself more closely with our values.

What can we do?

We can consciously work to develop empathy so that our unconscious mind doesn't sabotage us.

Studies have shown that white people perceive minorities as experiencing lower levels of pain in cases of injury and illness. Minority patients often don't get the help they need with pain management. But a 2011 study asked nurses to do empathy exercises – basically, to imagine how their minority patients felt. After doing the exercises, their treatment biases were reduced by 55 percent.

Checking ourselves

This kind of conscious work can make a big difference. But while we all struggle with implicit bias, it's important to put safeguards in place to make sure that youth get fair and equal treatment.

For example, some schools have introduced a graduated response model that details how they'll deal with specific misbehavior. Following the model means that kids experience the same consequences regardless of race or ethnicity.

We also need to watch the juvenile justice system closely to see areas where bias may be affecting how kids are treated. Extensive and transparent data collection is key to reducing disparities.

