

Prejudice, Bias and Racism: Origins and Impacts

As human beings, we subconsciously categorize people and make quick and sometimes inaccurate assumptions about them. This tendency can be dangerous, causing negative impacts to people's health, safety, and opportunities.

Why do prejudice and bias occur?

To understand where prejudice and bias come from is best understood by exploring the way human brains most often perceive and process information.

Human beings often use certain cognitive abilities such as schemas, scripts, and heuristics to help us perceive and interpret the world. These skills guide our behavior and allow us to predict outcomes because they influence our expectations for how people should behave and how situations will unfold.

These mental abilities are subconscious, subject to change, relative, and based on:

- The information available to you (from others, in the media, prior experiences, etc.)
- Language
- Cultural norms
- Privilege
- Personal identities

They assist in increasing ease and speed of evaluating our world but they do NOT assist in increasing accuracy.

Implicit and explicit racial bias arise from limited and inaccurate schemas and scripts because of:

- Societal privilege and lack of exposure (social distance from individuals who identify with a particular race or ethnicity)
- Cultural programming and conditioning (associations made in culture between a racial group and something negative)

Racist actions can occur and be perpetuated by schemas that are rooted in subconscious racism.

Remember, we are all capable of maintaining inaccurate beliefs about others even if we are unaware of their activation.

A call to action:

Understanding where prejudice comes from is no more than an interesting academic exercise if we do not pair it with honest reflection and changes in behavior. Research shows that increased awareness of personal bias is a helpful step in reducing it. Some helpful take home questions to reflect on to confront implicit bias in the workplace and beyond include:

1. Will certain inaccurate schemas/cultural programming be reinforced?
2. Will certain schemas be strengthened in others that should not be?
3. Do I have the chance to challenge bias and prejudice with this opportunity?
4. Is there something about how I define this particular identity that is limited or comes from bias?
5. What schemas do I have that need to be redefined?